

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

# ANDREA BAJANI ON THE INSTITUTION OF FAMILY

*The author discusses his story “Constellation.”*

By Nina Mesfin

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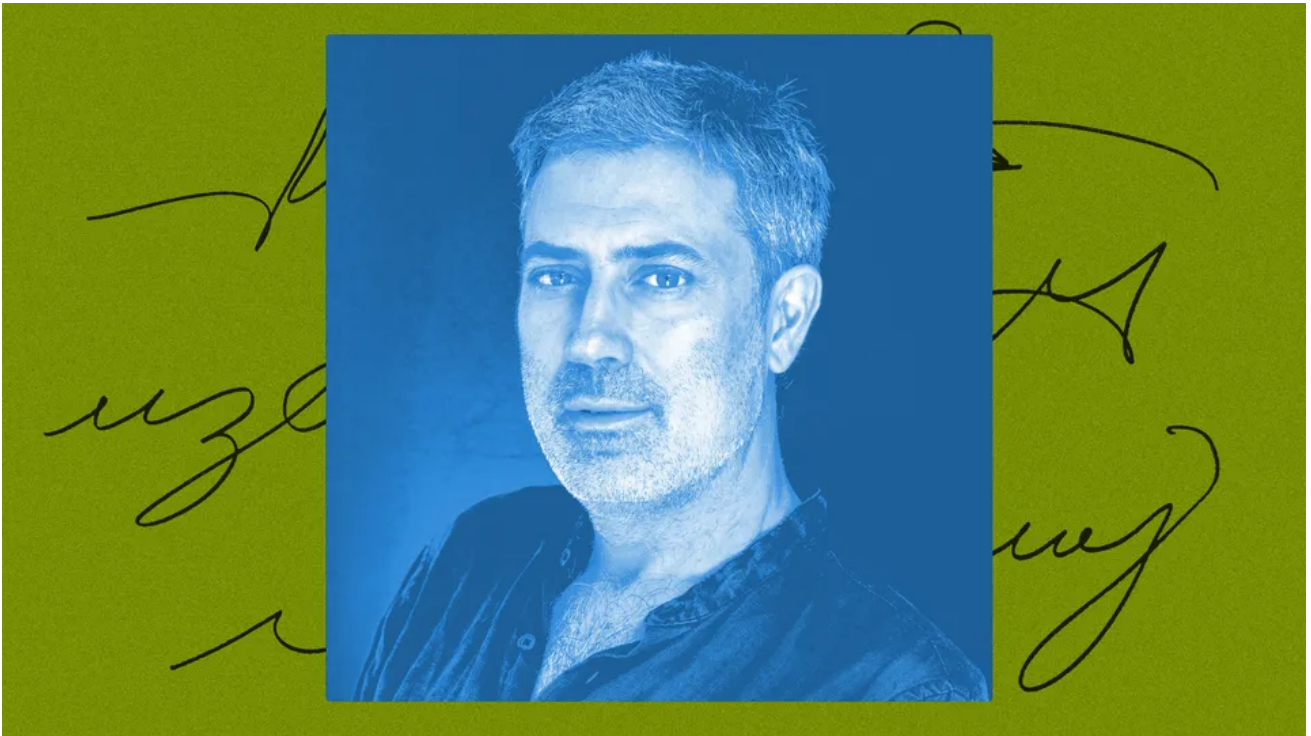


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**Y**our story in this week’s issue, “Constellation,” is drawn from your novel “L’anniversario” (“The Anniversary”), which won the prestigious Premio Strega in 2025. It’s told from the perspective of a man who, ten years after cutting off his parents, reflects on their lives and on his upbringing. How did the idea for the story come to you?

It came to me while I was teaching, evidence that it's not always the teacher who shows the students the path to a story; often it's the other way around. In this case, the real spark was a course called Writing the Family, which I've taught at Rice University several times, and whose subject fosters a particular intensity in the classroom. Family, as a theme, brings with it two elements that raise the temperature of any story: politics, and our most primordial emotions, which is pretty much everything that interests me in literature. The first time I taught the class, one thing struck me most of all: the students' stories were full of pain, and suffering within the family was perceived as an inescapable fate. They seemed to me like Minotaurs imprisoned in their labyrinths, convinced not only that they were monsters but that trying to get out—or even merely imagining doing so—was a crime, despite the violence in their narratives. One day, out of pure instinct, and because I always like doing the assignments I give my students, I began writing a story that was the exact opposite: a man decides to find the exit and leave, to escape from the labyrinth of a painful family, simply because he feels he has the right to do so.

**Familial estrangement, as you've noted in the past, is often considered a taboo subject. Did this affect your writing process?**

I do think it's taboo generally, and even more so in a society like Italy's, where family comes far before country, and the laws of the family before those of the country. All of which is to say, blood ties supersede an individual's rights. The taboo is calling into question what a society instills in its people—all of its people—without their even noticing. We are taught to “honor thy father and thy mother,” to think of being someone's child as a debt to be paid off in the course of our life, regardless of our lived experience within the family. The taboo requires building filial relationships on guilt rather than on rights, and it forbids any questioning of the family institution. I believe that literature's mission is to pry open taboos, to contest narratives imposed by whatever power. This can't help but shape the process of writing, which demands an added force, even an added fury, because contesting official power—which burrows into us—requires a certain recklessness. And so the writing of the story happened like a fever. The first draft of the novel took twenty days. Over the next three years, I wrote twenty-two versions, trying to make every

sentence say what it needed to—without relish, without showiness, and, above all, without passing judgment on my characters.

**The narrator seems to have no remorse about having severed ties with his family. Indeed, he describes the decade that followed as “the best ten years” of his life. Why, then, do you think he decides to commemorate this anniversary, as it were, by revisiting the past, especially the painful episode of domestic violence on which “Constellation” centers?**

Remorse has a moral slant, therefore it exists entirely within taboo. There's a crucial passage in the novel where, in the course of a few lines, the narrator switches from the verb “abandon” to the verb “retreat.” “Can one abandon one's parents?” he asks himself. He then refines the question: “Can one retreat from them?” That verbal shift is like a Copernican revolution. It marks the point where the protagonist essentially moves from submission to a taboo to assertion of a right. From the guilt that freezes him in a permanent state of expiation, to the claiming of something simple: the right to feel safe. We act as though it's scandalous to treat familial bonds like other bonds, as things that one can break if one so chooses, particularly if they put one in danger. That's why the theme of violence, both psychological and physical, is central to the novel, precisely because for so long—and unfortunately still today—violence hasn't been considered sufficient reason to bring an end to the dominion of the male, founded on force and on the subordination of women. And that's why I consider “The Anniversary” a deeply political book; cauterizing empathy toward victims of violence in order to shore up an institution—in this story, the institution of a certain kind of patriarchal family—is a political choice in service of a particular social project.

**“It's still not clear to me whether my father ever actually hit my mother,” the narrator prefaces, before recounting the night he came home to find police officers in his parents' apartment, his mother covered in blood. The details he goes on to provide seem to clearly indicate that his father did strike his mother. What accounts for the narrator's lingering doubts?**

I think you've touched on one of the novel's central points, though it's not so

much about doubt itself. The narrator, not having witnessed the incident, still clings to doubt, but for the reader the matter is clear: the episode is the culmination of a longer, subtler violence that goes back years, and was normalized by the members of that family and by an entire society. The blood in the mother's hair is evidence of a personal and political violence that the narrator calls into question. But this is the beginning of that calling, the first crack. Those lingering doubts you mention might also be seen as a last vestige of credulity, of fear. The fact that the narrator is a man is important. His telling of the story is the result of his refusal, as a man, of his patriarchal inheritance. He rejects the father's narrative, which renders the mother not only subordinate but invisible. In doing so, though, the narrator realizes that he had believed his father's narrative for so long that he knows nothing about his own mother and now has to invent her. It's why he places her at the center of his story.

**The narrator struggles to make sense of the, at times, shifting power dynamic between his parents, framing their behavior as adhering to a “script.” Do you think we all play a particular role within our families, dysfunctional or otherwise?**

I'm interested in the novel as a machine, and in what Milan Kundera called the “wisdom of uncertainty,” which is precisely what literature, at its best, produces. By freeing us from dogma, it also necessarily consigns us to uncertainty. To your question, I want to answer on two levels. The first is the sociological, or political, one: when an individual enters a family—or any other institution—they tend to settle into dominant cultural models. It's a way of simplifying, of resolving complexity, like buying from IKEA: you follow the instructions. From this follow both the political dimension and a certain form of ignorance as to the source of so much unhappiness—and not only on the family front. The second level is that of the novel, whose task is to plumb the depths of the human condition. For me, writing means trying to get close enough to each character to feel their heart beating, which challenges the first level, because human beings are much more complex and contradictory than sociological simplifications. They follow the “instructions,” in part, but they are also inhabited by ghosts, by memories, by the need for love. It makes

writing a marvellous adventure in knowledge.

**The story is framed as one that the narrator himself is writing, and throughout it, he intimates that he's not being entirely faithful to fact: "It's just a retrospective wish, another invention." Why does he go to pains to qualify his memories? And should we trust his narrative more or less as a result?**

One thing that has always fascinated me is the coexistence of two beliefs: that our personality—what makes us who we are—is formed in the earliest years of life, and that we retain hardly any memory of what happened to us in those years. It suggests that we remain a mystery to ourselves throughout our lives. I like to think that art is the little probe we send to look around in the black box, though always with the knowledge that what it reveals may be pure invention. The narrator is caught up in a process of rewriting every story he has inherited, including the version of himself that he has invented over the years. Uncertainty is his territory, and it is also the territory of his painful but necessary rebirth.

**"The Anniversary" comes out, in English, on August 25th. What has it been like to revisit the story in another language?**

Receiving Geoffrey Brock's translation of the novel was a true revelation. Not only because of its superlative quality, but for an even more profound reason: when I read it, I thought, This—in English, in the English of a poet—is the actual novel I wanted to write but, for language reasons, couldn't. I had to write it in Italian, but it was as though I had thought it in English. Geoff's version seemed to me the original, not a translation. And this epiphany led to another important realization: that I had written this novel—in Houston, where I live—with American readers partly in mind. This means that I had instinctively been trying to draw out of this "Italian story" something more universal, something that, while it certainly concerns my country, might also, in some measure, concern anyone else. ♦

*(Bajani's responses were translated, from the Italian, by Geoffrey Brock.)*