



# A Correspondence with Elena Ferrante

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**SHEILA HETI**

*I interviewed Elena Ferrante by email over the summer of 2016. She read my questions (which were written in English) and wrote her responses in Italian. Her replies were translated by Ann Goldstein, the English translator of Ferrante's many books. I had been hesitant about conducting this interview when I was offered the opportunity, for I admire Ferrante's reticence. Yet, debating it over with myself, it seemed it would be a mistake not to ask this great writer questions, if I had the chance.*

*For those who are unaware, Ferrante is one of the most celebrated contemporary writers in the world, and rightly so. In 2011, she released the first of a series of four books (each around 350 pages in length) called The Neapolitan Quartet, which follow two female friends from the time of their childhood in Naples in the 1950s to the present day. The books thrillingly unmask the consciousness and social situation of these women, tracing the complex bonds and political struggles of several generations of families in twentieth-century Naples. Reading these books, I felt a keen loss over the many great books that had not been written by women down through time; Ferrante made me long for even more first-rate writers to map (and to have mapped) the many underwritten aspects of the female experience. To me, the books have a distinctly female point of view: the point of view not of the natural victor but of one who has to fight for the right to observe.*

*Her three earlier and shorter novels (Troubling Love, The Days of Abandonment, and The Lost Daughter, published in Italian between 1992 and 2006) are like tinctures of the quartet: exquisitely precise and intensely felt, they magnify moments in a life and are written in a style and language that calls to mind*

few others—perhaps Clarice Lispector, for being just as brutal, penetrating, and heartbreaking. Ferrante’s books are profoundly contemporary while giving the same satisfaction as many nineteenth-century novels, as if Ferrante were not living in a landscape of busily competing media, but rather writing in a world where the quiet of readers can be taken for granted. She is formally risk-taking yet is a masterful storyteller. Her books rush you along in a swell of complicity, curiosity, feeling, and suspense. I cannot think of a single person I know who has not read Ferrante only to fall helplessly into her world. She has collapsed the gap between the sort of books that writers feel awe for and that the reading public can’t get enough of—the rarest thing.

Speaking personally, as a writer who has engaged in the various publicity and marketing strategies that many of us allow, I was interested to talk to Ferrante about how she knew from the beginning that she wanted to avoid the performance of self; I wanted to ask about the relationship between her own “disappearance” and the many disappearances she writes about. To me, there is something special about Ferrante’s disappearance as a body: unlike with, say, Salinger or Pynchon, disappearance is Ferrante’s main literary theme, and so her choice seems artistically meaningful, not just personal. I wanted to ask about how she—as a great illustrator of the human condition—has navigated such experiences as motherhood, discipleship, and rebellion. Naturally, I was curious to know how she wrote her books, but I didn’t ask too many craft questions because I know that for any writer, composition is ultimately a mystery.

Ferrante has managed, for decades, that difficult and enviable thing: the maintenance of total privacy as a human being, along with total openness as a creator through her art. I, and many of her devoted readers, hope there is even more of that art still to come. We are so grateful she took the time to do

this interview, although as you will see, she doesn’t consider this an interview at all.

Heti: You’ve remarked that you forget the books you read. Do you think there’s some connection between being a reader who forgets (I am too) and being able to create and write? Maybe forgetting is a subconscious kind of remembering that allows writers to recombine what they’ve taken from literature in ways that are particular to them.

Ferrante: Yes, that’s probably the case. I do forget, I forget especially the books I’ve loved very much. I have an impression of them, I have a feeling for them, but to discuss them I would have to reread them. If I had a clear memory that allowed me to cite passages, point out crucial moments, any attempt at writing of my own would seem to me lost at the start. Imagination is said to be a function of memory. I prefer to think that it’s a function of nostalgia. We compose stories knowing very well that we are the last to arrive. And yet every time it seems to us that we are returning to the moment when the first human being, with nothing but the truth of his experience and the urge to reinvent it at every step, began to tell a story.

Heti: Do you have any interest in writing short stories?

Ferrante: I’ve written very few short stories. The form that suits me is the long story, not the novel: I surprised myself by the dimensions of *The Neapolitan Quartet*. The thickness of the volumes on the shelf makes me anxious, I have the feeling that I overdid it.

Heti: Is there something about “the book” as an idea or object that is particularly meaningful to you?

And if books ceased to be printed, but were just read on tablets—not that I think this will happen—would you continue to write?

*Ferrante:* I've never worshipped books. I've always had a sense of the provisional nature of forms—the world changes continuously and what seemed to us inconceivable soon becomes a habit. I admit, however, that I do worship writing. Everything will change, but I can't imagine the end of the possibility of writing, with whatever tool, on whatever surface.

*Heti:* Your three novels before *The Neapolitan Quartet*—were they written in fragments, which you later pieced into a narrative, or were they written from beginning to end? Some writers plan what's going to happen chapters before they get there; others can see only a few sentences ahead. What is the process like for you?

*Ferrante:* I've always worked a lot on fragments. Sometimes there was almost no connection between them: they were good as self-sufficient pages, but there was no way to put them together. More often, though, a single fragment expanded and became a long story. The result almost always seemed to me artificial in tone because of an excess of invention, a maniacal attention to the sentence. I liked to tell stories—yes, I've always liked that—but I couldn't stick to what it seemed to me I had in mind in a satisfying way. Here I must explain myself: I always know what I want to tell but in a very confused way, so confused that I wouldn't be able to say it even to myself. In the past, to get out of that confusion, in the urgency to express myself and understand what was going through my own head, I would talk to a friend. But I soon discovered that the spoken story took away the desire to

write, and so I learned to be silent. If I want the story to move from confusion to order, I have to write: for me, there is no other way. Naturally, once the story is under way, as it moves on from the beginning and seeks a conclusion, I may discover possible links to material already written, and I use it or rewrite it. But essentially, when I write, I myself am amazed at what emerges from the fog and becomes clear, establishes connections, finds junctions. Yet I should clarify here that not even this simple movement from confusion to story has ever seemed to me sufficient. The problem for me is naturalness of tone and preserving the truth. If, in telling a story, the writing loses truth, I throw it away.

*Heti:* You once said, "I tend to edit and then inevitably revert to the original draft, when I see what I've lost by editing." I agree: there is always some power in the way a person first catches the words on the page. Can you talk about balancing your instinct to keep the rawness with your instinct to clean up? If you often prefer the first draft to the edited draft, what does your editing process consist of?

*Ferrante:* I detest vapid, sugary, sentimental tones and I try to get rid of them. I detest refinement when it cancels out naturalness, and so I look for precision without going too far. I could continue like that, with a fine list of intentions, but it's just talk. In fact, I move by instinct, a spontaneous movement that, if I put it in order, becomes merely a banal guidebook. So let's say that, pulled this way and that by countless readings, by varied layers of taste, by inclinations and idiosyncrasies, I generally aim at what seems to me perfection. Then, however, perfection suddenly seems an insane excess of refinement and I return to

versions that seem effective precisely because they are imperfect.

*Heti*: Picasso said the new work of art always looks ugly at first, especially to its creator. Did you find your books ugly in the way Picasso meant?

*Ferrante*: Yes, certainly yes, but not because I feel the book as new; rather because I feel it as mine, tarnished by contact with my experience.

*Heti*: Your books resist the pressure to be “correct” in a feminist sense. For me, I have noticed that often women will react negatively to portrayals of women that are “un-feminist.” Why do you think such readers have a hard time with portrayals of women that conflict with their ideals? Do they feel the female author is somehow betraying them?

*Ferrante*: “Correctness” has never been a concern of mine when I write. Nor have I ever felt, in telling a story, that I had to adapt the story or the character to the demands of a cultural alignment, to the urgent needs of political battles, even if I share them a hundred percent. Literature is not the sounding board of ideologies. I write always and only about what it seems to me I know thoroughly, and I would not bend the truth of a story to any higher necessity, not even to some ethical imperative or some prudent consistency with myself.

*Heti*: Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Elsa Morante, Clarice Lispector, Alice Munro. What are these writers, whom you cite among your favourite writers, able to do?

*Ferrante*: *Pride and Prejudice* is perfect, but I find *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* more appealing. I like texts that are generous and thus imperfect. Elsa Morante’s *House of Liars* and Clarice Lispector’s *The*

*Passion According to G.H.* also belong to this category, for different reasons.

*Heti*: Could you speak a bit about *Madame Bovary*? This book always upsets me. I can’t take how unsympathetic Flaubert is to *Bovary*, how trite he feels her entrapment is, how foolish and narcissistic her fantasies. What do you think of the character of *Bovary*, and of Flaubert’s relationship to his character?

*Ferrante*: I think of Emma *Bovary* as the extraordinary incarnation, today more alive than ever, of how women can become the victims of debased liberating ideologies. Madame *Bovary* reads, and reads about what the full life of a romantic woman should be; that is to say, not a stupid, pious, provincial woman but a free woman worthy of a Byron. Flaubert shows in fact how his heroine’s romanticizing is modelled more on male needs than on hers. Even structurally, the book shows the vise in which Emma is gripped. Not only does the author make her a victim of superficial lovers—although he concedes her the title, he denies her both the opening (devoted to Charles *Bovary*) and the end (devoted to the pharmacist Homais). Good books are not those that tell how things ought to go but those that tell how things do go.

*Heti*: Do you keep copies of the books you have written and published in the room where you write?

*Ferrante*: No.

*Heti*: So much contemporary female writing is accused of narcissism. Have you escaped the charge of narcissism, or have you received it? I’d like to bind this question to your comments about women who “practice a conscious surveillance on themselves,” who before were “watched over by parents, by brothers, by husbands, by the community.” You have written

that women who practise surveillance on themselves are the “heroines of our time,” but it’s precisely these women—real and fictional—who are accused of the sin of narcissism, as if a woman looking at herself (rather than being looked at by a man) was insulting to everyone. How do you understand this charge?

*Ferrante:* I’ve never felt narcissism to be a sin. It seems, rather, a cognitive tool that, like all cognitive tools, can be used in a distorted way. No, I think it’s necessary to be absolutely in love with ourselves. It’s only by reflecting on myself with attention and care that I can reflect on the world. It’s only by turning my gaze on myself that I can understand others, feel them as my kin. On the other hand, it’s only by assiduously watching myself that I can take control and train myself to give the best of myself. The woman who practises surveillance on herself without letting herself be the object of surveillance is the great innovation of our times.

*Heti:* You’ve said, “Even if we’re constantly tempted to lower our guard—out of love, or weariness, or sympathy, or kindness—we women shouldn’t do it. We can lose from one moment to the next everything that we have achieved.” This is very striking to me. What does it mean to you to lower your guard? Women are taught to give ourselves fully, with great trust, in love . . . but you think we shouldn’t?

*Ferrante:* It seems to me risky to forget that no one gave us the freedoms we have today—we took them. For that very reason they can at any moment be taken away again. So just that, we mustn’t ever lower our guard. It’s wonderful to give oneself fully to another, we women know how to do it. And we should continue. It’s a serious mistake to retreat, giving up the marvellous feelings we’re capable of. Yet it’s

indispensable to keep alive the sense of self. In Naples, certain girls who showed the marks of beatings would say, even with pleased half-smiles, He hits me because he loves me. No one can dare to hurt us because he loves us, not a lover, not a friend, not even children.

*Heti:* You’ve said, “I feel such a sense of unease and distrust these days that I can no longer write even half a word without fearing that, once published, it might be distorted or purposely taken out of context and used in a malicious way.” I think this is something many writers feel. Have you found a solution for it?

*Ferrante:* Yes. Be silent, recover my strength, start again.

*Heti:* Do you ever have the desire to publish under a new pseudonym—to leave Ferrante behind and release a book into the world around which there are no assumptions? Or do you like building the oeuvre? Do you have a connection to the name?

*Ferrante:* No, I don’t enjoy playing with pseudonyms. That bit of “I” that I manage to put together as an author corresponds to the name of Elena Ferrante.

*Heti:* I think many male artists are flattered by the idea of having artistic disciples, and many young men I know (writers, artists) enjoy being disciples of the older male artists they respect. This seems less the case among women who admire other women; women seem not to want imitators and seem not to want to imitate even the women they love. If this is true, how does a female literary tradition come into being? Or how do women become part of a non-gendered tradition, if tradition has anything to do with strong links between writers?

*Ferrante:* I don’t know. I’ve seen men in the most diverse fields fear young followers like the plague,

terrified by the idea of being supplanted. And I've seen women of some power help other women without feeling threatened. It depends on the individuals. Of course, it's more likely that a certain number of disciples will crowd around a male writer because, in spite of everything, a male writer today emanates more power than a female writer. Perhaps the status of an established male writer is more solid than that of a female writer, and so it's possible that in his imitators he sees only the affirmation of his own reputation and not the threat of being overtaken so that he appears instead to be the disciple of his imitator. But in my view what truly counts is not the crowd of followers who imitate you but the capacity to distinguish who can be creatively grafted onto your experience of writing and expand it, push it where you would be unable to take it. This is what establishes a tradition and this is what should be important to we women who write.

*Heti:* There's such a deep connection between your own anonymity and the many disappearances that haunt your work: Lila in *My Brilliant Friend*, the husband who abandons in *The Days of Abandonment*, the missing doll in *The Lost Daughter*, the dead mother in *Troubling Love*. In the case of all these disappearances, it is the disappearance that provokes the narrator's writing. Do you think your knowledge of your own "public absence" or "disappearance" likewise propels your writing-self? If so, what is the connection between your writing-self, which creates, and your disappearing author-self? Do you think you have to enact this disappearance to create the tension necessary to create, as we witness happening to the writers in your books?

*Ferrante:* We have difficulty accepting that our lives acquire meaning more from losses than from gains, from absences rather than from presences. The same happens with creative activity. It's hard to accept that the author function is unstable. It emerges in its entirety in the making of the work and then it withdraws, vanishes; nothing assures us that it will return. In its place remains the label of the name on the cover, or we ourselves, emptied and yet engaged in frantically filling the void, in the spectacle of self-promotion organized by the culture industry. The only true filling of that void is the completion of the work. The author can offer himself to the public only in an aesthetic form, whether complete or incomplete.

*Heti:* Thinking of the amazing harmony between the stories you tell and how you choose to engage with the public brings to mind Andy Warhol, whose public performance and art had as perfect a harmony. Are there writers or artists you respect on this level of an aesthetic and symbolic consistency between their work and their self-presentation?

*Ferrante:* Marina Abramović seems to me to have represented this fact vividly in her work *The Artist Is Present*. The author's presence is possible only as it coincides precisely with her being the work.

*Heti:* Do you smoke cigarettes?

*Ferrante:* Until a few years ago I smoked a lot, then I stopped abruptly. I tell you this because what is written while smoking seems better than that which fears for its health. But we have to learn to do well without necessarily doing harm to others and ourselves.

*Heti:* What is the role of a title for you? What sorts of titles do you like?

*Ferrante:* I don't think that the title and the cover have much importance. I make use of them (sometimes polemically), but I think in essence only a good text makes a title lasting and a cover memorable.

*Heti:* You often use the words *authenticity* and *verisimilitude* as opposites. Can you clarify for me what you mean by these terms?

*Ferrante:* One has to have great skill in order to write a story of which one can say, It seems true. I've tried to write such stories myself, and I read them with pleasure. And yet a text that skilfully gives an impression of truth is no longer convincing to me, as it used to be. Our world is based increasingly on effects of truth and less and less on truth. So I prefer books that it seems to me go back to an authentic experience. I don't at all despise skill—on the contrary. But more and more it interests me not as virtuosity in the reproduction of what is right before our eyes but as the capacity to adopt expressive means suitable for giving form to what is intimately ours and is difficult to say even to ourselves.

*Heti:* You've written, "A novel about today that is engaging and full of characters and events should be a novel about and against the suspension of disbelief." How does your work avoid the necessity of the suspension of disbelief, and do you find too many novels are written today that require the suspension of disbelief? If readers are trained to suspend their disbelief, are they less effective political actors on their own behalf?

*Ferrante:* Those words of mine were a political metaphor. I was referring to what seems to me to have happened in recent decades: the transformation of citizens into a public involved in representations

of the world that are skilfully constructed in order to suspend incredulity. The citizen risks acting like a fan, an enthusiastic consumer of media narratives that are plausible but deceptive, because those narratives are not the truth but have the appearance of truth. In other words, we have to return to not believing what they tell us. We have to relearn to distinguish between truth and verisimilitude.

*Heti:* Why do you do interviews? How do you decide which interviews to participate in? Are there rules you follow? Why not let the books exist without the interviews? Are you ever going to stop doing interviews altogether? Why not now?

*Ferrante:* I no longer follow any rule. The main thing is that it doesn't seem to me that I'm giving interviews. You think that we're doing an interview? I don't. In an interview, the person being interviewed entrusts his body, his facial expressions, his eyes, his gestures, the way he speaks—an often-improvised speech, inconsistent, poorly connected—to the writing of the interviewer. Something that I can't accept. What we are doing resembles, rather, a pleasant correspondence. You think about it and write me your questions; I think about it and write my answers. It's writing, in other words, and I am fond of all occasions for writing. In the past it seemed to me that I was unable to come up with answers suitable for publication. Either they were too succinct, a yes or a no, or a short question became an occasion for reflection and I wrote pages and pages. Now I think I've learned something but not necessarily. So no, I don't give interviews, to anyone, but I find these exchanges in writing increasingly useful—for me, naturally. It's writing that should be placed beside that of the



books, like a fiction not very different from literary fiction. I'm telling you about myself, but you too, a writer—I read one of your books in Italian, which I loved—with your questions are telling me about yourself. I talk about myself, as do you, as a producer of writing. I do it truthfully, addressing not only you and our possible readers but also myself, or at least that substantial part of myself that considers it completely senseless to waste so much time writing and needs reasons that justify the waste. In short, your questions help me to invent myself as an author, to give form, that is, to this unstable, elusive part that I myself know little or nothing about. Something that I imagine has happened to you too, as an author, when you have formulated the questions.

*Heti:* Do you think literature is possible without loneliness—either in the writer who writes it or in the reader who reads it?

*Ferrante:* There are those who write or read in the midst of chaos; it depends on the need and on self-discipline.

*Heti:* In Magda Szabó's *The Door*, Emerence—the intelligent cleaning woman with a strong inner code of behaviour, who keeps house for the intellectual woman-writer protagonist—reminds me a bit of your Lila, and Szabó's protagonist is reminiscent of your Elena. Yet Emerence is somehow the superior of the pair, as is Lila. Is there something in the figure of the intellectual woman writer that pales in comparison (from the perspective of the woman writing) to the (comparatively) uneducated woman who yet knows and understands the world? Why do so many female writers demean the “intellectual” female figures we create? Do we still not truly value female

literary work, women who work with their minds? Is it a kind of self-loathing? Why do we often portray intellectual women as having lost more than they have gained?

*Ferrante:* You pose a very interesting question; I have to think about it. Why do we invent cultivated, intelligent women and then lower their level or even their pleasure in life? Who knows. Maybe because we're still incapable of a convincing portrayal of female intelligence. We haven't completely set aside the literary model that represented us at the side of a superior man who would take care of us and our children. Thus, though we have now acquired the sense of our inner richness and our intellectual autonomy, we portray them in a minor key, as if our capacity to produce ideas and culture were a presumptuous exaggeration, as if, even having something extra, we ourselves didn't really believe in it. From here, probably, comes the literary invention of secondary female figures who possess that something extra in themselves, remind us of it, assure us that it's there and should be appreciated. We are still in the middle of the crossing, and literature makes do however it can.

*Heti:* Do you ever regret not taking the path of not having children? I worry (for I think I will probably not have children) that maybe I won't be able to be a good enough writer if I don't have this experience. Obviously you can't have children for this reason. And Virginia Woolf and many other great writers were childless, yet I still have this fear; on the other hand, I want all my time to read and write. Do you think it's possible for a woman to experience her deepest humanity if she is not a mother? If not, isn't that a problem for someone interested in knowing

humanity? Another version of this question might be: Do you think life naturally gives to everyone who writes enough experiences to write from—if writing is fed by having experienced life?

*Ferrante:* I don't know how to answer. I know that literary creation requires such a concentration of the energies, of the affections we're capable of, that it certainly collides with motherhood: its urgent requirements, its pleasures, its obligations. Inserting oneself into the chain of reproduction diminishes, at times suffocates, the extremely violent impulse to enter into that other reproductive chain that is literary tradition. But then if the urge to write really is invincible, here it is, returning stronger than ever: it makes your existence as a mother more difficult than normal, burdens you with guilt, both unfounded and very well founded. What is better for a woman who wants to write—to have children or not to have them? I don't know. Living isn't only reading and writing. But reading and writing can have the force to claim our entire life. And I don't know if that's a good thing. But I don't know if it's a bad thing either. One has to deal personally with these issues.

*Heti:* What do you think is the greatest thing literature can do for people? For culture? For the writer herself?

*Ferrante:* Take us where we have never been, where we are afraid of going.

*Heti:* You write in *Frantumaglia* that you were the sort of child who “apologized for everything.” But as an adult, you realize that goodness “derives not from the absence of guilt but from the capacity to feel true loathing for our daily, recurring, private guilt.” Yet how can a woman ever truly know what

she should be guilty for when women live in a world of codes that have been created by men, when we live in “male cities” (as you have termed it), and when the route to understanding who one is necessarily involves exploring one's instinct to “disobey”? How can you tell the difference between what you should feel guilty for and what you are made to feel guilty for but shouldn't?

*Ferrante:* Our future depends on this connection. There is no true liberation without a strong sense of self. The systematic practice of disobedience is in fact an integral part of male values, and so doesn't really free us; rather, at times, it crushes us, makes us even more acutely the victims of men's needs, especially in the realm of sex. We need an ethics of our own to oppose that which the male world has imposed on and claimed from us. We need a hierarchy of our own of merits and faults, and we need to reckon with truth. But that's possible only if we consider ourselves to be exposed to good and evil like any human being. When literature represents us as the positive pole of life or as having been exposed to evil only as victims—an evil that in the end will turn out to be a good, if looked at with spectacles different from those imposed by males—it is not doing its duty. The duty of literature is to dig to the bottom. We are a subject both unpredictable and unknown even to ourselves. We have an urgent need for representation and for an ethics of our own. We have the right and the duty to explore ourselves thoroughly, to slip away, to cross the borders that make us suffer. I insist on self-surveillance, which means choice, assumption of responsibility, and the necessity of losing restraint in order to know ourselves, not lose ourselves.

*Heti*: You have said that if you weren't a writer you'd be a dressmaker, like your mother was. When I read that, I thought about your books as a kind of dressmaking; perhaps the craft of dressmaking that you witnessed your mother practise is sublimated into the act of writing, as some writers sublimate their desire to dance, compose music, act . . . You refuse to shroud the female body in obscuring drapery, which, as you write, dressmakers do, in order to protect the sons who wish not to see their mothers' shape. And you refuse to show the female body to its best advantages, as the inappropriately feminizing dress the protagonist dons in *Troubling Love* does. Rather, you cut a dress to the exact specifications of the woman you write about. My mother was a pathologist. I think the act of looking at slides, of doing autopsies on the human body, is part of how I understand writing—is my inheritance from my mother's life's work.

*Ferrante*: I believe that everything that comes to us from our mothers has a power that we have to learn to draw on. But that power of suggestion at first frightens us or makes us ashamed. Our mothers seem, instead of a constant inspiration, a stumbling block to our growth, an annoyance. We spend much, perhaps too much, time in order to truly feel that we are their daughters, that is to say, an outlet of their story as women, not as mothers.

*Heti*: I only ever saw my mother reading self-help books, and now as an adult I find them particularly inspiring and fascinating, in a literary sense. You once wrote, "Over the years . . . I've become less ashamed of how much I like the stories in the women's magazines. . . . It seems to me that this cellar of writing, a

fund of pleasure that for years I repressed in the name of Literature, should also be put to work."

*Ferrante*: I think that it's not the great writers of the twentieth century but their followers who committed the extremely serious error of thinking of the pleasure of reading as a sign of triviality. Boredom is not a mark of distinction. In fact, there has never been a great or very great book that doesn't give primary importance to the enjoyment of readers, even if it's a handful of highly competent readers.

*Heti*: For a while, I had a theory that you must have published as an author under a different name before publishing these books—not only because I figured you must have first-hand experience of the literary circus that you write about so well in the body of Elena, but because your books seem like those of someone in the middle of her career, not at the beginning. Perhaps you just have higher standards, or more restraint, than many of the people who publish today. Do you think today people often publish books too young?

*Ferrante*: Not at all. Good books are written at all ages, and if one feels that one has produced a good thing, it does one as well to publish at twenty as at eighty. The problem is precisely the feeling of one's own value. I've written a lot, but sometimes I've had a hard time considering what I've written to be worth publishing. As for the knowledge of the literary circus that you attribute to me, what to say? A circus is a show. So it's enough to sit in a corner as a spectator, in silence, and observe with unillusioned eyes.

*Heti*: Did you ever fear what you would lose by not participating in the media, festivals, etc.? How did you set about so confidently not pleasing your

publisher? And do you think it's possible for a writer who has sent herself around in the world as a writer to stop? Or does the fact of ever having been seen mean that something is forever lost and any retreat is useless? Finally, have you ever signed a book?

*Ferrante:* Yes, I made the mistake of signing a hundred copies, some years ago. It was naive. It seemed to me that since I was doing it at home, in private, it wouldn't cost me much. Today I think that I could have spared myself even that. I remain of the opinion that a book has to absolutely make it on its own; it shouldn't even use advertising. Of course, my position is extreme. And among other things, the market has

by now absorbed it and made the most of it, while the media have readily changed it to gossip and a puzzle to be solved. But for me the small cultural polemic underlying the choices I made twenty-five years ago remains important. I will never consider it finished, and I trust that no one who feels that writing is fundamental will completely set it aside. Good books are stunning charges of vital energy. They have no need of fathers, mothers, godfathers, and godmothers. They are a happy event within the tradition and the community that guards the tradition. They express a force capable of expanding autonomously in space and time. **B**