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#### SEARCHING FOR LILA

Left: Ludovica Nasti and Elisa del Genio, who play young Lila and Elena, on set. Right: buildings high above the Gulf of Naples, where Ferrante's novels take place



DESTINATION  
THOSE WHO STAY

As the much-anticipated TV adaptation of Elena Ferrante's first book from her quartet of bestsellers hits screens, HELEN WHITAKER visits the Naples that inspired the elusive author, and goes on set in 'the neighbourhood'

## My brilliant Ferrante



Photograph: Getty Images







“N

apoli is a theatre,” declares director Saverio Costanzo. “Everyone knows how to act.” This

could well be the reason why Elena Ferrante’s Naples-set, four-novel series has become a publishing sensation. Based on Ferrante’s own upbringing, and beginning in a poor district of 1950s Naples, the books follow the lives of Elena (known as Lenù) and Raffaella (aka Lila) and span almost 60 years of their friendship – and conflict. Along with ten million other readers, I was sucked in by Lenù’s vividly narrated coming-of-age story, as she hauls herself out of the neighbourhood that both made her and suffocated her. While men are everywhere, this is very much the women’s story: Lila, Lenù and their friends try to carve their way as claims are laid and violence erupts around them.

Now the first book in the series has got the full HBO prestige-drama treatment, to the tune of eight episodes airing internationally, with adaptations of the other three books to follow. The pre-game already points to a ‘major international TV event’: 8,000 actors were auditioned for the roles of Lila and Lenù, whittled down to four – two playing the girls as children and two as teenagers. The show is the first HBO Original to be made with subtitles (scripted in Neapolitan dialect, it will be subtitled even in Italy). “I do feel a great pressure. Elena and Lila are icons,” admits Costanzo, who was attracted to the project by Ferrante’s unflinching writing. “It’s more than a bestseller, but as soon



Listen to Elena Ferrante’s *Naples Quartet* on board (selected flights)



## THE LOST DAUGHTER

From top: 8,000 actors auditioned to play Lila and Lenù; the gritty Rione Luzzatti inspired the book’s setting

as I read the books I felt like I had something in common with this person and felt like it was something I could manage.”

That was two years ago. Today, 23 miles away from Naples in Caserta, I’m standing in a £4.5m, 215,000 square-foot recreation of the real-life Neapolitan neighbourhood described in Ferrante’s books. While ‘the neighbourhood’ remains unnamed by the pseudonymous Ferrante, it has been widely identified as the working-class Rione Luzzatti area, in the east of the city. This is what the creators have used as their template for the 14, four-storey apartment buildings that make up the fictional version, with green screens currently standing in for the railway. It’s imposing, flat-roofed and set around wide courtyards: stylistic liberties have only been taken with the colour palette, set designer Giancarlo Basili explains. The fictional buildings are grey (inspired by Picasso’s *Guernica*), while in the real-life Rione Luzzatti they are sepia-toned.

“We are not making postcards of Naples,” says Costanzo of the show’s setting, which is the polar opposite of the dreamy holiday idealism in 2017’s Italian-set *Call Me by Your Name*. In the 1950s, Ferrante’s neighbourhood was gritty and claustrophobic, the atmosphere thick with menace. Casual violence was an accepted part of life. “For us, it was very important to be authentic,” Costanzo adds. But it meant treading a precarious line between the real 1950s Naples versus the Naples viewers might be expecting. “We have a wedding at the end and, on the cover of the books all over the world, Lila’s in a wedding dress,” he says, going on to explain that the wedding party a viewer might expect – in a city-centre restaurant replete with faux-Vesuvian carvings – was at odds with the understated countryside banquet he thought a real Neapolitan couple would choose. Deciding which side to portray gave him sleepless nights. In the end he went with truth over the familiar, and his decision was on the money. ‘Ferrante fever’ is fuelling interest in precisely this anti-postcard side of

the city, with fans more interested in authenticity than the idealised Naples. Several operators offer Ferrante-inspired tours to show her world.

Sophia Seymour is a British-born filmmaker, writer, and founder of tour company Looking for Lila, which is one of the few to offer private tours of the Luzzatti neighbourhood. The fascist-era buildings, wallpapered with poster-sized death notices, and with basement window grates that the girls play next to in the book, are the twins of the ones that make up the Caserta set. Which begs ☹

## PHOTO-OP SPOTS FOR FERRANTE FANATICS

### | → | CERTOSA E MUSEO DI SAN MARTINO, Naples

The series ends with Lila's wedding, filmed in the church at San Martino Museum, and with her clad in a dress designed by Valentino creative director Pierpaolo Piccioli.

### | → | PIAZZA DEL PLEBISCITO, Naples

When the neighbourhood teenagers go to one of Naples' wealthier areas for the evening, a vicious fight breaks out. It was filmed on this square.

### | → | RIONE LUZZATTI, Naples

While never identified by name in Ferrante's novels, the neighbourhood is widely believed to be the real-life setting for the books.

### | → | MARONTI BEACH, Ischia

Lenù's happiest weeks are spent on the beach, though she's surprised to witness mud treatments, which the volcanic island – famed for its millennia-old wellness remedies – still offers today.

the question: why build a replica at all? The production company cites the inevitable changes to the area over the decades. However, when I see it for myself the next day, it strikes me that the Camorra, the dominant Naples crime syndicate, might have taken an 'interest' in a nine-month location shoot in a local suburb.

"The fans that contact me are looking to get under the skin of Ferrante-land," Seymour tells me, as we walk around the area, stopping for a €1 traditional savoury roll called a *pagnuttello* at Il Pasticciello, the famed local pastry shop. Seymour started doing tours two years ago when, having devoured the books, she wanted to learn more about their inspiration. She matched passages from the novels to locations in Rione Luzzatti, befriending residents and business owners as she did. We pop our heads in to the public library, so key to the girls in the book, pass the public gardens, where they practise their Latin, and walk through the tunnel on Via Gianturco that they traverse in an attempt to reach the sea for the first time.

It was only when visiting friends – fellow fans – suggested Seymour offer tours that she realised there was a demand for Ferrante tourism, even in an area where you never quite shake the feeling that you're being watched. "Every sort of thing happened, at home and outside, every day," says narrator Elena in the book. "But I don't recall having ever thought that the life we had there was particularly bad."

As I talk to Seymour, we pass a fruit seller, and women hanging their washing out on balconies, who call *buongiorno* as we pass. Neither the neighbourhood nor its residents has altered much since Ferrante's childhood: generations of families still live within blocks of each other.

"The books and the TV show have raised up the exact things that Naples is famous for," says Seymour. Her clients, mainly Americans, Brits, Australians, Finns and Swedes, are interested in the books' depiction of community and the history of the still solidly working-class area: "They want to know about daily life – and the similarities and differences between Ferrante's time and now." Like them, I am fascinated to see the "dirty white houses" and "dust of the streets" at the centre of their stifling universe.

For the most part, the residents of Rione Luzzatti are bemused by the literary interest in their neighbourhood. The owners of the wine shop and espresso bar greet Seymour like an old friend and happily claim Ferrante as their own, but no one we talk to has read the books, nor cares who Ferrante really is. Because, despite her 'outing' two ☺



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## THE STORY OF A NEW NAME

From top: Piazza del Plebiscito monastery; Costanzo proposed ending the series in the Certosa di San Martino, but Ferrante insisted it should conclude at the reception: "The beginning and end of the book are the bits she was most attached to," says Costanzo



DESTINATION  
THOSE WHO STAY



years ago (journalist Claudio Gatti claimed he had uncovered her pseudonym, prompting an international outcry), the identity of the fiercely private author remains unconfirmed.

What's also clear is that there's also no sense that anyone's cashing in on the neighbourhood's burgeoning fame, aside from a mural planned for the side of a local building. There's not a *Ferrantini* or *Elena-pasticcino* to be found in the bar or pastry shop. (Fans can, however, find an 'Elena Ferrante pizza' ten minutes' drive away at Pizzeria Carmnella. It is topped with Neapolitan ragù, *fior di latte* and ricotta bows.)

Back in Caserta, producer Domenico Procacci explains that, despite the peripheral presence of crime families in the show (rather aptly we're talking on the set of the bar owned by the Solara brothers, the local muscle in the books), the production can only be good for Naples. Which is more than can be said for his previous Naples-set film, 2008's *Gomorrah*, which concentrated on the Camorra. "There was an almost violent reaction about it giving an image of Naples that was repellent," he says with a wry smile. "Politicians in Naples said that the city lost money because tourists stopped coming. In this case it's totally different."

Especially because *My Brilliant Friend* does, in fact, have a 'postcard' side to it – in scenes set and filmed an hour away by ferry on Ischia. The seaside island, famous for its natural thermal waters, has long been a popular holiday destination with both Germans – Angela Merkel is a regular – and the older generation, meaning that so far, it's been in the shadow of chichi Capri. However, its intense blue sea, complete with colourful swaying fishing boats, vineyards and an almost inexhaustible supply of clifftop views, guarantees that once Ischia gets its HBO closeup, viewers will be Googling 'My Brilliant Friend + location'. Ischia is Lenù's literal and metaphorical escape from neighbourhood life. The "endless" beach in Maronti, where her crush Nino first kisses her, and the "steep wide road" that connects it to Barano are where she feels free for the first time. Walking down the narrow alley with buildings on each side, you feel something of Lenù's joy as it opens up to the sea.

Alessandro Mattera of Ischia-based Platypus Tours has already seen an uptick in interest – particularly among Americans – since the books became international bestsellers. He gives me his Ferrante-inspired tour of the island, which takes in the books' locations and culminates in a creative-

#### WHERE TO STAY

##### |→| **ROMEO HOTEL**, *Naples*

Mere metres from Molo Beverello harbour, this ultra-modern Naples Bay-set hotel offers luxury and a Michelin-starred restaurant, within walking distance of the historic centre – if you can tear yourself away from the rooftop pool and view of Mount Vesuvius. Deluxe rooms from £226pn. [romeohotel.it/naples](http://romeohotel.it/naples)

Photographs: Laif/Camera Press London



#### A WRITER'S JOURNEY

Left, from top: Ischia, where young Elena experiences freedom for the first time; Ischia Ponte, where scenes from the show were filmed Above: Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet

writing lab with an Italian literature professor. While you might come for Ferrante, you'll stay for the thermal spas, sunken ruins and world-class restaurants. Plus, once you're here, you can't leave without visiting Castello Aragonese d'Ischia, a 15th-century mediaeval castle on its own private island that's now a stunning hotel. (Scenes for the show were also filmed on the bridge that connects the Castello to Ischia, even though it's not mentioned by name in the book.)

So even if Ferrante's books have (so far) passed you by, chances are that you'll be hearing a lot more about Naples and Ischia in 2019 – as well as more theories about who the author really is. Costanzo can't help with that. Despite being handpicked by Ferrante for the project ("Maybe my mother is Elena Ferrante?" he jokes) and her being involved in everything from the casting to the dialogue, Costanzo only communicated with her via email or WhatsApp messages that had been rerouted by her publisher. "It was like working with a ghost," he says laughing. "But I'm not curious at all to know who Elena Ferrante is. I believe in the reality of the books...The pages, with very little effort, bloom in how simple yet deep they are. I didn't know anything about Neapolitan culture before – I'm from Rome and I looked to Milan more than to Naples. Then I understood that Ferrante's book was like Neapolitan culture, like Neapolitan song. Very sophisticated, but very popular. It is magic." ■

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*My Brilliant Friend* is on HBO in the US on 18 November, and in the UK on Sky Atlantic. For Sophia Seymour's tours: [lookingforlila.com](http://lookingforlila.com). For Alessandro Mattera's tours: [en.platypustour.it](http://en.platypustour.it). With thanks to [ischia.it](http://ischia.it). Helen Whitaker's debut novel, *The School Run*, is out in 2019

##### |→| **ALBERGO IL MONASTERO**, *Ischia*

With views befitting a cliff-top fortress on its own private island, this hotel built into a 16th-century convent has a simple beauty, with history lurking behind every nook and cranny. Breakfast on a delicious buffet on the terrace while watching the boats below. Double rooms from £111pn. [en.albergoilmonastero.it](http://en.albergoilmonastero.it)

##### |→| **GIOVANNI'S HOME**, *Naples*

Centrally located, this hostel is run by possibly the most welcoming man in the city – one who has a reputation for cooking up pots of pasta and pesto to eat on his roof terrace. The kind of warm, relaxed atmosphere that will always be a magnet for a good crowd. Dormitory beds from £14. [giovannishome.com](http://giovannishome.com)

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