



MY BRILLIANT FRIEND

By **Elena Ferrante**
Book 1 in the **Neapolitan Quartet**

*Translated from the Italian
by Ann Goldstein*

#1 Best Book of the 21st Century
The New York Times

Beginning in the 1950s in a poor but vibrant neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples, Elena Ferrante's four-volume story spans almost sixty years, as its main characters, the fiery and unforgettable Lila and the bookish narrator, Elena, become women, wives, mothers, and leaders, all the while maintaining a complex and at times conflicted friendship. This first novel in the series follows Lila and Elena from their fateful meeting as ten-year-olds through their school years and adolescence.

Through the lives of these two women, Ferrante tells the story of a neighborhood, a city, and a country as it is transformed in ways that, in turn, also transform the relationship between two women.

About the author

Elena Ferrante is the author of *The Days of Abandonment* (Europa, 2005), *Troubling Love* (Europa, 2006), and *The Lost Daughter* (Europa, 2008), now a film directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal and starring Olivia Colman, Dakota Johnson, and Jessie Buckley. She is also the author of *Incidental Inventions* (Europa, 2019), illustrated by Andrea Ucini; *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey* (Europa, 2016); and a children's picture book illustrated by Mara Cerri, *The Beach at Night* (Europa, 2016). The four volumes known as the "Neapolitan novels" (*My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*) were published by Europa Editions in English between 2012 and 2015. *My Brilliant Friend*, the HBO series directed by Saverio Costanzo, premiered in 2018 and is in its fourth season. Ferrante's most recent novel is the instant *New York Times* bestseller, *The Lying Life of Adults* (Europa, 2020).



Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. Why is Don Achille such an important character? His presence looms over the whole novel; what does he represent?
2. Throughout the novel, Lila earns her reputation as “the misfit,” while Elena comes to be known as “the good girl.” How do the two live vicariously through one another, and what is it about their differing personalities that makes their friendship credible? Which girl, if any, do you most easily identify with?
3. Domestic life in the outskirts of Naples in the 1950s is depicted as conservative, challenging, and at times, even severely violent. Ferrante uses the girls’ early “child play” to emulate the callous undertones of the town. Why is this analogy so successful? What is so important about Tina and Nu?
4. Why is Elena so invested in her education? Is it a means to an end, or an end unto itself? If a means to an end, is she being realistic or is she fooling herself?
5. What is revealed of the girls’ characters on the day they decide to skip school? Do these discoveries surprise you? How does this affect their relationship (or our sense of their relationship)?
6. Ferrante returns, once more, to the theme of “mother-daughter relationship” in *My Brilliant Friend*. What are the abiding characteristics of this relationship? Who do you feel suffers the most—mother or daughter? Why?
7. It can be assumed that Elena’s voice is behind the title of the novel, referring to Lila as “her brilliant friend.” However, toward the end of the girls’ story, it is Lila who praises Elena, and encourages her to be “the best of all, boys and girls” (pg 312). Is this dialogue between the two girls symbolic of Lila’s surrender? Are you surprised by Lila’s words?
8. Lila’s rustic personality and crude comments sometimes come off as hurtful and malicious. Furthermore, although both families struggle with poverty, it is the Cerullo family who appear to be the underprivileged of the two. Why, nonetheless, does Elena remain a highly devout friend?
9. What do the shoes that Lila designs and makes represent symbolically? What undertones do the shoes help to evidence in the latter half of the novel?
10. How would the book be different if told from the point of view of Lila or another character? Is Elena’s point of view the most appropriate? Why or why not?