

Reviews of books and audiobooks in Italian

Susanna Agnelli (1922-2009), *Vestivamo alla marinara*, 231pp. (1975). Susanna Agnelli's paternal grandfather founded the Fiat company in 1899. She was thus a member of one of the richest families in Italy.

Vestivamo alla marina is an autobiography beginning in childhood and ending with Agnelli's marriage in 1945. The title "We dressed like sailors" refers to the sailor-suits her parents made all the children wear, and gives little hint of what the book is really about. It begins with the sailor-suits and her upbringing under the stern eye of British nanny "Miss Parker", but before long Italy has joined the Axis and the young "Sunì", as Susanna was known, is volunteering as a nurse on ships bringing injured soldiers from Africa back to Italy. As a war memoir it is fascinating, including for example an account of the utter confusion and chaos created by the Armistice of September 8, 1943 (Sunì was in Rome at the time). Judging by her own account, Sunì was a very courageous young woman, but it is only fair to point out that her war experience was highly atypical because of her access to wealth and power. In the middle of the war, she takes a ski vacation in Switzerland. When she and her brother Gianni need a car in Firenze, hoping to get to Perugia where they can hide out in one of their grandfather's numerous houses and await the allied advance, as Agnellis they have only to go to the local Fiat headquarters and they're set. This is not to say that life was easy, and indeed the trip to Perugia ends in disaster.

Even the richest of women could not escape the extreme sexism of the era. Sometime after Sunì's father died in a bizarre seaplane accident, her mother had an affair with writer Curzio Malaparte (whose novel *La Pelle* will eventually be reviewed here). The grandfather responded by cutting her off from the family income and taking away her seven children—all of which was within the law, apparently. However, and here we see again the unusual access to power, the mother went to Rome and convinced Mussolini to intervene personally. Sunì too was in a constant battle with sexist attitudes, as a nurse and in her personal life.

One glaring omission of the memoir is that it avoids discussing the extent to which the Agnelli family supported the fascist regime. The issue is alluded to occasionally but never directly confronted. But whatever the truth of the matter may be, *Vestivamo alla marina* remains a fascinating glimpse of the period through the eyes of the super-rich.

Agnelli tells her story in a conversational style, in about eighty two or three-page chapters, which makes it an easy read. Highly recommended.

Milena Agus, *Mal di Pietre*, 119pp (2006), audiobook 2hr 21 min, read by Margherita Buy. A short novel of three generations of Sardinian women, focusing mainly on the life of "Nonna" as told by her granddaughter. According to the audiobook cover, *Mal di Pietre* "ha ottenuto uno strepitoso successo di pubblico e di critica, anche all'estero". I found some aspects of it very interesting (including a creative, unexpected conclusion), and others less so. The inclusion of the lurid and demeaning details of "le prestazione delle Case Chiuse", which the reticent Nonna rather improbably offers to her husband, seems calculated to gain an "R" rating, so to speak, just as is often done in the movies. Although I'm not opposed to lurid details on principle, in this instance they detract from an otherwise engaging story.

The first time around I only listened to the audiobook, but this is a bit tricky because the story constantly jumps around in time. Reading the book at the same time is definitely

recommended, for the aforementioned reason as well as the fact the book includes some interesting Sardinian dialect (translated into Italian in the footnotes, which are in turn what one hears in the audiobook).

Sibilla Aleramo (1876-1960), *Una donna*, 220pp. (1906). Sibilla Aleramo is the pen-name of Marta Felicina Faccio. *Una donna* can be regarded as an autobiographical novel which, according to the website Sibilla Aleramo.it, very closely follows her real life. For example, at age 12 Aleramo's family moved to Civitanova Marche, on the Adriatic coast south of Ancona, where her father managed a glassware factory. In the novel the town is named only as "una cittàuzza di Mezzogiorno". Aleramo was one of the first Italian feminists, and for that reason alone it is an interesting, important book. But it is not an easy read (I found the vocabulary rather difficult) and not a book to read for pleasure. In a sense, it is not so much a novel as a kind of tortured lament and self-analysis, an excruciatingly painful attempt to come to terms with her decision to leave her husband and son, as well as a feminist manifesto. (In real life, her son Walter was seven when she left, and they did not see each other again for 31 years.) She wanted to take her son with her, but under Italian law at the time a wife was little more than the property of her husband, and she had no rights whatsoever. Indeed only the threat of losing her son kept her from leaving the marriage years earlier—a marriage that began with her future husband raping her when she was 15.

It is quite amazing that despite being trapped in the ultra-sexist environment of Italy c. 1900—trapped both figuratively and literally, as for a long time her husband kept her and the baby locked in the house—this young woman transformed herself into an independent, creative, feminist thinker. One longs to know more about exactly how her awakening came about, but in this respect the book is a disappointment: Aleramo gives very little in the way of details and examples. In Chapter XII, for example, we find:

Pensare, pensare! Come avevo potuto tanto a lungo farne senza? Persone e cose, libri e paesaggi, tutto mi suggeriva, ormai riflessioni interminabili. Talune mi sorpredevano, talaltre, ingenua, mi facevano sorridere...La loro verità era infinita.

But what exactly were these reflections? We don't know. Earlier in Chapter XI, we read:

In quei giorni di infinita solitudine, nel silenzio di ogni richiamo umano, abbandonata veramente ogni speranza e ogni fede, trovai in un libro una causa di salvezza.

Now we are dying to know more about this *libro*, but learn little more than that the author was a "giovane sociologo" writing of his "viaggi in paesi giovani" and of the problems that arise from cultural differences. Why and how the book was a "causa di salvezza" is explained only in vague general terms. Some specifics would be far more enlightening. Later she writes a short article for a journal in Rome, which publishes it. "Era in quello scritto la parola *femminismo*", she says, and gives no further details. "Intanto il mio scartafaccio cresceva di mole...si svolgeva in cento frammenti il filo delle mie considerazioni sulla vita..." But alas, not a single example, not a *frammento*, is given of what she wrote.

It would have been very interesting to have more detail, and would have made a better novel as well. But ultimately it is not a novel. Maria Corti said it best, in her preface to the 1950 edition:

Una volta entrata in scena, Sibilla Aleramo rompe tutti i ponti con la piccola vita borghese che l'attendeva; la stampa di Una donna è la sua dichiarazione di guerra.

I highly recommend this “declaration of war”, but don’t expect it to be pleasant.

Isabel Allende: A great writer, whose novels translate well from Spanish to Italian (I have this on authority of a native Italian). Ironically, I probably wouldn’t have gotten started reading Allende without my interest in Italian.

1. *L’isola sotto il mare*. Audiobook is good too (14 hours 10 minutes). Takes place at the time of the slave rebellion in Haiti, c. 1800.

2. *Il quaderno di Maya*.

3. *D’amore e ombre*.

4. *La casa degli Spiriti*. Audiobook (17 hours). Her first novel. This one and the previous two all involve, sooner or later, the military coup in Chile in 1973. The audiobooks of 1 and 4 are both read beautifully by Valentina Carnelutti, who, as it turns out, also plays Francesca in one of my all-time favorite movies *La Meglio Gioventù* (a six-hour miniseries).

5. *Il mio paese inventato*. A memoir on certain aspects of her life (in Chile until the military coup, then ten years in Venezuela, divorce, remarriage to an American in San Francisco). Much of the emphasis is on Chileans as a people, but there is personal detail as well. Very interesting.

6. *La figlia della fortuna*. The story begins in Valparaiso, Chile, in the 1830’s. At that time British immigrants were well-established in Valparaiso. (When Darwin was in Valparaiso during the voyage of the Beagle, he stayed with an old school chum there. And according to Wikipedia, about 4 percent of the current population of Chile is of British descent). Later the action moves to California during the Gold Rush. The main character, Eliza, is an orphan raised by a British siblings Jeremy and Rose Sommers. To avoid spoilers, I’ll say no more; this is one of my favorite Allende novels so far.

7. *L’amante giapponese*, 281pp. (2015). A disappointment; toward the end I just skimmed. The basic set-up is promising, but it didn’t work for me. Also, although it is difficult for a non-native speaker to judge, it seemed to me that it is a poor translation.

8. *Inés dell’anima mia*, 322pp. (2006). For me, the historical context—the Spanish destruction and enslavement of the indigenous populations of Peru and Chile in the 1500’s—is just too depressing to enjoy the novel, based as it is on a real historical figure. In contrast to “L’isola sotto il mare”, the main characters aren’t engaging enough to make it a good read.

Niccolò Ammaniti:

1. *Io no ho paura*, 219 pp. (2001). Narrated by a 9-year old boy in passato prossimo and imperfetto. Highly recommended. The film is good too.

An audiobook came out in 2013, read by Michele Riondino (5hr 42 min). Riondino’s reading is superb, lending even more suspense to an already gripping story.

2. *Io e Te*. 116 pp. Not as good as no. 1, in my opinion.

3. *Fango*. 317 pp. A collection of stories featuring senseless and at times quasi-pornographic violence, with no redeeming features that I can discern. In particular, I challenge anyone to justify the existence of the revolting *Rispetto*. Perhaps you could explain

to me how a graphic tale of the brutal gang rape and murder of three young women can be described as (I quote from the book cover) “una gustosissima vena comica”, “uno scintillante spettacolo”, and “un autentico, irripetibile gioiello”. After *Rispetto* it is impossible to take Ammaniti seriously as a writer; he is more like an adolescent boy trying to shock the grown-ups with the bad words he’s learned. In my case he’s succeeded in this aim; *beato lui*. But what a waste of talent.

Jane Austen, 1. *Ragione e sentimento*, audiobook 12hrs 38min, read by Paola Cortellesi. Although I’ve never read any of Jane Austen’s novels, I’ve seen almost every movie version, some of them multiple times (*Sense and Sensibility* being my favorite). As a result I found the audiobook interesting even apart from the Italian language aspect, as I was getting the complete story for the first time. Entertaining, with a high percentage of dialog, well-read with some real acting by Cortellesi (her “Signora Jennings”, for instance, is quite amusing).

I’m not sure why, but the frequency of subjunctive conjugations in the story is exceptionally high. Constructions of the type “per quanto fosse...” alone occur dozens of times. So it’s a great way to tune your ear to the subjunctive, in all of its tenses, if you want practice in that. Another small but significant bonus is that the 50 short chapters are all announced with ordinal numbers: “capitolo quinto”; “capitolo sesto”, “capitolo trentunesimo” etc. You could of course memorize these from some grammar book or another, but how much more pleasant to practice the ordinals with the Dashwood sisters!

2. *Orgoglio e pregiudizio*, audiobook 12hrs 23min, again read by Paola Cortellesi. It would be easy to ridicule Austen’s novels. An extraterrestrial whose only knowledge of earthlings came from reading Austen would have to conclude that no one actually works for a living; they only go to dances, go for long walks in the countryside, read, play cards and gossip about how much so-and-so will inherit when his father kicks the bucket. Meanwhile food, clothing and shelter appear as if by magic. Indeed, it is remarkable the extent to which Austen does not even acknowledge the existence of those who do actual work—even middle-class work, let alone agriculture and other physical labor. And setting aside the issue of the working classes, one is still left to wonder: Don’t these people ever *do* anything? And why do they all talk as though they were delivering a paper “Interpersonal relationships in early 19th century England” at the London Psychological Society?

Far be it from me, however, to engage in such ridicule. The fact is that *Orgoglio e pregiudizio* is a lot of fun, and all the more so because of Cortellesi’s creative reading. Her rendition of Mr. Collins is especially amusing, as is her interpretation of Mrs. Bennett. Highly recommended, again with the bonus of much practice in the subjunctive and the ordinal numbers.

Ippolita Avalli, *Mi manchi* (audiobook about 8 hours, 2008), read by Alessandra Bedino. The set-up: Single mom Vera and her son 18-year old son Gabriele have a very strained relationship. He disappears during a trip to London, and his mother goes to look for him. This part of the plot inches forward at a maddeningly slow pace, continually interrupted by flashbacks to Vera’s earlier life: love interests, abortion, the terrorism of the *Brigate Rosse* in the 70’s. Although I enjoyed much of it, I found the ending to be anti-climactic and trite, including elements reminiscent of a cheap romance novel. The reading by Bedino is excellent though; definitely worth a listen.

Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), *Eugénie Grandet*, 189pp (1833). In some ways, the plot and style of *Eugénie Grandet* brings to mind a male, French version of Jane Austen. The title character is a naive, sheltered young woman of marriageable age, daughter of a rich, miserly father and a timid, pathetic mother. Several families of the town are maneuvering to marry their sons to Eugénie, mainly for financial reasons. Signor Grandet, often referred to as “il buon'uomo”, judges potential suitors exclusively by their wealth; in fact he is so obsessed with money that his character risks degenerating into a caricature. In the midst of all this is the faithful family servant Nanon, who although loyal to her master is also the only one of the three women who will stand up to him at all.

Then Eugénie's dashing cousin Charles (son of Signor Grandet's brother) arrives from Paris. It hardly needs saying that the two fall in love. Signor Grandet might have considered Charles a suitable match, until he learns that Charles' father has gone bankrupt and committed suicide. It is then essential to get Charles away from Eugénie; Grandet's solution is to ship Charles off to the colonies in the East Indies, with the idea that there Charles will make his fortune and meanwhile the two lovers will forget about each other.

For three-fourths of its length *Eugénie Grandet* is an engaging story. One has to accept the bizarre 19th-century male view of women. In Balzac's case it is a combination of condescension with worship of an ideal concept of feminine purity, virtue and of course beauty; at his worst he makes treacly comparisons with the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, the characters are interesting and the plot less predictable than the paragraphs above might suggest. The high point is when Eugénie and her mother, aided and abetted by Nanon, finally stand up to the tyrannical Signor Grandet. Then Balzac shifts gears. Having accustomed the reader to detailed, well-written narration of daily life and unfolding drama in the Grandet household, he abruptly speeds ahead ten years or so to a very unsatisfying conclusion. I've never liked that technique, and here it is very disappointing. One detail: In the telling of Charles' successes in the East Indies, it is casually mentioned, as though the fact were of little significance, that he made most of his money through the slave trade.

Muriel Barberry, *L'eleganza del riccio*. 318 pp. Originally in French. A middle-aged concierge secretly reads Heidegger and quotes Tolstoy, resulting in some fairly difficult Italian vocabulary. Narrated alternately by her and a precocious 11-year old girl who lives in the same building. So the audiobook (about 6 hours, if memory serves) also has two narrators, which adds some variety.

Giorgio Bassani (1916-2000), *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, 214pp (1962), audiobook 7hrs 40min read by Marco Baliani. It took me three tries to get going on this one. The prologue caught my interest right away, including as it does this interesting question from an 11-year old girl:

“Papà,” domandò ancora Giannina, “perché le tombe antiche fanno meno malinconia de quelle più nuove?”

But Chapter 1 drones on and on about the family tomb, effectively killing a promising beginning. The trick is to persevere, although to some extent the whole book is like this: interesting one minute, boring the next. The story takes place in Ferrara (north of Bologna) in the years leading up to the war, with the “race laws” increasingly weighing down on its

mostly Jewish characters. But this is all in the background; the centerpiece of the plot is the relationship between the male narrator (who is unnamed, an odd device that one encounters frequently in Italian novels of the era) and Micòl Finzi-Contini, the daughter of a rich family living on a huge estate with a tennis court. The narrator is in love with Micòl, whereas she wants only friendship. This part of the story is well-told, especially in the dialogs between the two, and yet isn't enough to sustain an entire novel. All in all I give it a lukewarm recommendation; the audiobook is definitely worth a listen.

Prospective readers (non-native speakers, that is) are advised that the reading is sometimes difficult, partly due to Bassani's predilection for long, convoluted sentences. Following is an example of a single Bassanian sentence, with my attempt at translation. The background is that the Finzi-Contini children are brought to school in a horse-drawn carriage, whereas everyone else walks or rides a bike.

E bisogna dire che esaminare l'equipaggio da vicino, in tutti i particolari, dal cavallone poderoso di tanto in tanto calmamente scalcante, con la coda mozza e con la criniera taglia corta, a spazzola, sino alla minuscola corona nobile che spiccava argentea sul fondo blu degli sportelli, ottenendo talora dall'indulgente cocchiere in tenuta bassa, ma assiso in serpa come su un trono, il permesso di montare su uno dei predellini laterali, e ciò perché potessimo contemplare a nostro agio, il naso schiacciato contro il cristallo, l'interno tutto grigio, felpato, e in penombra (sembrava un salotto: in un angolo c'erano perfino dei fiori infilati dentro un esile vaso oblungo, a foggia di calice...), poteva essere anche questo un piacere, anzi lo era senz'altro: uno dei tanti avventurosi piaceri di cui sapevano esserci prodighe quelle meravigliose, adolescenti mattine di tarda primavera.

The following translation has some problems and guesswork (for instance, I haven't found any dictionary with the word "serpa" or a verb for which "assiso" might be the past participle), but it's the best I could come up with:

"And it is necessary to say that to examine the crew close-up, in every particular, from the big, powerful horse calmly kicking up its hooves now and then, with its tail cropped and its mane cut short, in a crew-cut, to the small coronet of nobility that stood out against the blue background of the carriage doors, sometimes obtaining from the indulgent coachman in his poor uniform, but perched on the driver's seat as though on a throne, the permission to climb up onto one of the side footboards, so that we could contemplate at leisure, with our noses pressed against the glass, the interior all in grey, padded and in shadow (it seemed like a living-room: in one corner there were even some flowers inserted into a thin oblong vase, in the shape of a chalice...), this too could be a pleasure, indeed it was without fail: one of the many adventurous pleasures that those adolescent mornings of late spring were capable of lavishing upon us."

Ponderous sentences of this type certainly make life difficult for the reader: its core is "esaminare l'equipaggio da vicino, poteva essere anche questo un piacere", but the two clauses are so far apart that by the time one gets to the end one has almost forgotten the translation for the beginning. Then again, Bassani wasn't writing for a 21st-century American mathematician.

Lyman Frank Baum, *Il meraviglioso mago di Oz*. Beautifully illustrated by Giuliano Lunelli. 206 pp. Easy to read, lots of fun. The audiobook is also wonderful and highly recommended, read by Jasmine Trinca. 3 hours and 45 minutes. Jasmine Trinca is Giorgia in *La Meglio Gioventù*, the beautiful film mentioned above under Allende.

Mario Benedetti, *La tregua*, 241pp. (1960). Benedetti was a Uruguayan writer and poet, of Italian descent as his name suggests. *La tregua* is written as the diary of Martín Santomé, an almost-fifty widower who is soon to retire from his job as an accountant at a manufacturing firm. His wife passed away in childbirth twenty years earlier, leaving him to raise their three children alone. He is at a loss to know what he'll do with his retirement, but everything changes when a young woman Avellaneda, half his age, joins the firm. Put this way, the plot may sound routine. But Benedetti has an intriguing, original style that I found absorbing. Santomé's memories of his beloved wife, his difficult relationships with his children, and his love affair with Avellaneda are combined with philosophical speculations and some amusing tangential vignettes.

Alan Bennett, *Nudi e crudi*, audiobook 2hrs 25 min., read by Paola Cortellesi. This is a comedic novella written in 1996, whose original English title is "The clothes they stood up in". I've never read anything by Bennett, and after this I doubt I ever will. The initial premise is interesting, but it goes nowhere and isn't funny. It may have lost something in translation, but I doubt the English language could save it.

Dario Biocca, *Silone: la doppia vita di un italiano*, 358pp, 2005. See under Silone for discussion.

Karen Blixen (1885-1962), *Il pranzo di Babette e La storia immortale*, audiobook 3hr51min read by Laura Morante. I liked the film "Babette's Feast" more than the story. The very strange "La storia immortale" (which was also made into a short film, by Orson Welles) kept my interest only because I was curious to see where Blixen was going with it. Overall it didn't do much for me.

Blixen's most famous work is probably "Out of Africa", written under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen.

Federica Bosco, *Mi piace da morire*, audiobook 3hr 49min, read by the author. According to the notes, Bosco is the "regina indiscussa della chick lit italiana". I'd call it a romantic comedy, entertaining as well as good practice, with its conversational present tense Italian (not to mention illustrations of the use of various *parolacce*).

Emily Bronte (1818-1848), *Cime Tempestose* (Wuthering Heights), audiobook 14hr 20min, read by Alessandra Bedino and Luigi Marangoni. Bronte is the anti-Austen, with completely dysfunctional (or in the case of Heathcliff, psychotic) characters and a plot that remains gloomy and depressing to the bitter end. I don't see the point of writing such a novel.

Anna Maria Bruzzone and Rachele Farina, *La Resistenza taciuta: dodici vite di partigiane Piemontesi*, 311pp (2003). Fascinating, moving account of the lives of twelve

women of the Piemonte region in the Italian resistance, told by the women themselves. Many experienced arrest and torture; all risked their lives and lost companions, friends and family to the Fascists and Nazis. Social justice and women's rights are recurring themes. Equally interesting are their stories of early life, before the war. Maria Rovano, for example, tells of her experiences as a midwife in Valle d'Aosta. Her clients, mostly poor, lived high up in the hills, and it was a two or three hour walk carrying her midwife's suitcase to reach them.

Italo Calvino (1923-1985), 1. *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, 148 pp. To translate from Calvino's own account of this, his first novel: "At the time in which I wrote it [1947], the 'literature of the Resistance' was still an open problem, and to write 'the novel of the Resistance' stood forth as an imperative." In the end he found the responsibility too daunting and decided that rather than confront it directly ("di petto") he would do so indirectly ("di scorcio"), giving only a glimpse of "*il colore, l'aspro sapore, il ritmo*" of the period. The story is told from the point of view of Pin, a young boy. Highly recommended. Written in present tense.

2. *Il cavaliere inesistente*. 183 pp. This bizarre tale is considered a classic. The plot can only be described as a cross between Gilbert and Sullivan and the Twilight Zone, featuring an empty suit of armor as its hero and involving, for instance, a young man who may or may not inadvertently have incestuous relations with his mother (I won't give it away here). Definitely not for kids. Some difficult vocabulary related to knights, armor, and the like.

The edition I own has some of the most hideous and hideously inappropriate illustrations imaginable. (Note to editors: Please don't hire "artists" trying to show off how original they are. Hire someone who can actually *illustrate* the text.)

I liked the audiobook more as it is read beautifully, in an entertaining style, by Claudio Carini. Why they didn't record the whole book, I have no idea. Two hours worth of selected passages.

3. *I racconti*, a 2-volume collection of over 50 short stories. There is also an audiobook *Racconti Scelti* including nine of the stories (2 hrs 15 min, again read by Claudio Carini). So far I've read or listened to 22 of these, and on the whole I much prefer them to *Il cavaliere inesistente*. The stories of Volume I (from which those of the audiobook are taken) range from from humorous (excerpts from Calvino's series about the comedic character Marcovaldo, such as *Funghi in città* and *Luna e Gnac*) to rather dark war-related stories such as *Ultimo viene il corvo* e *Campo di mine*. Volume II includes an interesting series *Gli amori difficili* (I don't know if this is Calvino's designation or the editor's) with titles of the form "L'avventura di..." (di un lettore, di una bagnante, di un miope etc.). For something sweet, try "L'avventura di due sposi".

4. *Marcovaldo, ovvero le stagioni in città*, audiobook of irrelevant length with wasted effort by Marco Paolini, 2006. For my general view of adding music to audiobooks, see my review of the audiobook of Moravia's *Gli indifferenti*. This affront to Calvino is among the worst of the genre; I stopped listening after five minutes and will shortly consign it to the dustbin. It's bad enough that music is played simultaneously with the reading, always an annoying, pointless distraction; to make matters worse, still more irrelevant music is inserted between paragraphs, destroying the continuity of the story.

I would be willing to write this off to poor taste and incompetence, were it not for the self-aggrandizing statement on the CD-cover: “fusioni di musica e letteratura...capaci di restituire non solo il senso e il significato, ma anche l’anima dei racconti più belli.” (“Fusions of music and literature...capable of restoring not only the sense and significance, but also the soul of the most beautiful stories.”) This is unbelievable arrogance. Who are they to say that any “restoration” is needed, let alone that *their* taste in music is adequate to the task? The stories stand on their own; the music ruins them.

Luigi Carletti, *Cadavere squisito*. A self-described “thriller”. If you like ugly stories with contrived plots and characters that range from barely sympathetic to repulsive, this is the book for you. The plot was interesting enough to keep me reading it, but by the end it seemed a waste of time.

Andrea Camilleri, 1. *Una voce di notte*. I didn’t actually read this; I include it here only to warn others: When I ordered it online, I naively assumed that it was written in Italian. Alas, much of it is in Sicilian dialect. It’s true that many sentences—even entire paragraphs—are essentially standard Italian, and it quickly becomes clear that *pirché* is *perché*, *sapiva* is *sapeva* and so on. Nor is it so hard to decipher thing like *Stammi a sintiri. Non sinni parla che io resto ccà! E po’ arricordati che io sugno il tò superiori*. Still, if you’re trying to learn standard Italian, Camilleri is best avoided.

2. *Il giudice Surra*, 35pp. (2011). I found this in a collection of three stories by three different authors entitled *Giudici*, published by Einaudi. It takes place in the early days of the unification of Italy, telling the story of a judge from Torino who is sent to Sicily to bring its judicial system into line with the new national model. There he is threatened by the Fratellanza—”che già ai suoi tempi si chiamava maffia e che poi, strada facendo, perdette una effe”. Being unaccustomed to the peculiar local traditions of communication, however, he remains unaware of the threats and proceeds nonchalantly ahead. A great story. Again there is a fair bit of Sicilian dialect, but only in the dialogues. It’s fun to decipher the dialect when there isn’t too much of it (the trouble with “Una voce di notte” is that even the narration is often in Sicilian).

Luigi Capuana (1839-1915), 1. *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, 268pp (1901), audiobook 9hrs10min read by Claudio Carini. This is one of the most interesting, absorbing novels of its era (let’s call it 19th century, broadly defined) that I’ve read yet. The well-crafted tragic plot moves along at a fairly brisk pace, and often takes unexpected turns. There is a cast of fascinating characters, and much well-written dialogue. But before going into the details, I give fair warning that the rest of this review will be like one of those movie trailers that gives away the entire story.

Set in Sicily—where Capuana was born, in the same town and almost the same year as Verga—the story centers on *il marchese* (equivalent to the French “marquis”), a wealthy, never-married landowner who I think is supposed to be forty-ish. A brief summary of the plot, omitting one key element that I’ll return to below: One of his most loyal workers, Rocco Criscione, has been found shot to death. Another man, Neli Casaccio, is tried for the crime, convicted and sentenced to prison, leaving behind a wife and four children to fend for themselves. He later dies in prison. The real culprit, as we learn early on, is the marchese.

For ten years he has been involved with Agrippina Solmos, a servant girl who he seduced at 16, early on moving her into a room of the main house. Under much social pressure for this scandalous state of affairs, especially from his aunt the *baronessa*, he had recruited Rocco to marry Agrippina, with one condition: they must swear an oath to be husband and wife in appearance only; no sex, in short. Meanwhile Agrippina would continue to come to work for the marchese. After three years of this, the marchese begins to suspect the two have broken their vow—an unforgivable *tradimento*. He murders Rocco in a jealous rage, or more precisely in a careful, premeditated ambush. Consumed alternately by guilt and by fear of the afterlife, he eventually goes insane. We last see him in a straitjacket, bound for the asylum.

Other principal male characters include: the marchese’s lawyer don Acquilante, an otherwise intelligent man who believes in “spiriti” and in contacting the dead seance-style; his openly atheist cousin Pergola, who lives in sin with a common-law wife and their children, and don Silvio, a self-sacrificing if rather naive priest who works tirelessly for the poor. I don’t know of any other Italian novel of the era in which a character (Pergola) delivers such scathing criticism of the Catholic church.

Agrippina is a cipher. We learn little about it her, beyond her slave-like devotion to the marchese, for which she is actually admired by many of the local men. Capuana himself had a long-lasting relationship with an illiterate family servant, who bore many of his children. Like the marchese in the novel, he eventually arranged for her to marry another man. Agrippina stands by the marchese to the bitter end, even after his guilt becomes known and he goes insane.

The other principal female character is Zosima, the love of the marchese’s youth. At the time Zosima thought they would marry, but it never happened. Although from a noble family, she falls on hard economic times. She remains single and never forgets her dream of becoming “la marchesa di Roccaverdina”. At the baronessa’s urging (this is long after the murder of Rocco), the marchese proposes to Zosima. Although she worries that she will be compared to Agrippina, she accepts. After much procrastination and dithering on the part of the marchese, they are finally married. Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t work out well. When the truth comes out, Zosima leaves him, straightjacket and all.

Other than the baronessa, who cares only about her dogs and maintaining the family name, the remaining important female character is “mamma Grazia”, the aging family servant who was the marchese’s nurse and is now showing signs of dementia. She is virtually the only person toward whom the marchese shows any kindness.

Through the eyes of these characters we get a fascinating glimpse of late 19th-century Sicily, including the Italian judicial system, the church, local politics and a devastating drought. Highly recommended.

2. *Giacinta*, 205pp (1879). This was Capuana’s first novel, dedicated to Emile Zola. It was inspired by actual events that had been in the news, although it’s unclear to what extent the novel follows the real-life story. Capuana apparently fancied himself a student of female psychology, and *Giacinta* fits into the 19th century trend of men writing about women: *Madame Bovary*, *Therese Raquin*, *Anna Karenina* (although Capuana wouldn’t have known Tolstoy’s novel at the time he wrote *Giacinta*, as it had just been published in Russian in 1878). In all four of these novels, the female protagonist has affairs and commits suicide at

the end. Giacinta does it with a curare-tipped needle, after first trying it out on her canary.

In the end I wasn't convinced by the Giacinta character. On the other hand, real life is often stranger than fiction, so who knows? Be that as it may, Capuana writes with absorbing style. A good read, and a fast one (lots of dialogue).

Gianrico Carofiglio. The first four follow the cases of Bari defense lawyer Guido Guerrieri. I heard an interview with Carofiglio in which he objected to the characterization of these novels as John Grisham-like legal thrillers. In my opinion, however, Carofiglio (who was an anti-mafia judge in Bari) is at his best in the courtroom scenes. Anyway, I liked them a lot; you learn some interesting things about the Italian legal system. There are audiobooks of all four, read by Carofiglio himself. I wouldn't say he's a great reader but I enjoyed these also.

1. *Testimone inconsapevole*. 316 pp., audiobook 7 hours (includes an interview with Carofiglio, but not the one mentioned above).
2. *Ad occhi chiusi*. 250 pp., audiobook 5 hours.
3. *Ragionevole dubbi*, 299pp, audiobook.
4. *Le perfezioni provvisorie*, 336pp., audiobook 7 hours.

No. 5 and 6 below were okay, although I didn't enjoy them as much as the Guerrieri stories.

5. *Il passato è una terra straniera*, 297pp.

6. *Il silenzio dell'onde*.

7. *Né qui né altrove: una notte a Bari.*, 160pp. (2008). Bari is to Carofiglio as Firenze is to Pratolini: A beloved hometown, where he grew up and where most of his novels are set. In this one, three friends from college days reunite for a night in Bari 20+ years later. The first-person narrator is presumably based on Carofiglio himself. Although interesting enough to read to the end, it has no real "hook" to involve the reader, at least not for me. The descriptions of Bari are interesting, although at times the author seems to assume the reader is already familiar the city, while the reminiscences and reflections of the narrator and his two friends are occasionally interesting but don't really grab you. One interesting item of trivia: According to the book (revealed during a discussion of the extent to which Bari is known in the outside world), the Meryl Streep character in "The Bridges of Madison County" says she was born in Bari. For me, the most intriguing item was the description of *la focaccia barese* in the *Epilogo*, which *va accompagnata, possibilmente, da una bella bottiglia di birra molto freddo*.

8. *Una mutevole verità*, 115pp, 2014. This very short, routine detective mystery ("poliziesco") seems a half-hearted effort from Carofiglio. The story is entirely plot-driven, with almost no character development (although I did note with interest Fenoglio's purchase of Mozart's clarinet concerto), and the plot itself, while not without interest, doesn't have much new to offer. It reads more like a script for a television series—and as such it wouldn't be bad at all, but I hoped for more from Carofiglio.

9. *La regola dell'equilibrio*, 280pp, 2014. Carofiglio returns to his roots, bringing back Bari lawyer Guido Guerrieri. In this episode, a judge and former classmate of Guerrieri's is accused of taking bribes. Entertaining.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice nel paese delle meraviglie*, 116 pp. Fascinating, because how can you possibly translate the innumerable puns and wordplays into another language? Indeed you cannot, but it's fun to read in Italian anyway. What makes this edition [B.C. Dalai editore, prefazione di Lella Costa] especially interesting are the footnotes explaining the missing puns and anglicisms to Italian readers.

Carlo Cassola (1917-1987), 1. *La ragazza di Bube*, 250+pp, 1960. This moving story is centered around Mara, “la ragazza” of the title, during the years just after the war. I liked it a lot. I won't discuss the plot, other than to say that it involves the aftermath of the resistance (Cassola himself fought with the resistance), and that Cassola is the anti-Pavese. The book is filled with fascinating characters, and in particular has a strong female protagonist. But I'll say no more to avoid spoiling it. Highly recommended; very easy to read because at least half the book is dialog.

2. *I poveri*, short story about 8pp (found in [Trevelyan]). Interesting, subtle character study of a well-to-do woman who brings a good deal of hypocrisy and snobbery to her charity work in the poor neighborhoods.

3. *Il taglio del bosco: Racconti lunghi e romanzi brevi*. As the title indicates, this is a collection of tales that can be regarded as either long “short stories” or short novels; there are nine of them ranging from 30 to 110 pages in length. The title story *Il taglio del bosco* (the only one I've read so far) is about 65 pages. Presumably based on Cassola's own life, it is in part an interesting portrait of the life of a woodcutter, or “logger” as we'd say in the northwest, in 1930's Italy. The trees are cut by hand with axes and hauled by mules. But it has an emotional element too: The main character Guglielmo mourns for his wife, who died young of an unspecified illness. While Guglielmo spends months at a time in a remote logging hut with four coworkers, his unmarried sister takes care of his two young daughters.

4. *Il soldato*, 109pp. (1958). A big disappointment after reading *La ragazza di Bube*. Shallow characters, inconsequential plot, very little content. At the time some reviewers rated it highly, but I can't imagine why.

Vincenzo Cerami, *Un borghese piccolo piccolo*, 123pp. (1976). At first it appears intended as a commentary on the life of a “piccolo borghese”, in this case a middle-class accountant in a government retirement office who is himself approaching retirement and whose greatest aspiration is that his son follow in his footsteps—even if it means helping the son cheat on the qualifying examination. Had Cerami kept to this theme, it might have been a good book. But he abruptly changes the tone of the story twice, first with a random, contrived act of violence, and then with a gruesome and totally implausible act of revenge. I can't think of any reason to read this novel. Or to write it.

Miguel Cervantes (1547-1616), *Don Chisciotte della Manica*, 923pp. (vol 1. 1605, vol.2 1615), audiobook 40hr read by Claudio Carini.

I didn't know what to expect when I started this classic novel. Like most people, I knew of don Chisciotte and his faithful squire Sancho Panza, and the famous encounter with the windmills, but other than that I knew nothing of the story. Forty hours of listening later I understand why *Don Chisciotte della Manica* is considered one of the great works

of European literature. As far as I know, nothing remotely like this had ever been written. Shakespeare was a contemporary (Cervantes and Shakespeare died in the same year)¹, but of course he wrote plays; Dante came much earlier with his epic poem *La divina commedia*. Cervantes' story is considered the first modern novel. It seems to have been conceived as a satire on the absurd tales of knights and chivalry that were popular in the 1500's, but evolved into much more than that.

The premise of the story is that don Chisciotte, a 50-something wealthy landowner, has become obsessed with tales of knight errantry and decides to become a knight-errant himself. Equipping himself with armor, shield, sword and lance, he sets off on his decrepit old horse, Ronzinante, in search of giants to slay and damsels in need of rescue. As he has learned from his assiduous study of the knightly literature, every knight errant must worship and serve a beautiful princess. Don Chisciotte chooses "la impareggiabile Signora Dulcinea di Toboso", who is in fact an ordinary farm girl he once had a crush on, and who doesn't even know he exists. Early on it occurs to him that he also needs a "scudiero" (squire). He recruits for the purpose Sancho Panza, a local farmer—and so begins the famous relationship of the "non mai abbastanza lodato Cavaliere dalla Triste Figura" (of the sad countenance because of his unrequited love), idealistic champion of chivalry and mad as a hatter, and the down-to-earth, long-suffering, simple-minded, good-hearted scudiero who dreams of ruling the "island" that his knight promises to win.

If the novel itself is entertaining, the audiobook as read by Claudio Carini (using his own translation) is even more so. It's one of the most enjoyable of the many audiobooks I've listened to, and I felt sad when it came to an end. A glimpse of Cervantes' style can be had from the chapter titles, e.g.: "Che cosa accade all'ingegnoso hidalgo nella locanda che egli si figurava fosse un castello", or "Della non mai vista e inaudita avventura compiuta dal valoroso don Chisciotte con minor pericolo di qualunque altra portate a termine da alcun famoso cavaliere al mondo". Cervantes has a great sense of humor, a good eye for characterization and a good ear for dialogue. There are dozens of interesting minor characters who appear (and reappear) in the story, and a number of interesting subplots, but the best parts of the novel are the amusing, often contentious dialogues between don Chisciotte and Sancho.

The weak point of *Don Chisciotte della Mancia* is the same as that of many later novels by other authors (Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, Hugo's *Les misérables*): irrelevant digressions that needlessly lengthen it and detract from an otherwise engaging main plot. The most egregious example is the "novella del curioso fuori luogo", which is literally a separate novella artificially inserted as a manuscript discovered by chance at the locanda. Another device is to have random characters encountered along the way tell their own stories of trial and tribulation, for example several chapters "dove il prigioniero racconta la sua vita e le sue vicende". The tale that the prisoner tells is not without interest, since it involves battles with, and being captured by, the "Turks", an area in which Cervantes had extensive personal experience (he was seriously wounded in the famous naval battle of Lepanto in 1571, and was later captured by Algerian pirates and held prisoner for five years before finally being ransomed). There are several more, less interesting digressions involving e.g. goatherds

¹So 2016 is the 400th anniversary of their deaths. According to news reports, many Spaniards are indignant that their government is not celebrating Cervantes the way that Britain is celebrating Shakespeare.

singing sad songs of lost love. In some cases Cervantes uses his characters to air what are presumably his own views on various subjects, for example a chapter in which *il canonico* critiques, among other things, the implausible plots of contemporary Spanish theatre.

The first volume of *Don Chisciotte* was very popular, and inspired a number of illegitimate knock-offs of much lesser quality. In the preface to volume 2, Cervantes complains bitterly about the plagiarism. An interesting literary device of v.2 is that the characters themselves are familiar with the first volume, and complain about the spurious sequels.

In any case, it's a remarkable, landmark novel, and the audiobook especially is great entertainment.

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), *Racconti scelti*, audiobook 2hr32min, read by Silvia Cecchini. Some of the stories are humorous, in a lightweight, entertaining way. Some are darker, and a few I really don't get even after listening twice.

Carlo Collodi (1826-1890), *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, audiobook 4 hours 36 minutes, well read by Moro Silo. This is the complete story, which includes much more than the Disney version familiar to most Americans. Fun. Also recommended is the parallel text edition translated with notes by Nicolas Perella.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), *Cuore di tenebra*, audiobook 4hr 34min, read by Francesco De Gregori. The classic novella of a voyage up the Congo river. Highly recommended.

Philip Cooke (ed.), *The Italian resistance: an anthology*, 197pp. (1997). This is from the same series "Italian texts" that includes *Women writing in Italian* (see below under Sharon Wood). The writings are in Italian, with commentary and notes in English. There are 33 short pieces, arranged chronologically 1943-45: Personal reminiscences, letters, excerpts from novels by Calvino, Viganò, Pavese, historical essays, etc. Just to give you an idea, among the most interesting I've read so far are:

Fiorina Friziero, *Poi è sopravvenuto l'8 settembre*. Friziero, a working class woman from Torino, describes the impact of the armistice of Sept. 8 1943 on her life. (For another such personal impression, see Susanna Agnelli's *Vestivamo alla marina*.)

Giaime Pintor, *L'ultima lettera*. Pintor was killed by a mine, while trying to cross enemy lines, shortly after he wrote this letter to his brother.

Renata Viganò, *Il viadotto*. Viganò is best known for *L'Agnese va a morire*, reviewed below. This (fictional) account of partisans blowing up a bridge is an excerpt from *Matrimonio in brigata*.

Leone Ginzburg, letter to Natalia Ginzburg. His last letter to his wife before dying in a Nazi prison in Rome. Very sad.

Natalia Ginzburg, *Memoria*. A short poem written after her husband's death. Likewise.

Pietro Secchia, *La proclama di Alexander*. An account of reactions to the infamous (from the partisan perspective) proclamation of British general Harold Alexander in November 1944. See my review of Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* for details.

Ada Gobetti, *L'alba si levò grigia*. An excerpt from her *Diario partigiano*, this piece describes the liberation of Torino as Gobetti experienced it. Fascinating on many levels.

Mirella Aloisio and Giuliana Beltrami, *Ma abbiamo scelto la Resistenza*. A look at the varied reasons that women chose to join the resistance.

The collection includes one curious item written in English by Beppe Fenoglio: an excerpt from an unfinished draft of “Il partigiano Johnny”. According to the notes, Fenoglio’s version of English has been dubbed “fenglese”. I found it poetic, for example:

“...and the world was sadness. The sky was high, of a vertiginous and almost formicolant grey, and a gale chill and resigned, much like a curfew toll, came flipping-flapping the sad first leaves of the nearest trees. And in that sadness a nail-thought into the chilled Johnny’s mind: ‘These are poor Englishmen. The poorness of these Englishmen!’”

Patricia Cornwall, *Oggetti di reato*, 322 pp. Translation of *Body of Evidence*, from Cornwall’s long-running series about coroner Kay Scarpetta. I’m not a big Cornwall fan, but I bought this early in my Italian-reading days because crime/detective novels are usually easier to follow.

Gabriel D’Annunzio (1863-1938), *Il Piacere*, 358pp. (1890), audiobook 13hr read by Claudio Carini. D’Annunzio was a man of many facets: writer, poet, soldier, politician, fascist, would-be dictator of Fiume, womanizer...One bit of trivia I happen to know is that he wrote a “mystery play” on the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian with music by his third (!) choice of composer: Debussy. (The music is very interesting; the play not so much.) *Il piacere* was his first novel. The edition I have was originally published by Oscar Mondadori in 1995, with notes by Federico Roncoroni—hereafter referred to as “the Notes”. The standard English title seems to be “The child of pleasure”, but in my opinion, simply “Pleasure” would be better.

In a nutshell, it is the story of young aristocrat Andrea Sperelli and his love affairs with two women: young widow Elena Muti, and Maria Ferres, wife of a diplomat. According to Roncoroni, the Sperelli character is definitely a representation of D’Annunzio himself. “Pleasure” refers of course to physical pleasure—at times the novel is surprisingly graphic for its date—but also to art. In fact d’Annunzio makes many references to art and artists that only the *cognoscenti* (I am not one of them) will follow, for example:

“Pareva una creatura di Thomas Lawrence”; “...credetter ravvisare la figura del divino Cesare Borgia dipinta dal divino Sanzio”; “...que’ chiari paesi citerèi ch’esciron dalla fantasia d’Antonio Watteau”; “...a similitudine d’una sacerdotessa d’Alma Tadema.”

The Notes provide further information, and up to a point it can be interesting to look up the artists in question on-line. But after a while one wearies of this constant name-dropping, which seems calculated to show off the author’s vast knowledge. Poets, composers, and other historical figures are similarly exploited. Obscene jokes are made in Latin. Moreover, according to the Notes, numerous passages in *Il Piacere* appear to be lifted directly from works of others, in particular from French novelist Josephin Péladan. In any case, one can certainly learn a lot from *Il Piacere* and the Notes (I’d never heard of Péladan, for example).

Sperelli himself frequently resorts to plagiarism in his over-the-top, flowery monologues (did people really talk like this?) aimed at seducing the woman of the moment. For example, according to the Notes (see the notes to p. 183 and p. 184) the line “La pietà che mi venisse

da voi [Maria Ferres] mi sarebbe più cara della passione di qualunque altra” is taken from a poem by Shelley, and the entire speech in which it occurs is borrowed from a novel by S enancour. In this instance the narrator acknowledges the fact: “Egli faceva sue le parole d’Obermann”, Obermann being the protagonist of S enancour’s novel.

Although *Il Piacere* is not an easy read, its idiosyncratic style is interesting, and it provides a fascinating glimpse into the sex lives of the idle rich in 1880’s Rome (and not only the lives of Italians; there is an entire chapter in which the English second husband of Elena shows off his pornography collection to Sperelli). There is art—lots and lots of art—a horse race, and a duel. But I’d have to say favorite character was Delfina, Maria’s little girl, portrayed in surprisingly convincing fashion by D’Annunzio.

Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia: canti scelti*, audiobook 78 min. read by Claudio Carini. I had ordered *Calvino: racconti scelti* from my favorite book-site (ibs.it) and by mistake they sent me the Dante. For a moment I imagined “Marcovaldo in purgatorio”. In any event, they sent the Calvino and told me to keep the Dante. I can’t claim to have understood much of it, but it was interesting to hear the cadence of the poetry.

Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749-1838), 1. Libretti for the Mozart operas *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* e *Così fan tutte*, in *Three Mozart Libretti, complete in Italian and English*, translated by Robert Pack and Marjorie Lelash (1993).

Nowadays opera-goers have supertitles to rely on. But the supertitles translate only a small fraction of what’s being sung onstage. There is a good reason for this: Otherwise the audience will tend to be focused on the supertitles, thereby missing much of the onstage action. *Three Mozart Libretti* gives the complete libretti, with parallel English translation, of the three famous Mozart-Da Ponte collaborations. (It is often the fate of the librettist to be all but forgotten; although this book is all words and no music, Da Ponte isn’t even mentioned on the cover or the title page; Da Ponte would not have been happy to see his work referred to as “Mozart libretti”.) The Italian in these operas is sometimes archaic and often, of course, in a poetic style using non-standard word order, spelling etc. Hence the English translations provided here are especially helpful.

2. *Memorie; Abate, libertino, letterato: una vita a caccia di donne, soldi e musica*. As one can infer from the title alone, Da Ponte was quite full of himself. I bought this two-volume memoir (about 500 pages) mainly to read about Da Ponte’s collaboration with Mozart on the three above-mentioned operas, expecting to find some interesting anecdotes. Surprisingly (or not, given Da Ponte’s inflated ego), he has very little to say about Mozart. To be fair, he does sing Mozart’s praises in the same style that he sings his own. He describes Mozart as *...dotato di talenti superiori forse a quelli d’alcun altro compositore del mondo passato, presente o futuro...* (“gifted with talents perhaps superior to those of any other composer in the world, past, present or future”). Of himself he says *...la mia sola perseveranza e fermezza fu quella in gran parte a cui deve l’Europa ed il mondo tutto le squisite vocali composizioni di questo ammirabile genio* (“it was to my perseverance and firmness alone that, in large part, Europe and the world owe the exquisite vocal compositions of this admirable genius”). He goes on to say that the injustice and envy of journalists and biographers of Mozart would not allow them to “dare tal gloria ad un italiano”, and that he is going to set the record

straight. And in truth it was apparently Da Ponte who convinced Emperor Joseph II to allow *Figaro*—regarded as subversive for the way in which nobles are portrayed—to be performed in Vienna.

I found that any attempt to read the entire work bogged down quickly. But it's interesting to browse selected parts, such as the regrettably short section on Mozart. Constantly on the move to stay one step ahead of creditors and angry husbands, Da Ponte eventually landed in New York, where he died in 1838.

Grégoire Delacourt, *Le cose che non ho*, 142pp. (2013). Translated from French. Although interesting at the start, the story loses that interest at an ever accelerating pace. The plot is just too contrived, with implausible behaviour, absurd coincidences and a hackneyed attempt at the unoriginal theme that money doesn't buy happiness. It was a bestseller in France though, so maybe it's just me. It involves a very ordinary couple, living a very ordinary life until...well, I can't say much more without giving away the whole story. As a small clue for opera fans, at the end the female protagonist cites a verse from the Mozart aria "Dove sono". *Figaro* had a happier ending.

Grazia Deledda (1871-1936), 1. *Canne al vento*, 184pp (1913). Like all girls in Sardinia at the time, Deledda was only allowed to attend school through the fourth grade. She taught herself writing, and won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1926. *Canne al vento* is generally regarded as her most important novel. I found it fascinating for its depiction of life in early 1900's Sardinia (Sardegna): the rich versus the poor, the limitations imposed on women, Catholicism and other, more local superstitions, the omnipresent malaria. Deledda's descriptions of the Sardinian landscape are particularly vivid. The central character is Efix, a servant who works the land of the three Pintor sisters (a fourth sister, now deceased, fled to Cittavecchia to escape their tyrannical father, also deceased). The Pintor family was once wealthy but has fallen on hard times, none of the surviving sisters having married. When the son of the fourth sister comes to Sardinia for the first time, there is hope that through him the estate and family name will be returned to its former glory. Efix, who is almost a family member himself, tries to move things along. All of the characters have their flaws, but most have good hearts.

Audiobook 6hr35min read by Silvia Cecchini.

2. *La via del male*, 262pp (1896). Audiobook 8hrs read by Claudia Giannelli. Regarded as Deledda's first major novel, *La via del male* was written in 1891-93 when she was just over 20. It is an amazingly mature novel for someone of that age, and in fact I would never have guessed the author was so young. It is also one of my favorite novels of the 19th and turn of the century era, right up there with Verga, Capuana, Serao, and the rest. In fact I liked it much more than *Canne al vento*, because of its more gripping plot. In fact I won't say anything about the plot, to avoid spoiling it. It's clear from the beginning (and the title) that it's a tragedy, and fairly clear from the beginning the general direction the tragedy will take. The details, however, are not so predictable, and there is considerable suspense.

Just to give the rough idea, the main characters are three young people: Pietro, Maria and Sabina. Pietro and Sabina are poor, and have an unspoken understanding, or at least expectation, that they will marry. But Pietro falls for Sabina's rich cousin Maria, in whose

household he works as a servant. As you can imagine, from there on things don't work out so well. There are a number of interesting, well-drawn supporting characters, such as Maria's father "zio Nicola".

The setting is the hilly, even mountainous Nuoro region of Sardinia, and as in her later novel *Canne al vento*, there are many vivid descriptions of the landscape. Some might say that Deledda overdoes it in this respect, as variations on the same theme occur repeatedly throughout the novel. But I enjoy her descriptions, especially because she is describing a relatively wild (by European standards) environment, using the kind of glowing, loving imagery that I would use myself to describe my favorite places in the mountains. A sample (it is spring):

"Ora però le campagne, inondate di sole si stendevano verdi e fiorite; sulla pianura, arsa d'estate e pantanosa d'inverno, ondulava alla brezza una vegetazione selvaggia, un mare d'erbe alte, di cardi dal verde argenteo, di asfodeli dai fiori lucenti da rugiada; le ferule innalzavano i loro ombrelli diafani; manti di fiori coprivano le macchie; il puleggio e la rosa selvatica imbalsamavano l'aria tiepida e pura.

Le montagne lontane coronavano il panorama come d'un immenso diadema di zaffiro, più azzurro del cielo stesso."

Later on, at dusk:

"Qualche lucciola brillava, immobile sull'erba, come un misterioso fiore notturno, e pareva riflettesse lo splendore verdognolo delle prime stelle tremolanti sul cielo ancora violaceo."

My translation, taking a few liberties (with notes on some questionable words):

"Now, however, the fields were flooded with sunlight, an expanse of flower-covered greenery; on the plain, arid in summer and marshy in winter, a wild vegetation waved in the breeze, a sea of high grass, of silver-green thistles, of daffodils glistening with dew; the fennel plants raised up their diafanous umbrellas; mantles of flowers covered the shrub; the pennyroyal and the wild rose embalmed the tepid, pure air.

The distant mountains crowned the panorama like an immense diadem of sapphire, bluer than the sky itself."

"A few fireflies were shining, immobile on the grass, like a mysterious nocturnal flower, and seemed to reflect the greenish splendor of the first stars, trembling in the still violet sky."

Comments: The trickiest part is determining what kind of flowers/plants are meant by "ferule" and "puleggio". Combining the dictionary and online photos with the botanical expertise of my sister, it seems that the "ferula" is the giant fennel native to the Mediterranean region. The "peleggio" is even more obscure. According to the dictionary it can mean a pulley-like device, but also a flower, namely the pennyroyal. Now "imbalsamare" is literally "to embalm", but given the juxtaposition of the peleggio and the wild rose, my guess was that Deledda's use of the word is more like "to perfume". On the other hand, according to my sister the pennyroyal has a more medicinal smell, so I'm really not sure what was intended. Finally "violaceo" is given in the dictionary as "mauvish", but that word lacks the poetic feel of the original; "violet" works better.

As to the audiobook, Giannelli would not be my favorite reader, but she's okay.

3. *La Madre*, 197pp (1920), audiobook 4hr32min read by Virginia Alba. A priest in a small Sardinian town has a secret lover. His mother knows what's going on, and is worried sick for her son, and for the woman too. This short, powerful novel confronts the absurdity of celibacy for priests, especially when pre-adolescent boys commit to the priesthood without knowing what will hit them later. Highly recommended.

Arthur Conan Doyle, *Il pollice dell'ingegnere*, audiobook 1 hour. "Le avventure di Sherlock Holmes" don't translate well to Italian, since (in my view) the most interesting thing about them is their late 19th century Britishness. It doesn't help that the story is read in a monotone. But if you're interested, a number of the Sherlock Holmes stories are available in this series.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), 1. *Notti bianche*, audiobook 2hr 16min, read by Fabrizio Bentivoglio. The lonely narrator wanders the streets of St. Petersburg at night. One night he rescues a young woman who is being harassed by a drunk. She lives with her blind grandmother and has fallen in love with the tenant who rents the room upstairs. Distraught that he (the tenant) has gone off to Moscow, she confides in the narrator, who at first treats her like a sister but of course falls in love with her. It's a good story, which for some reason Bentivoglio reads in an annoying whisper. My favorite character is the grandmother.

2. *Delitto e castigo*, 636pp (1865). An extremely dark tale, but of course one knows this going into it. The Italian translation by Emanuela Guercetti is excellent. A classic.

3. *Il giocatore*, audiobook 5hr43min read by Luigi Marangoni. An entertaining short novel that revolves around gambling addiction, especially addiction to roulette. Dostoevsky knew his subject well, being an addict himself. In fact he wrote *Il giocatore* in a short time, under pressure from his editor because of his gambling debts. Most of the story takes place at a mineral spa in Baden-Baden (at that time a popular destination, it seems, of the Russian aristocracy; see also *Anna Karenina*) with a casino. Some parts of it aren't very convincing, especially the strange one-sided love affair between the protagonist narrator and a young Russian woman. But the plot also has some very clever elements involving an elderly aunt back in Moscow whose death is eagerly awaited by an assortment of relatives hoping to inherit her wealth.

On a side-note, evidently it was common among the Russian aristocracy to learn French beginning in childhood; it was used in everyday conversation and also when they didn't want the servants to hear what they were saying. In fact there is a good deal of dialogue in French in *Anna Karenina* and even more so in *Il giocatore*, to the point that the reader who doesn't know a little French is at a disadvantage. Studying Italian has, alas, kicked much of my French out of my brain, but luckily I was able to get by.

Giorgio Faletti, *Tre atti e due tempi*, 143pp. The story involves the fixing of a soccer game. Written in present tense and *passato prossimo*; easy to read.

Oriana Fallaci (1929-2006). 1. *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*, audiobook 4 hours, read by the author. I knew of Fallaci of course, and that for a number of reasons she was a controversial figure, but until now I had never read any of her work. I had assumed that

Lettera was at least in part autobiographical, but perhaps it isn't. In any case the "Lettera" is in the form of a woman talking to her unborn child. The pregnancy was not planned and the father (they are not married) wants her to get an abortion. In the end, she miscarries.

Although I knew from the beginning that the story would not be a happy one, I was taken aback by the extremely negative, depressing way in which Fallaci, or the narrator, talks to her unborn child. The synopsis on the CD-case describes how "una donna...si rivolge con toni ora teneri ora drammatici al bambino che porta in grembo", and although there are a few "tender" moments I don't think "dramatic" is the right word for the mother's grim depictions of the life of miserable slavery that awaits the *bambino*—especially if it is a *bambina*.

On the other hand, what a pleasure to finally find an Italian author who takes on the sexist male establishment with no holds barred, subjecting it to the ruthless criticism it so richly deserves. It is tempting to enter into a discussion of the particular brand of sexism practiced in Italy, including the role of the Catholic church, but I really don't want to turn this into a political website. Let me just mention one pertinent remark of Fallaci's: "La parola 'puttano' non esiste." It is the same in English; there is no word comparable to "whore" that applies to men.

2. *Viaggio in America* (2014), 290pp. A collection of magazine articles and letters reporting on Fallaci's travels in America 1965-1967. At that time Fallaci was already famous, and seemed to know just about every celebrity in the country. In particular she had a close friendship with Shirley Maclaine, and one of the most interesting sections of the book describes a road trip they took together from California to Alabama.

It's a very interesting read, although I found the style wore on me after a while. Fallaci, who is writing to entertain the readers back home, indulges in outrageous hyperbole such as "every one in Los Angeles has three swimming pools" and speaks as though Elizabeth Taylor, Warren Beatty, Peter Lawford, Lauren Bacall et. al. were typical Americans. It's amusing enough, but I would have preferred a more serious critique of American culture.

Elena Ferrante, 1. *L'amica geniale* 327pp. (2011), audiobook 11hr50min read by Anna Bonaiuto.

2. *Storia del nuovo cognome* 470pp (2012), audiobook 17hr read by Anna Bonaiuto.

3. *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 382pp (2013), audiobook 15hr20min read by Anna Bonaiuto.

4. *Storia della bambina perduta*, 444pp (2014), audiobook 17hr40min read by Anna Bonaiuto.

These four books form a single novel, with each volume picking up exactly where the previous one left off. Reviews of the English translation are over the top, to put it mildly. Major newspapers, reviewers, and authors have said of it: "The Neapolitan Novels are a tour de force", "unconditional masterpiece", "dazzling, stunning, an extraordinary epic", "pulverising emotional power and impact", "one of the great achievements of modern literature", "Elena Ferrante has established herself as the foremost modern writer in Italy—and in the world", "if you haven't read Elena Ferrante, it's like not having read Flaubert in 1856...incontrovertibly brilliant" etc. etc.

It is the story of a friendship between two women, Elena (who narrates retrospectively) and Lila, from childhood in a poor neighborhood of Napoli in the late fifties through adolescence, marriage, motherhood, and into their sixties in the present day. It begins in a world in which it is considered normal, even admirable, for husbands to beat their wives, for parents to beat their daughters, and for girls to get married at sixteen. Although it features Elena and Lila as the main characters—Elena much more than Lila—to some extent it is a “romanzo corale” in the style of Pratolini, following the fortunes and misfortunes of two dozen or so of their relatives, neighbors, friends, lovers and enemies.

Although I don't share the unrestrained enthusiasm of the reviewers cited above, I liked it a lot, especially the middle two volumes. By the end I was beginning to tire of the perpetually dysfunctional families and especially of the self-destructive, obnoxious personality of Lila. It's all perfectly realistic, but 1600 pages of it is a bit much. That said, I highly recommend it.

5. *I giorni dell'abbandono*, 211pp. (2002). Olga has an extreme nervous breakdown when her husband abruptly leaves her. Her complete lack of self-esteem makes the story a painful read, and there a few plot points that strain credulity. Nevertheless, it's hard not to be drawn in by it. Recommended.

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), *Madame Bovary* (1857), audiobook 13hrs 36 min, read by Alessandra Bedino. Although this is among the most famous novels of the 19th century, I've never read it in any language, and without my interest in Italian probably never would. The Italian audiobook, however, is read with great style by Bedino and kept my interest to the end.

Aldo Forbice (editor), *Silone, la libertà*, 301pp, 2007. See the discussion of “il caso Silone” under Silone below.

Alessia Gazzola, 1. *L'allieva*, 369pp. A mediocre Kay Scarpetta style story. It's written in first-person present tense though, which is a pleasant change of pace.

2. *Un segreto non è per sempre*, 412pp (2012). Another of the same series. I liked it more than the first. Not something I'd ever read in English, but it's good Italian practice (again written in present tense).

3. *Non è la fine del mondo*, 218pp. (2016). Described on the back cover as a “commedia romantica”, this very dull novel has little comedy and even less romance. I quit about halfway through.

Natalia Ginzburg (1916-1991), 1. *È stato così*, 104pp. A short novel in the genre “Depressing stories about dysfunctional, unlikeable characters whose largely empty lives end in tragedy”. Even Ginzburg remarks in an introduction (written much later) that she was depressed when she wrote this. No kidding. Written in *passato prossimo*, which, although easy to read, becomes a bit tedious in the long run because of the constant repetition of the auxiliaries.

2. *La madre*. Another pointlessly depressing tale (a short-story) from Ginzburg: A young widow commits suicide in a hotel room. Her children move to the country and quickly forget about her. Well-written, but what is the point?

3. *Le piccole virtù*, 136pp., (1962). This is a collection of eleven articles that were originally published in various newspapers and journals, between 1944 and 1962. Those I found most interesting were:

Inverno in Abruzzo (1944). In fascist Italy there was a peculiar system of “internal exile” for potential subversives viewed as not dangerous enough to merit prison. They would be confined to a town far from home, and apparently allowed to bring the whole family. During the war Leon Ginzburg, Natalia’s husband, was sentenced to two years of exile in a poor village of Abruzzo. *Inverno in Abruzzo* is a poignant sketch of family life in exile, with a heart-breaking final paragraph.

Ritratto di un amico (1957). A portrait of Cesare Pavese (never mentioned by name), up to his suicide.

Il figlio dell’uomo (1946). A moving, pessimistic piece on the impossibility of recovering, psychologically, from twenty years of fascism and war. For most of us today, certainly including myself, the experience is almost impossible to imagine.

The two strangest pieces are *Elogio e compianto dell’Inghilterra* and *La Maison Volpé*, written in London in 1961 and 1960 respectively, in which Ginzburg complains at great length about England and the English (there is much more “compianto” than “elogio”). That the food leaves something to be desired is well-known; I myself can barely stand to look at an English “cooked breakfast”, and I imagine it must be hell for an Italian. But for Ginzburg it is the gloomiest place on earth, in every way: The people are gloomy. They talk only of superficial things. “Le commesse inglesi sono le più stupide commesse del mondo.” The English have no imagination. The young people all dress the same. In London, “questa città nera e grigia”, they even plant trees, can you imagine? Not like the superior trees of Italy, which are there “per caso, scaturito dall’allegria della terra.” And each Englishman speaks English in his own way! (As opposed to Italy, where everyone speaks in the same way.)

I first visited England as a teenager, just a couple of years after these articles were written, and have been back several times since. So I know firsthand that Ginzburg’s observations are total nonsense. I am not inclined to stereotype an entire country, as is Ginzburg, but I in my experience to date, Italian writers of her generation tend to be very inward-looking, focused myopically on their country and themselves. Perhaps because of fascism and the war; I don’t know. Ginzburg herself represents an extreme case. Confirmation of this point can be found in other essays of the book, especially *Lui e io*, written in 1962 (although he is never named, it is obviously about her second husband Gabriele Baldini, a professor of English literature who, presumably, was the one who dragged her to London), and *Il mio mestiere* (1949). She doesn’t like learning foreign languages, she says. She doesn’t like to travel. She doesn’t like music. In fact the one thing she really cares about is her *mestiere*, i.e her writing. One begins to understand her observations on London. This inward focus is seen also in *I rapporti umani* (1953), written in a universal “we” form—when we are children our parents yell at each other, slam doors and make us jump—as though her own experiences

growing up were somehow typical.

On the other hand, having lived a very comfortable, indeed extraordinarily fortunate life, in which (knock on wood) I have experienced no significant hardships whatsoever, I wouldn't presume to judge Ginzburg in any way. I just keep hoping from some *spiraglio* of hope, or just a bit of humor, in her writing. And it does exist: See the next two reviews.

Note: There is an audiobook (3 hrs 15 min), read by actress Giovanna Mezzogiorno. Unfortunately, Mezzogiorno reads in a sort of husky whisper that I found annoying. I can't recommend it. This is a rare exception though; almost all of the Italian audiobook readers I've heard, male or female, have been excellent.

4. *Lessico familiare*, 251pp., (1963). A fascinating, moving autobiographical account of Ginzburg's family and (to some extent) her friends. It's only drawback, in fact, is that Ginzburg says very little about herself, explaining in the *avvertenza*: “Non avevo molta voglia di parlare di me. Questa difatti non è la mia storia, ma piuttosto, pur con vuoti e lacune, la storia della mia famiglia”.

There are no chapters; the style is a steady stream of anecdotes about her family, many of them quite amusing, interspersed with laconic references to the horrors of fascist Italy. Even the death of her husband Leone, at the hands of the fascists, is alluded to only in passing: “Leone era morto in carcere...a Roma durante l'occupazione tedesca”. And “Fu un periodo sereno, e furono gli ultimi mesi che passavamo insieme, Leone e io.” And “Leone dirigeva un giornale clandestino ed era sempre fuori casa. Lo arrestarono, venti giorni dopo il nostro arrivo [a Roma]; e non lo rividi mai più.” There is not much more than that. On the other hand, this intertwining of amusing stories with matter-of-fact reporting of death, imprisonment and destruction ultimately adds to the poignancy and emotional impact of her story.

Indeed, without in any way meaning to minimize the tragic side of the *Lessico*, I must say that I found the family anecdotes fascinating, entertaining and at times downright hilarious. Her father, Giuseppe Levi, was certainly a “piece of work”. He was a well-known histologist (i.e. biologist specializing in the microscopic structure of organic tissues), and had three students who went on to win Nobel prizes. His social skills, however, left something to be desired. Here's one of several examples that had me laughing out loud:

...raccontavano Terni e mia madre che un giorno, in una cerimonia di professori, mentr'erano tutti riuniti nelle sale dell'università, mia madre aveva chiesto sottovoce a mio padre il nome di uno che si trovava a pochi passi da loro. “Chi è?—aveva urlato mio padre fortissimo, così che tutti s'erano voltati. “Chi è? te lo dico chi è! è un perfetto imbecille!”

Giuseppe's own family members were among the most frequent targets of his outbursts, with “asino” and “sempio” two of his favorite epithets (“sempio” was his word for “stupido”). Voialtri siete asini! Che sempio/a sei!—were typical modes of addressing his five children, and his wife, Lidia Tanzi. If he didn't like the way you dressed, what you took on a hike, what books you read, who you hung out with, you were a *sempio*. If you were anti-fascist, however, you usually got a free pass. According to Natalia, her mother could be intimidated by her father, and yet Lidia frequently seems to give as good as she gets in their endless sparring.

A seemingly endless procession of interesting acquaintances passed through the Levi household—scientists, writers, activists, entrepreneurs, actors—many of whom were either then or later well-known figures in Italy and beyond: Adrian Olivetti, for instance, son of the founder of the Olivetti typewriter and (later) computer company, married Natalia's sister Paola, and Cesare Pavese, who Natalia later worked with at the Einaudi publishing house (Einaudi himself was a visitor at the Levi's, in the days when he was just getting started).

The closest Ginzburg comes to expressing any emotion—openly, I mean—is toward the end when talking about the death of Pavese (who committed suicide in a hotel room). And yet *Lessico familiare* has a very powerful emotional impact, through its unique, effective mix of real tragedy reported in almost neutral terms, and fond reminiscences of chaotic family life. I say “fond” because, despite the constant yelling and bullying (of everyone around him) by her father, and the constant verbal battle between her parents, a love of family and in particular of her parents comes through very strongly. In fact the last four pages of the book consist of yet another lively, nutty, argumentative conversation between Giuseppe and Lidia: Giuseppe with his routine insults “Macchè! Sempia che non sei altro! Ma guarda che asina che sei!”, and Lidia who replies, unperturbed, “Io quand’ero nel mio collegio, mi facevano anche a me studiare le balene...” A beautiful book, recommended very highly.

Note added 4/14: An audiobook is now available, read by Margherita Buy (a well-known actress who stars in one of my favorite Italian movies, *Giorni e Nuvole*). Audiobook also highly recommended; Buy is excellent.

6. *Le voci della sera*, 129pp., (1961). I was intrigued by the brief preface:

In questo racconto i luoghi, e i personaggi, sono immaginari. Gli uni non si trovano sulla carta geografica, gli altri non vivono, né sono mai vissuti, in nessuna parte del mondo.

E mi dispiace dirlo, avendoli amati come fossero veri.

What kind of places and people had Ginzburg loved, “as though they were real”? In fact, her disclaimer notwithstanding, it seems rather obvious from *Lessico familiare* that the character of the mother of Elsa (the first-person narrator) was inspired by Ginzburg's own mother, and that of “il vecchio Balotta” by her father. The setting too resembles her native Torino, with the the mountains nearby and climbing, hiking and skiing all entering into the story. Even the endings of *Voce* and *Lessico* are almost identical in spirit.

The style is partly that of a *romanzo corale* à la Pratolini, although with far fewer characters, and partly a continuous chapter-less stream of narration and dialog as in *Lessico*. Tragedies are reported casually, almost in passing, and although Elsa reveals far more of herself in *Voce* than Ginzburg does in *Lessico*, she does it through neutral reporting of dialog—I said this, he said that—rather than telling us directly what she is thinking or feeling. In any case, characterization through dialog is Ginzburg's strong suit, in my opinion, and moreover much of the dialogue is very funny. This sense of humor is something I never would have expected, after suffering through *È stato così* and *La madre*, but I now realize it was just my bad luck to start with what are (I hope) her two most depressing stories. I liked *Le voci della sera* a lot.

It's an easy read too, even more so than *Lessico*. Highly recommended.

7. *Tutti i nostri ieri*, 321pp, 1952. A big disappointment. It's hard to imagine how an eyewitness like Ginzburg could have written such a flat, emotionless story of the war years. The characters are kept at a distance; you don't really get to know them. Part of the problem is the style: all events are narrated at the same pace and in the same tone, whether someone is just having breakfast or committing suicide on a park bench. Ginzburg's predilection for long, run-on sentences wears on the reader (at least on this one), as does her repetition of the same words over and over again. The main female character, Anna, is described repeatedly as an "insetto". Why is it that even women authors of the era so rarely wrote about strong female characters? In any event, it was a disappointment after *Lessico familiare* and *Le voci della sera*.

8. *Caro Michele*, 199pp (1973), audiobook 5hr read by Nanni Moretti. An even bigger disappointment. In fact the audiobook is one of the worst I've yet encountered. The novel consists mainly of letters written by various characters, many of them female. It makes absolutely no sense to have a man read all of the parts, even talking in the first person about being pregnant, nursing etc. Worse, Moretti reads all the parts in the same raspy monotone.

After listening to the audiobook, I decided to read the book too, just to see if the story minus Moretti was any better. And it is, but it's at best mediocre, unconvincing novel. Michele marries an American nuclear physicist, in England, because "io amo l'intelligenza". Later he decides "in fondo preferirei avere una moglie stupida". His mother utters lines such as "amo la tristezza ancora di più dell'intelligenza". I don't believe anyone really talks like this, in Italian or any other language. At times I wondered if it's supposed to be a comedy, but given that Michele is knifed to death at the end by fascist thugs, this seems unlikely.

Not recommended.

Paolo Giordano, *La solitudine dei numeri primi*, 301 pp. The mathematical theme of the title intrigued me, but in the end it's yet another depressing tale about exasperatingly dysfunctional characters.

Ada Gobetti (1902-1968), *Diario partigiano*, 419pp, 1956 (but written, I believe, in 1949). A fascinating account of Gobetti's life in *la Resistenza* in the Torino area, September 1943-April 1945. Her first husband, Piero Gobetti, died in 1926 from health problems resulting from a beating at the hands of the fascists. They had a son, Paolo, who (still a teenager) joined the partisans with his mother.

Much of the book is based on a diary Gobetti kept in a coded English. It is often left in diary form, for example:

4 febbraio. Questa sera, arrivando, ho trovato Paolo tornato da un giro di due giorni nella Val Bousson, con Gianni. Han dormito nella caserma dei carabinieri abbandonata, proprio sulla frontiera. Han trovato una quantità d'armi...

Now and then longer episodes are presented in narrative form; one of the most engrossing is an 80-page account of a trip across the Alps to contact the French forces in Grenoble (January 1945). For Gobetti, who had long been thinking about the post-war prospects for women's liberation, a key objective was to forge links between French and Italian feminist groups. In the final chapter Gobetti describes the chaos, confusion, joy and celebration after

the Germans finally leave Torino. For Gobetti, the mood is decidedly mixed: joy, yes, but at the same time a sober realization:

Confusamente intuivo però che incominciava un'altra battaglia: più lunga, più difficile, più estenuante, anche se meno cruenta. Si trattava di combattere non più contro la prepotenza, la crudeltà e la violenza—facili da individuare e da odiare—ma contro interessi che avrebbero cercato subdolamente di risorgere, contro abitudini che si sarebbero presto riaffermate, contro pregiudizi che non avrebbero voluto morire: tutte cose più vaghe, ingannevoli, sfuggenti.

“I vaguely realized, however, that another battle was beginning: longer, more difficult, and more wearing, even if less bloody. It was no longer a matter of fighting against arrogance, cruelty and violence—easy to identify and to hate—but against interests that would in an underhanded way seek to rise again, against habits that would soon be resumed, against prejudices that would not want to die: all more vague, deceptive and elusive.”

In fact in a number of passages one can detect a certain nostalgia for the partisan days: a nostalgia for the intense comradeship and unity of purpose that comes with fighting a common enemy. My father was with the U.S. Army in Italy during the war, and although his experience was hardly comparable to that of Gobetti, he too would speak nostalgically of the war days, as one of the “best” times of his life. It seems to be a common emotion, at least for those who come through it relatively unscathed.

In any case, *Diario Partigiano* is a must-read for anyone interested in the Italian resistance, and I highly recommend it to everyone. I don't know if it is available in English translation. For a long time I couldn't find it at all, and finally wrote to Einaudi asking why they hadn't reprinted it. A few months later, in April 2014, a new printing appeared! Coincidence, no doubt...but I was elated.

Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), *La locandiera*, a famous play that premiered in Venice in 1753; it occupies about 93pp in the 1983 Mondadori edition. *Mirandolina* is the “locandiera” a female innkeeper. Her guests include a Conte and a Marchese who have both fallen in love with her, and a Cavaliere who swears that he'll have nothing to do with women. Meanwhile Fabrizio, the cameriere, is also in love with *Mirandolina* and hopes to marry her. The very cynical *Mirandolina* sets out to seduce the Cavaliere, while still stringing along poor Fabrizio. The plot is reminiscent of later comic operas such as *Così Fan Tutte* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Although predictable, it would be fun to see performed (I'm told that it's done every year in Perugia), and is definitely fun to read aloud.

The downside of the play, and I'm not alone in this opinion, is that *Mirandolina* is so cynical and manipulative, and moreover insists that all women are like her (“*Così Fan Tutte*”). Although it's always refreshing to see a thoroughly independent, intelligent and self-confident female character in Italian literature, *Mirandolina* is downright mean to the end and it's hard to sympathize much with her.

The Mondadori edition I bought reproduces a sort of review by Goethe c. 1786, in which he appears not to have liked the ending of the play, for reasons similar to mine. But upon reading the whole article one discovers that Goethe was mainly writing about the fact that in Rome and some other parts of Italy, the old practice of having female roles played by young

men was still current. Up to a point he's okay with the idea of an actress playing Mirandolina, but says that to have the final scenes played by a woman is "always unpleasant".

John Grisham, 1. *Il cliente*, 474 pp. Translation of "The Client". I enjoyed it in Italian.

2. *Il professionista*, audiobook 7 hours 45 minutes. Very lightweight but mildly enjoyable tale about a professional football player who, having been forced to end his career in the U.S., ends up playing American football in Italy. That's right—there is a semi-pro American football league in Italy, the existence of which Grisham discovered by chance and inspired him to write this novel.

Sara Gruen, *Acqua agli elefanti*, 363 pp. Translation of "Water for Elephants". Works well in Italian, I thought.

Giovannini Guareschi (1908-1968), *Don Camillo*, 289pp (1948). This is the first of a humorous series featuring Don Camillo and his nemesis Peppone, respectively the priest and the communist mayor of a small town in the Po valley (the town isn't specified, but I think it's supposed to be somewhere along the river between Mantova and Ferrara). There is a third principal character, namely Cristo, with whom Camillo talks frequently. However, this is not your typical Christ, but rather one with a sense of humor. As Guareschi himself says in an introduction:

Ma se qualcun altro si sente offeso per via dei discorsi del Cristo, niente da fare; perché chi parla nelle mie storie, non è il Cristo, ma il *mio* Cristo: cioè la voce della *mia* coscienza.

"But if someone else feels offended because of Christ's speaking, there's nothing to be done; because who speaks in my stories is not the Christ, but *my* Christ: that is, the voice of *my* conscience."

Don Camillo and Peppone are constantly at odds with one another—for example, Peppone wants his child baptized as "Lenin", which doesn't sit well with the priest—yet share an unspoken mutual respect and occasionally even help one another when the chips are down (although Cristo frequently needs to intervene to keep the hot-headed Don Camillo in check).

Many of the stories are amusing, and all give an interesting glimpse of small-town life in postwar Italy. On the debit side, there is constant slapstick violence reminiscent of The Three Stooges: face-slapping, butt-kicking, head-butting etc., accompanied by threats of homicide that aren't taken seriously. I found this tiresome after a while. And although I hate to keep harping on the sexism of a bygone era, there is one story, *Il pittore*, that sinks to a level so nauseating that I find it hard to forgive. The apparent moral of the story is this: If a woman has the affrontery to ride about on a bicycle instigating strikes by the farm workers, rather than stay at home cooking for her husband and mending his socks, then it is perfectly acceptable for the husband to assault and publically humiliate her—with the aid of Don Camillo, no less.

Nevertheless, most of the stories are entertaining and I recommend the book. My favorite quote is from *In riserva*, in which Don Camillo, much to the surprise of il Cristo, manages to get Peppone and his followers to donate money for the repair of the church tower:

...il Cristo sorrise sbalordito.

“Avevi ragione tu, don Camillo.”

“Si capisce,” rispose don Camillo. “Perché Voi conoscete l’umanità, ma io conosco gli italiani.”

“Christ smiled in amazement.

‘You were right, don Camillo.’

‘Of course,’ replied don Camillo. ‘Because You know humanity, but I know Italians.’”

Francesco Gungui, *L’importante è adesso*, 397 pp. A silly teen romance novel, which I bought in the early days of my Italian reading because it’s written in the present tense with lots of dialogue.

Paula Hawkins, *La ragazza del treno*, audiobook 9hr52min read by Carolina Crescentini, Marianna Jensen and Alessia Navarro. In audiobook form at least, this is one of the better edge-of-your-seat suspense stories I’ve come across in a while. The story is narrated in the first person (in present tense) by three female characters, each read by a different actress. All three readers were excellent. If I ever return to English, I think I’ll take up audiobooks there too; when the narration is well done it adds a lot to the story. Now I’m curious to see the movie, which has just come out in Seattle. Writing a screenplay from a novel seems to me a difficult art form in its own right. “The girl on the train” would be particularly challenging, since in large part the novel develops through the thoughts of the three protagonists.

Hergé, *Le avventure di Tintin*, 20 or so volumes translated from French. These are “comic books”, but of exceptional originality and quality. They have been translated into virtually every European language, including Catalan and Welsh. If you’ve never tried them, I recommend starting with *Il Segreto del Liocorno* and *Il Tesoro di Rackham il Rosso*. None of the volumes after *Tintin nel Tibet* are worth reading, as Hergé clearly ran out of steam and some of these weren’t even drawn by him. And the earliest to begin with is *Il Granchio d’Oro*, in which Hergé’s most inspired character, Il Capitano Haddock, is introduced.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885), *I miserabili*, audiobook 60hrs read by Moro Silo (novel published in 1862). It took me over three months to finish this remarkable work in audiobook form, but it was worth it. Five volumes, 48 “books”, 365 chapters. It’s one of the most engrossing novels I’ve encountered, and Silo’s reading is excellent (Silo is a former professor of sociology who reads for the Italian Society for the Blind, among other pursuits).

On the other hand, there is much one could find fault with in *I miserabili*. First of all there is Hugo’s strange habit of inserting long historical digressions that have little or nothing to do with advancing the plot. There is a long book on the Battle of Waterloo, for instance, and another on the history of certain convents. At a dramatic moment, when Valjean is fleeing with the unconscious Marius into the sewers, the action stops for an entire book on the history and function of the Paris sewer system. Later on Valjean encounters quicksand in the sewer system, at which point Hugo digresses for a chapter on the different kinds of quicksand and where they are found.

There are further digressions discorsing on morality, philosophy, politics etc. Although all the action takes place in the decade 1823-1833, as narrator Hugo sees fit to make comparisons with later events, such as the revolution of 1848. Even abolitionist John Brown gets a mention.

In short, *I miserabili* really isn't a novel in the sense that I would define; it is a combination novel-history lesson-philosophical essay. As a novel it could be vastly improved by drastically reducing its length (it would still be long!), eliminating all the distracting digressions that bring the action to a dead stop.

One could also criticize the many absurd coincidences Hugo contrives to reconnect various threads of the plot. At a critical moment, with Javert hot on his heels, Hugo runs into Fauchelevent, a man whose life he saved years earlier. There are many more such coincidences. Nevertheless, if one is willing to except this device, it's a very enjoyable and at times gripping novel.

Sophie Kinsella, *Ti ricordi di me?*, translated from the English "Remember me?". audiobook about 10+ hours. Wonderful, I loved it. Entertaining romantic comedy in which a young woman wakes up in the hospital only to discover that the last three years of her life have been wiped out by amnesia, finds out she's married to a man she doesn't even recognize, etc. Even if you're not a sucker for sappy romantic comedies, as I am, you may enjoy the lively narration in first person present tense by Tania de Domenico. Lots of dialogue and idioms, and a nice sampling of *parolacce*. Excellent practice and highly entertaining at the same time.

Jhumpa Lahiri, *In altre parole*, 148pp (2015). Lahiri is a writer of Bengali descent, whose principal language is English. She is a kindred spirit in the sense that, like me, she fell in love with the Italian *language* and has become rather obsessed with it. On the other hand, my obsession is nothing compared to hers. Lahiri even moved to Rome with her family, and in these essays (written by her in Italian) Lahiri talks as though her entire being has been consumed by the language. It's a little weird, actually, but who am I to talk?

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957), 1. *Il gattopardo*, 327pp. (1958). Audiobook 10hrs 6min, read by Toni Servillo. I wasn't sure whether to file this under "Tomasi" or "Lampedusa", but here it is. This was Tomasi's first and only novel, published posthumously after it was promoted by Bassani. The setting is Sicily, mostly in 1860-61 at the time when Garibaldi and his "camicie rosse" were fighting in the south for a united and independent Italy. Its many fascinating characters include the duke don Fabrizio, his wife Stella, nephew Tancredi, the beautiful young Angelica, and Jesuit priest padre Pirrone. In a sense, however, the main character is Sicily itself—represented here as a world of its own, beyond the understanding of outsiders. At one point a representative of the new government, a *piemontese* named Chevalley, invites don Fabrizio to be named "Senatore del Regno". The duke declines, explaining his refusal with a long discourse on the unique ways of Sicily. On the subject of whether the Garibaldians had done "male" or "bene", don Fabrizio says to Chevalley:

...voglio dirle subito ciò che lei capirà da solo quando sarà stato un anno fra noi. In Sicilia non importa far male o far bene: il peccato che noi siciliani non perdoniamo mai è semplicemente quello di 'fare'.

“...I want to tell you right away what you would understand on your own when you’ve lived among us for a year. In Sicily to do bad or to do good doesn’t matter: the sin that we Sicilians can never forgive is simply that of ‘to do’.”

Tomasi has a great sense of humor. There is a chapter featuring padre Pirrone that is reminiscent of similarly amusing scenes in the novels of Ignazio Silone: When the “erbario” don Pietrino—a poor, uneducated contadino—asks the intellectual Jesuit Pirrone a simple question about the duke, Pirrone replies in a long-winded lecture ranging from “la luce del Golgota” to “coccodrilli” and finally to “la morte nobilissima di Socrate”, at which point don Pietrino “si era arreso e dormiva”.

My one critique of the novel is that it would have been better to end it after chapter 6. Chapter 7 jumps ahead about 20 years to the old age and death of the prince; the final chapter 8 jumps ahead another 20 years to the old age of Angelica et. al. It’s all rather anticlimactic. But overall I recommend it highly.

Miscellaneous comments: 1. For reasons unknown, the usually reliable Toni Servillo reads the early parts of the audiobook as though he was thoroughly bored with it, almost falling asleep. But it picks up later on, so don’t give up.

2. The English translation is titled “The Leopard”, but this is incorrect: the “gattopardo” is the serval, a smaller African wildcat (perhaps found in Sicily centuries ago?).

3. There is 1963 Italian movie which, oddly, features Burt Lancaster as don Fabrizio and French actor Alain Delon as Tancredi (Angelica is played by Claudia Cardinale). Could they really not find Italian actors for these parts? Although fine in their roles, both Lancaster and Delon are dubbed.

2. *I racconti*, 147pp. Three short stories and some reminiscences from childhood. Among these only the short story *La sirena* seems worth mentioning, for its depiction of an arrogant, sarcastic 75 year-old professor of Greek, Rosario La Ciura. Late in the story, La Ciura tells the narrator of his youthful summer love affair with a mermaid—*la sirena*. This part is disappointing and silly at first, but it comes together in the end to leave a haunting impression. In any case, it’s worth reading for the character of La Ciura alone. With typical disdain, he refuses to show the narrator (a young Sicilian man living in Torino in 1938) his library: “Tutta roba classica, che non può interessare uno come te, moralmente bocciato in greco.”

Stieg Larsson, *La regina dei castelli di carta*, 857 pp. Translated from the Swedish, this is the third of the “Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” series, whose English title is “The Girl who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest”. I’d read the first two in English, but since it’s a translation anyway, why not read it in Italian?

Harper Lee, *Il buio oltre la siepe*, 290 pp. Translation of “To Kill a Mockingbird”, with an odd choice of title. But it’s such a great story that it works well in Italian, despite the Southern vernacular.

Carlo Levi (1902-1975), *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, 1945, audiobook 10hr 43min read by Massimo Malucelli. A beautiful, moving autobiographical account of Levi’s exile in Lucania 1935-36. Here “exile” refers to the peculiar fascist practice of confining enemies of the state to remote villages, in cases viewed as insufficiently dangerous to warrant prison.

In Lucania (a region of Southern Italy) Levi encountered for the first time “il problema meridionale”, the extreme poverty of the illiterate southern *contadini* who, plagued by hunger and malaria, were continually exploited by the upper classes. The *contadini* in fact regarded themselves not as “cristiani” but as a little more than “bestie”. Here it must be noted that the title of the book is often misunderstood in English translation: As Levi explains from the beginning, it is a local saying meaning that Christ “stopped short of Eboli” i.e. never came to Eboli (one of the towns of the region). Some translations even have the absurd “Christ came to Eboli”, which is the exact opposite of the actual meaning. Levi was greeted warmly by the *contadini*, because he treated them with kindness and respect, and because he was a medical school graduate: despite having moved on to painting and writing, he was a huge improvement over the incompetent local doctor.

Very highly recommended.

Primo Levi (1919-1987), 1. *Se questo è un uomo*, 170pp., first published in 1947 and largely ignored, but since its re-publication in 1958 it has recognized world-wide and reprinted many times. It is the story of Levi’s year in Auschwitz, up to the arrival of the Russians. It goes without saying that it is not an easy read, and I don’t mean the Italian. This 2014 Einaudi printing includes an appendix that Levi wrote for the 1976 scholastic edition, in which he responds to some frequently asked questions from his readers.

2. *Se non ora, quando?*, 259pp. (1982). One of only two novels by Primo Levi, *Se non ora, quando?* follows a motley group of Jewish, Polish, and Russian partisans/soldiers/refugees (mostly Jewish) who find themselves on the German side of the Russian front in 1943. As the front moves to the west and south, they move with it, hoping to reach Italy and from there, eventually, Palestine. In a note at the end of the book, Levi explains:

“In quel periodo [1945], insieme con una fiumana di rimpatriati e di profughi, arrivarono realmente in Italia alcune bande simili a quella che mi sono proposto di descrivere...”

“At that time, along with a flood of repatriates and refugees, there really did arrive in Italy a number of bands such as the one I took it upon myself to describe...”

This historical aspect is what makes the book interesting, in particular the depiction of the general chaos at the war’s end. Also noteworthy is Levi’s assortment of interesting female characters, for example the indomitable Lina, whose parents named her after the famous British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. The one historical character in the novel is Polina Michajlovna, a young woman of twenty who, apparently as part of an all-female group of pilots, flew lightweight wooden airplanes called P-2’s at night, bringing supplies to the partisans and dropping grenades on the Nazi camps.

The ending combines a personal ray of hope, in the form of the birth of a baby, with a cold slap in the face from the outside world. It certainly isn’t light reading, but recommended.

3. *La tregua*, 255pp (1961). The sequel to “Se questo è un uomo”. There was a strange limbo between the time the Germans left Auschwitz and the time the Russians arrived. It was too late for many of the prisoners, who died of starvation or disease in the meantime. The survivors spent months travelling from one encampment to another, even after the war ended. Early on they were joined by many others who had been stranded in Poland or Russia for one reason or another, including about 1400 Italians. Although they were generally well-treated by the Russian army and by the Poles, for reasons they couldn’t fathom it was fall

before they were finally put on a train back to Italy. A fascinating account of the Auschwitz aftermath.

Curzio Malaparte (1898-1957, *La pelle*, 417pp. (1949). *La pelle* is one of the most brutal, grotesque, stomach-turning novels I've read (although "novel" is somehow not the right term). Most of it takes place in Napoli during the Allied occupation, while the Allied armies were stalled at Cassino, but toward the end it moves quickly to Roma and Firenze and the end of the war, and there are sidetrips to Berlin and to the Ukrainian front. The title refers to the napoletani saving their skins rather than their souls.

Curzio Malaparte was the pen-name of Italian journalist and writer Kurt Erich Suckert. According to Wikipedia (which is not always reliable), he chose the pseudonym Malaparte around 1925 as a play on Napoleon's surname "Bonaparte". If true, this foreshadows the predilection for the perverse that pervades *La Pelle*; "perverse" in the dictionary definition: *willfully determined not to do what is expected or desired; contrary*. For a number of years he was a fascist, but by the 30's opposed fascism, was expelled from the party and exiled.²

At first one might think that *La pelle* is an autobiographical account of the war. It soon becomes clear, however, that it is in no sense a factual reporting of events. The style is hard to describe; I would call it a "fact-based surrealist fantasy". Many of his tales are obviously embellished, when they are not outright invented, in order to make a point, but are set in the context of real events. Sometimes these work: For instance, there is a vivid, poetic description of the March 1944 eruption of Vesuvius, which destroyed a number of villages (and many Allied airplanes based near Napoli). There is a gruesome nightmare in which Malaparte argues with men who have been crucified in the Ukraine. But his continual spinning of tall tales, combined with his deliberately provocative hyperbole, only serves to damage his credibility and ultimately diminishes the impact of the work. This is unfortunate because he has much of importance to say, especially to Americans.

One of the important points is Malaparte's portrayal of Americans, based on his experiences as an Italian liaison officer with the Allied forces. The dedication of the book reads:

All'affettuosa memoria del Colonnello Henry H. Cumming, dell'Università di Virginia, e di tutti i bravi, i buoni, gli onesti soldati americani, miei compagni d'arme dal 1943 al 1945, morti inutilmente per la libertà dell'Europa.

But the pages of the book itself burn with resentment toward the Americans, and understandably so. At a formal dinner in honor of WAC commander Mrs. Flat, there is the following exchange between Malaparte and Mrs. Flat.

"Felici?" esclamò Mrs. Flat guardandomi con occhi stupiti, "come potete esser felici, quando i vostri bambini muoiono di fame e le vostre donne non si vergognano di prostituirsi per un pacchetto di sigarette? Voi non siete felici: siete immorali."

"Con un pacchetto di sigarette," dissi a voce bassa, "si comprano tre chili di pane."

²One should not too hastily judge Italians who supported fascism in its early stages. Even the great Arturo Toscanini was a fascist for a while, but soon changed his tune—literally, refusing to play the fascist anthem at his concerts.

“Happy?” exclaimed Mrs. Flat, looking at me in amazement, “how can you be happy, when your children are dying of hunger and your women aren’t ashamed to prostitute themselves for a pack of cigarettes? You’re not happy; you’re immoral.”

“With a pack of cigarettes,” I said softly, “you can buy three kilos of bread.”)

This American combination of arrogance and ignorance is much in evidence throughout. “Sapete che cosa è la fame, Mrs. Flat?” She does not, obviously, and is oblivious to the complicity of American soldiers in the degradation of the napoletani. Of course, the Italians did the same thing—and worse—to the Greeks; see *Le soldatesse* by Ugo Pirro. Still, it is essential, and sobering, to see what the American occupation looked like through Italian eyes. In this respect *La pelle* is a valuable work. But it has some serious problems.

One problem is Malaparte’s obsession with describing grotesquely obscene sexual episodes, usually but not always involving young Italian prostitutes and American soldiers. The details are too obscene to give here, but see for instance “La vergine di Napoli”, “Le parruche” and the unbelievably bizarre ritual of “la figliata” described in “Il figlio di Adamo”. One can never be sure to what extent these episodes are invented, but for the sake of argument let’s assume they had some basis in reality. Bizarre sexual practices were hardly unique to wartime Napoli, and their peculiarity is beside the point. The sexual exploitation of vulnerable, starving women, girls, and boys is the point, and one wonders at Malaparte’s motivation in adding these lurid, superfluous details, as though he were a barker at an oldtime circus sideshow. “La figliata” involves homosexual men, with whom Malaparte obviously had issues: Earlier he spends an entire chapter linking homosexuality with marxism.

Here are two printable examples of Malaparte’s tall tales, which he obviously didn’t intend to be believed. Either he intended them as a perverse form of comedy, or he intended to impart some moral—and failed, as far as I am concerned.

The first occurs at the dinner already mentioned, with Mrs. Flat and the other officers. The menu lists as main course “Sirena alla maionese con contorni di coralli”, the Sirena being (according to Malaparte, who is pulling our leg) a type of fish which “per la loro forma quasi umana, hanno dato origine all’antica leggenda delle Sirene”. The maggiordomo brings in the dish and sets in on the table (I’ve condensed the episode here; the bits in English are in the original):

E ora tutti guardavamo allibiti, muti per la sorpresa a per l’orrore, quella povera bambina morta, distesa a occhi aperti nel vassoio d’argento, su un letto di verdi foglie di lattuga, in mezzo a una ghirlanda di rosei rami di corallo.

“Ma non possiamo mangiare that...quella bambina...that poor girl!” disse il Colonnello Eliot.

“Generale,” disse Mrs. Flat con voce severa, “spero che non mi obbligherete a mangiare that...this...that poor girl!”

“Ma è un pesce!” disse il Generale Cork, “è un ottimo pesce! Malaparte dice che è eccellente. He knows...”

“Non sono venuta in Europa perché il *vostro* amico Malaparte, *and you*, mi obblighiate a mangiare la carne umana,” disse Mrs. Flat con voce tremante di sdegno, “lasciamo a questo barbarous Italian people to eat children at dinner.

I refuse. I am honest american woman. I don't eat Italian children!...Che cosa direbbero a Washington, Generale, che cosa direbbero al War Department, se sapessero che ai vostri pranzi si mangiano le bambine bollite...boiled girls?"

(An now everyone looked, appalled, struck dumb with surprise and horror, at that poor dead girl, laid out with eyes open on the silver tray, on a bed of green lettuce leaves, surrounded by a garland of pinkish branches of coral.

"But we can't eat that...that girl, that poor girl!" said Colonel Eliot.

"It's not a girl," I said, "it's a fish."

"General," said Mrs. Flat severely, "I hope you won't oblige me to eat that..this..poor girl!"

"But it's a fish!" said General Cork, "an excellent fish!" Malaparte says it's excellent. He knows..."

"I didn't come to Europe so that *your* friend Malaparte, *and you*, should oblige me to eat human flesh," said Mrs. Flat, her voice trembling with indignation, "let's leave it to these barbarous ...[etc.] What would they say in Washington, General, what what they say at the war department, if they knew that at your lunches boiled girls are eaten?"

Malaparte spends many pages on this absurd black comedy, which only dilutes the power of the earlier dialog on prostitutes and cigarettes.

The second tall tale also involves a dinner, this time in the field. Malaparte's friends are expressing their doubts about his earlier book, *Kaputt*, that reports from the Ukrainian front where Malaparte was sent by *Il Corriere*.

"Mi piacerebbe sapere," disse Pierre Lyautey volgendosi a me con garbata ironia, "che cosa c'è di vero in tutto quel che raccontate in *Kaputt*."

"Non ha alcuna importanza," dice Jack [an American colonel and friend of Malaparte], "se quel che Malaparte racconta è vero, o falso. La questione da porsi è un'altra: se quel ch'egli fa è arte, o no."

("I would like to know," said Pierre Lyautey, turning to me with polite irony, "what truth there is in what he relates in *Kaputt*.")

"It's of no importance," said Jack, "whether what Malaparte relates is true or false. The question to ask is another: whether what he does is art, or not.")

General Guillaume adds that "penso che in *Kaputt* egli si prenda gioco dei suoi lettori" ("I think that in *Kaputt* he's making fun of his readers"). I haven't read *Kaputt*, but this is exactly what Malaparte does in *La pelle*. Up to this point in the dinner scene, Malaparte has been silently listening while he eats. Earlier in the day a Moroccan soldier stepped on a mine, and although he survived, his hand was blown off and never found. Malaparte now speaks up and reveals that the soldier's hand accidentally ended up in the kouskous and he's been gnawing on it the whole time, having been raised to believe (in "il migliore collegio d'Italia") that one never does anything to upset a good meal. "The meat was a little hard," he says, "and despite my good education, I couldn't get the fingernails down." Here he's playing a sick joke on his friends, but also a joke on the reader because in the story the

friends initially take him seriously, which is also completely absurd. Thus even Malaparte's tales of telling tall tales are in themselves tall tales.

So do I recommend *La pelle*? Yes, if you can stomach it. It is unlike anything you've read. The disappointment is that it could have been a book of exceptional importance on the Allied invasion and occupation of Italy, but in that respect it is ruined by Malaparte's extreme style.

A final remark: In addition to the English dialog scattered throughout the book, there is a fair bit of dialog in French (mainly because Colonel Jack happens to speak French). So if you don't know French, you'll miss a little.

Anita Malavasi (1921-2011), Video clip (45 min.) with pdf transcript (9 dense pages) at www.resistance-archive.org/en/node/328

This "interview" (actually a monologue, with Malavasi talking to the camera) was made in 2006, and is accompanied by a verbatim transcript. It is a very brief autobiographical account, from childhood through fascism, the war, the resistance, and the politics of the post-war era. Malavasi, one of the amazing women of the Italian Resistance, chose the battle name "Laila" after an Aztec warrior princess, was a partisan commander, ditched her fiancé when he insisted that she leave the partisans to become a proper Italian housewife, and fought vigorously against the return to sexism-as-usual after the war. As far as I know, Malavasi didn't write any more complete memoirs, which is a great pity. Fascinating and inspiring.

Marco Malvaldi, 1. *Milioni e milioni*, 193pp. An Agatha Christie-style mystery, i.e. with an artificially limited set of suspects, all of whom in the end are gathered in one room where the mystery is revealed through a series of monologues, confessions, and—from the sleuth, whether professional or amateur—various brilliant deductions. Usually I don't care for this style at all, but Malvaldi has a great sense of humor and some great characters. Entertaining and easy to read.

2. *Odore di chiuso*, 191pp. This one is an even more stereotypical Agatha Christie story: The baron invites various guests to his castle for a weekend of hunting, someone is mysteriously murdered, in the end the detective assembles everyone in the drawing room to reveal his deductions, etc. But Malvaldi's style is so entertaining that the plot barely matters. One unexpected touch is that Pellegrino Artusi appears in the story as a main character. Artusi (1820-1911) is best known as the author of a cookbook "La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiare bene" still used today. The audiobook (5 hours including the interview, read by Alessandro Benvenuti) is great too, with the added bonus of a 45 minute interview with Malvaldi. Besides being amusing in its own right, the interview is a fantastic listening exercise because Malvaldi speaks relatively slowly and with marvelously clear enunciation.

3. *La briscola in cinque*, audiobook 3hrs 26min. This was Malvaldi's first novel, written while he was a graduate student in chemistry at the University of Pisa (the book was published in 2007, the audiobook in 2013). An enjoyable murder mystery, again read with great style by Alessandro Benvenuti. Occasionally I found it difficult to understand, possibly

because of a bit of dialect. But it's a lot of fun and worth listening to chapters multiple times if need be. A young woman is found murdered near a bar (a bar in the Italian sense of the word). Most of the subsequent action takes place at the bar, where a group of old guys who hang out there gossip and speculate about what could have happened, eventually inspiring the *barista* Massimo to solve the case. Great characters and dialogue. As a mathematician I was taken by surprise when (I'm not giving away anything important) Massimo invokes Godel's Incompleteness Theorem in the course of explaining his solution to the old fellows.

4. *Argento Vivo*, 269pp (2013). Here Malvaldi abandons the Agatha Christie style. The format is another standard one: a diverse group of characters whose lives become intertwined by chance, via a stolen car and a burglarized house. Again Malvaldi's clever, humorous style is the strong point, and I enjoyed most of it. Unfortunately, however, it has two major flaws that ultimately ruined it for me. First, there is the device of the "novel within a novel". One of the main characters is a writer, and three chapters are taken from the novel he is currently writing. I'll call this the "inner" novel and the main story the "outer" novel. The trouble is that the inner novel consists almost entirely of a long retirement speech given by a mathematician at a conference, in which he considers the possibility of applying mathematical concepts such as "fractal dimension" to the works of Bach, Mozart et. al. Although I usually enjoy Malvaldi's references to mathematics, science and so on (I even enjoyed the character in the outer novel who goes on about the proper use of semicolons), this inner novel is both dull and irrelevant, and does nothing but bring the real action to a dead stop. The second problem is the ending; in fact the story doesn't end so much as simply die a slow death. There is a semi-final chapter. Then there is an epilog. Then there is a final chapter from the inner novel. And nothing much happens in any of them.

It's a pity because the book is populated with some of Malvaldi's most amusing characters (I especially liked the two married couples at its center), characters that could have been developed further and could have been granted a more satisfying conclusion. On the other hand, and this is a caveat that applies to all of my reviews, I cheerfully concede the possibility that I missed something in the Italian that might have changed my opinion. If they make an audiobook, I'll probably give it another try.

5. *Il telefono senza fili*, 189pp. (2014). Malvaldi is back in fine form, returning to the BarLume of "La briscola in cinque" where Massimo, Tiziana and above all the four "vechietti" solve crimes through gossip and speculation. Highly entertaining. I keep hoping that Massimo's character will be developed a bit more, but (although there is a nominal love interest here) we somehow never really get to know him.

6. *Buchi nella sabbia*, 239pp. (2015). On the debit side, this one is more stereotypically Agatha Christie-style ("giallo inglese") than ever. It's a formula, really: 1. There's a homicide. 2. The murderer can only be one of a small group of suspects, each of whom has a motive and/or a dark secret. 3. Much of the story consists of the detective interviewing the aforementioned suspects. 4. At the end the detective never just arrests the guilty party; he assembles all the suspects in one place and proceeds to recount at great length his line of reasoning, waiting until the very end to dramatically reveal that the butler did it. It's a style that quickly gets tedious; I doubt I would keep reading these stories if they were in English.

On the plus side, the setting and set-up of *Buchi nella sabbia* is original and intriguing. We are in 1901, at a performance of Puccini's opera *Tosca*. In the opera, the hero Cavaradossi is to be executed by firing-squad. Tosca sacrifices her honor with the evil Scarpia, in exchange for his agreeing that the execution will be faked, with blanks. But Scarpia lied, and Cavaradossi is in fact executed (earlier Tosca stabs Scarpia to death, so the bad guy does get his just desserts). In Malvaldi's novel, the set-up is that in the execution scene the tenor playing Cavaradossi is really killed, apparently by real bullets from the guns used by the firing-squad actors. So who done it? I can tell you that it wasn't the butler, as there is no such character in Malvaldi's story.

The operatic setting makes it interesting, and worth a read. Side-notes: (1) There is a curious scene in which two of the main characters discuss the existence of God. (2) In the opera, Tosca is the only female character. Malvaldi reproduces this theme, with the soprano who sings Tosca the unique woman in the story.

Antonio Manzini, 1. *Era di maggio*, 379pp. (2015). A fairly generic police mystery-thriller, but a good one. It seems to be part of a series about the same detective, and I'll definitely look for the earlier stories.

2. *Pista nera*, 273pp. (2013). More with the same rather unlikable protagonist, Rocco Schiavone. The setting in Valle d'Aosta makes it interesting.

3. *7-7-2007*, 367pp. (2016). The latest in the Schiavone series, and my favorite so far. This one is set mainly in Rome, giving the back story on the murder of his wife.

4. *La costola di Adamo*, 281pp. (2014). Another Schiavone story, also good.

Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), *I promessi sposi*, 600pp. (1840). Audiobook 26 hrs., read by Claudio Carini. Widely regarded as a masterpiece of Italian literature (and also as the first Italian novel, unless one counts Ugo Foscolo's epistolary novel *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, written in 1802), the sheer length and density of *I promessi sposi*, not to mention its occasionally archaic language, make it a daunting proposition for Italian learners. For many Italians (so I had been told) it has negative associations because it is required reading in high school. Thus it was with modest expectations and some trepidation that I finally confronted the *Sposi* in summer of 2014.

To my considerable surprise and delight, I found it to be a fascinating, engaging, highly entertaining story. Manzoni is a superb writer, in my estimation. He has a keen eye for human behaviour, and his characters are beautifully drawn: Lorenzo and Lucia (*i promessi sposi*), Lucia's mother Agnese, the less than admirable friar Don Abbondio and his no-nonsense maid Perpetua, bad guy Don Rodrigo, even badder guy l'Innominato ("the unnamed", based on a historical figure), the unfortunate and very un-nunnish nun Gertrude, the heroic padre Cristoforo, the saintly cardinal Federigo (based on a historical figure), and many interesting minor characters (some of whom I wish had been developed further, for instance the pseudo-intellectual Don Ferrante, who constructs elaborate syllogisms to prove the plague does not exist).

There is much dialogue, well-written and convincing. I've been told that the Italian used e.g. by Lorenzo and Lucia has no resemblance to the dialect they would have actually spoken, but this is not something a non-native speaker is even going to notice, and is in any case irrelevant: regardless of the language used, the sentiments expressed ring true. Besides,

if one really put it in the original 17th century dialect (of the Lake Como region), probably not even Italians would be able to understand it. The dialogue brings many scenes vividly to life; one of many that comes to mind is the tavern scene in which Lorenzo gets drunk and into trouble, during the bread riots in Milan.

Manzoni's descriptions are often equally vivid, for instance the young lovers fleeing in a rowboat across Lake Como, by moonlight. Or his accurate and chilling depiction of the bubonic plague, based on the historical plague that struck Milan and vicinity around 1630 (which Manzoni apparently researched in great detail).

This brings me to what is perhaps the one major flaw of the novel, namely Manzoni's frequent, length digressions on historical themes. He devotes two entire chapters to an account of the plague, and others to war and famine, chapters in which the main characters don't appear at all. Although interesting in themselves, these digressions bring the plot to a dead halt—which is a pity, because it's such an engaging and suspenseful story. In fact Manzoni himself is very aware of this, often apologizing to the reader and at one point (Chapter 22), when he stops the action to give the back-story on Federigo, he even says:

Intorno a questo personaggio bisogna assolutamente che noi spendiamo quattro parole: chi non si curasse di sentirle, e avesse però voglia d'andare avanti nella storia, salti addirittura al capitolo seguente.

“It is absolutely necessary that we spend a few words on this character: whoever doesn't care to hear them, and has however the desire to move ahead in the story, could even jump ahead to the next chapter.”

Manzoni's “quattro parole” occupy eight dense pages, and the reader might do well to take his advice. Indeed any chapter or passage that doesn't mention the main characters can be skipped without losing much. Toward the end of the novel one gets the impression that even Manzoni was running out of steam—but then again, it is more likely that I was the one whose steam was beginning to fade.

In any case, it is a remarkable, highly recommended novel. The audiobook, read by the always excellent Claudio Carini, is in some ways even more entertaining, as well as easier to follow: the acting and tone makes up for the sometimes difficult vocabulary. Some might find a 26-hour audiobook an even more daunting proposition than the novel, but if you commute to work and can listen in the car, it's a great way to pass the time.

Dacia Maraini (b. 1936), 1. *Voci*, 300pp. Disappointing, pretentious murder mystery. First person present tense narration makes it worthwhile for practice purposes, but I can't recommend it.

2. *La ragazza con la treccia*, audiobook (13 racconti, 3hr 7 min), read by Alessandra Bedino, Eleonora Calamita, Maria Grazia Mandruzzato, and Lucia Schierano. A varied and entertaining collection that makes for good listening practice. Among those I found interesting and/or entertaining were: *La ragazza con la treccia* (the only one that I've also read); *Un clandestino a bordo*, the title of which refers literally to the Joseph Conrad story *The secret sharer* and figuratively to the relationship between the narrator and “l'uomo che amo”; *Il calciatore di Bilbao*, which despite its unresolved ending (somewhat reminiscent of Alfred Terhune's *The blue paper*) is an engaging, albeit sad tale; *Il bosco di bandito*,

concerning a young girl who spends a weekend in the country with her teacher and the teacher's husband; *Il visitatore notturno* is a charming change of pace, a tale told to a young niece about an unusual nocturnal visitor at a hotel in Australia.

All are worth a listen (although one, *Il bottone giallo*, is downright ugly). Whether you're wild about the stories themselves or not (I enjoyed them), the fact that they're all 11-18 minutes in length makes this an excellent choice for listening practice.

3. *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, audiobook 11 hrs 35 min., read by Piera Degli Esposti. Marianna is a deaf-mute Sicilian girl, born to a wealthy family in the 18th century. At 13 she is married off to a 40-year old uncle, who, it turns out, sexually abused her when she was 5. Despite all this, she maintains her personal integrity, raises children and takes an interest in writers such as British philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). So in outline it is a promising story, yet somehow I couldn't get involved in it. The historical novels of Isabel Allende are similar in spirit but much better written, in my opinion. I didn't care for Esposti's reading style either.

Be warned that this another audiobook to which some misguided soul decided to add music (see my review of the audiobook of Moravia's *Gli indifferenti*). Here the music is by Yoi Maraini, presumably a relative of the author, and perhaps Dacia herself approved it. Be that as it may, I was delighted to find that my computer—an intelligent machine indeed—decided on its own to separate all the music tracks from the reading, thereby making it easy to download a gloriously music-free version onto my smartphone.

4. *La vacanza*, 153pp (1962). This was Maraini's first novel. Narrated by an 11-year old girl, it recounts a summer vacation from a "collegio" and its nuns, in 1943. I found the characters interesting and especially the setting: The war is going on, the Allies are bombing Rome, Mussolini has set up his new government in the North, the Germans are running amok—yet people are still able to vacation on the beach.

5. *L'età di malessere*, 195pp (1963). Since I found Maraini's first novel interesting enough, I thought I'd try the second. This one is narrated by a 17 year-old girl, Enrica, who lives in a poor neighborhood of Rome. She has sex with three different men, including a repulsive young man who is engaged to another woman, and an even more repulsive older married man, a lawyer, who has a liking for underage girls. Her mother is a pathetic soul who dies of lung cancer early in the story. Her delusional father makes elaborate bird cages on the side, that never sell. She has an abortion. She gets a job with an aging rich woman who keeps an aspiring young actor as a lover. The rich woman takes Enrica and her boy-toy to a strip club.

None of this leads anywhere. It is just a gloomy tale of dysfunctional characters, in the style of Pavese and Moravia for example. And as with Pavese and Moravia, it paints a picture of a closed, claustrophobic society, with a protagonist who seems unaware that there is a world beyond her immediate neighborhood. Enrica is only seventeen, true. She is poor, true. But surely Rome in the 1960's was a much bigger world than that, even for a poor teenage girl. According to the blurb on the back cover, she is "alla ricerca di una sua vera identità". It would be a more interesting story if she ever attained her own true identity, even a little.

G. Garcia Marquez (1927-2014), *L'amore ai tempi del colera*, 376pp., 1985. It's love at first sight when 20-ish Florentino Ariza first sees 13-year old Fermina Daza from afar. But things don't work out, Fermina Daza grows up to marry doctor Juvenal Urbino, and Florentino Ariza carries the torch for over fifty years, until the husband dies and Ariza finally realizes his dream. Marquez has a captivating, seductive style that kept me interested for three hundred pages or so. But ultimately one tires of Florentino Ariza's absurd, irrational obsession, and the endless series of sexual affairs with women of all ages that keep him going while he waits for Urbino to die. In the 21st century Fermina Daza would seek a restraining order to stop Ariza's stalking. In fact Ariza would be in prison for child-molestation: At the age of 76, he cynically grooms to be his lover a 14-year old girl who has been left in his care. The girl later commits suicide. Are we supposed to sympathize with Florentino Ariza? Are we supposed to be happy for him when his "love" for Fermina Daza is consummated in old age?

A beautifully written novel, with nothing to say to me.

Carlo Martigli, 1. *999. L'ultimo custode*. A "DaVinci Code" kind of novel, but in my opinion a much better one. Enjoyable and not too hard to read.

2. *L'eretico*. A sequel to *L'ultimo custode*. Entertaining for a while, but not worth 500 pages in my opinion. I gave up after about 400.

Guy de Maupassant (1850-1892), 1. *Bel-Ami*, 343pp. (1885). The story of Georges Duroy, who makes a career out of seducing wealthy women and re-invents himself as a journalist. I found it interesting from a historical standpoint, although the story in itself is not so compelling.

2. *Tomboletta e altri racconti*, audiobook 2hr44min read by Silvia Cecchini. Maupassant was well-known for his many short stories, and indeed I found these to be much more interesting than *Bel-Ami*. The Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, in which de Maupassant enlisted as a volunteer, is a theme of several of the stories. The title story "Tomboletta" is an example, although its main purpose seems to be to illustrate the hypocrisy of the French upper classes—which it does most effectively.

Silvia Cecchini is a good reader, but she does a few too many of these. It would be nice to have more variety.

3. *L'eredità*, audiobook 2h4 20min read by Silvia Cecchini. This is a long short story, so to speak, and again an entertaining satire on French society. In this case, an office worker marries the daughter of a colleague with the aim of inheriting the considerable wealth of the colleague's elderly sister. But things do not go smoothly.

Elsa Morante (1912-1985). 1. A collection of 12 racconti entitled *Lo scialle andaluso*. Overall I like Morante's style very much. I only wish that she would have written a few stories with a more positive spin. I'll explain further below.

Lo scialle andaluso, 53pp. (1951). This intriguing tale is about a widowed ballerina and her young son. I won't say more, as one of its most interesting features is that it's hard to guess where Morante is going with it and therein lies part of the intrigue. Although I suspect there is some symbolism that went over my head, the style is simple, direct and easy to read. Definitely recommended; I'd be interested to know what others think of it.

As with Pavese, however, the negative view of life that Morante presents can be exasperating. As an extreme case, consider *La nonna*. A 40-year old, childless widow moves to the upper floor of a country home, in a small village near a raging river, left to her by her late husband. A man of 25 and his very possessive mother live on the bottom floor. The widow and the young man fall in love, get married and have twins. The young man's mother, now "la nonna", feels that the widow has stolen her son from him and leaves in anger. A few years later she returns, still very bitter. One day she tells the two little twins she has a story to tell them. They're very excited to hear it. The nonna tells them that the river is a big lawn with flowers made of water, horses of glass, and birds made of water as well. "Even the wings are made of water?" asks one of the twins. "Of course," replies the nonna. Shortly thereafter, *La nonna* drowns herself in the river. The children, unaware that their grandmother is dead, go down to the river and find a boat. Inspired by the tale of the horses, they hop in and are carried off by the current to their doom.

Nor do I see the point of *Il cugino Venanzio*. The unfortunate Venanzio is a little boy with evident physical and psychological problems, and an aunt who beats him with a "battipanni" every morning since he's certain to do something bad during the day while she's at work, and it's more efficient to punish him in advance. At the age of seven, he dies.

In *Il soldato Siciliano*, the wife of Gabriele (the Sicilian soldier) character leaves him "per fare la mala vita", while their daughter, Assunta, is still a baby. As Assunta grows up, Gabriele takes out his anger on her, and she comes to hate him. At fifteen she moves out and goes to work as a cameriera for il Maresciallo, whose son tries to rape her. After a month she commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. Racked by guilt, Gabriele doesn't have the courage to kill himself (he says) and is wandering around the country fighting the Germans in the hopes that he'll be killed in battle and so be reunited with his daughter.

As with Pavese, you soon come to expect these dark, depressing endings; in the case of *La nonna* you can see it coming as soon as the nonna returns. But what is the point? In the three preceding examples the endings seem pointless and contrived—very cleverly contrived, but pointless nonetheless. Does a story have to be depressing to be considered "literature"? Nevertheless, I kept reading because Morante is almost always interesting (among the ten of the twelve that I've read, only *Donna Amalia* struck me as simply dull). Among my favorites are *Un uomo senza carattere* and the simple, touching *La giornata*. Then there are a few really weird fantasies, such as *Il ladro dei lumi*, in which the caretaker of the tombs in *il Tempio* secretly puts out their oil lamps at night to save money, causing the dead to rise from the grave in protest. The weirdest of all is *L'uomo dagli occhiali*. I've read it twice and haven't the slightest clue what it's about. Any ideas?

2. *La Storia*, 649pp (1973). An opera critic once said of Wagner's Ring Cycle that it is either the greatest work of art ever produced by a single man, or the most colossal bore. It depends on who you ask. Morante's *La Storia* seems to have been similarly received by the general public; in online reviews at ibs.it, Italian readers rate it as either one of the best novels ever written, or as the most boring. Most of the reviews are in the former category, however, while at amazon.com American readers give the English translation 5 stars, and even consider it the greatest novel of the 20th century.

I am at a loss to understand how anyone can regard it as a Great Novel. In its first

half, despite a number of flaws, it's an interesting story. But the second half reads like an unedited draft of a different book altogether, with bad plotting and some shockingly bad, indeed downright amateurish writing. I would describe it as a Novel of Lost Opportunity: within it is the core of a first-rate novel, but it ultimately self-destructs due to its excessive length, gloomy outlook, profusion of ill-advised, artificial literary devices, and bad writing. Be warned that in the process of elaborating on this claim, I'll reveal many key elements of the plot. Perhaps it's just as well, even if you haven't yet read *La storia*: It's best to know in advance that in the world of Elsa Morante, happiness is not even a possibility.

To begin, let's take a look at the fate of the main characters. Apart from some family history, the story spans the years 1941-47, taking place entirely in Rome and centering on half-Jewish schoolteacher Ida. Her husband dies young of cancer, leaving Ida and their son Nino. Ida's father dies at 58, after which her mother drowns herself in the river (whether it was suicide or accident is left ambiguous, but it is clear the mother had lost her will to live). Nino survives the war, but then is killed in a car crash while fleeing the police. Meanwhile Ida is raped by a German soldier in 1941 (he dies shortly thereafter when his convoy is attacked over the Mediterranean). Nine months later she gives birth to a son, Giuseppe, nicknamed "Useppe". Useppe too survives the war, but dies of an epileptic seizure at the age of 5. Jewish pacifist-anarchist Davide loses his entire family to the holocaust, and after the war dies of a morphine overdose. 48-year old prostitute Santina survives the war, then is stabbed to death by her pimp with a pair of scissors. Even various animals—and here it must be kept in mind that they are, oddly, major characters in the drama—meet unfortunate ends. Nino's first dog, Blitz, is killed in the Allied bombing of San Lorenzo. His second dog, Bella, is shot by the police while trying to defend Useppe's corpse. A cat named Rossella gives birth to a single kitten that she is unable to nurse, and leaves it to die. As for Ida, after the death of Useppe she slips into a senile, vegetative state for nine years, then dies.

It would help if the main character, Ida, were more sympathetic. Certainly one sympathizes with her suffering through so much trial and tragedy, and there is much to admire in her self-sacrificing devotion to her two sons. And yet I found Ida almost devoid of personality, lacking depth and impossible to relate to. Nino is an interesting character, although I wish he had been developed more. For example, at about 16 he enthusiastically joins the fascist army and goes off to fight. The next we hear of him he has changed sides, and is fighting with the partisans. But very little detail is given of what caused him to change his mind. Given that many Italians remained loyal to fascism to the end of the war and beyond, it would have been interesting to hear more about Nino's change of heart. I liked the little boy Useppe a lot; here Morante does a fine job of portraying the toddler years and beyond (perhaps surprisingly so, given that she never had children of her own). Best of all is the account of life in the refuge in Pietralata, which Ida and Useppe share with a variety of interesting characters: Carulina, a 15-year old mother of twin girls, Giuseppe "Secondo", his cat Rossella and canaries Peppiniello and Peppiniella (of course, in a Morante story not even canaries are safe; one day their cage is left open and they are killed by Rossella), the mysterious pacifist-anarchist "Carlo Vivaldi" (it's clear from the get-go that this a false name, but I'll not mention who he turns out to be), and many others. The Pietralata episode occupies about a hundred pages, up to the end of 1943. After that, the writing deteriorates rapidly.

The biggest problem with the book lies in its excessive length and Morante's writing style, which constantly pulls the reader out of the story and makes it impossible to stay involved. For example, the novel is divided into years (1941-1947), with each year preceded by a summary of what was then going in the world—and not just in Europe; we are kept up to date on Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, etc. To my taste, these summaries are pointless distractions from the real story, and could be cut. But one can simply skip past them; the worst distractions, which I'll now elaborate, lie elsewhere.

First, the story is told by an anonymous, all-seeing narrator. He or she chimes in at random intervals with jarring first-person comments that interrupt the flow and ruin the mood. For example, on p. 135 we read that Ida "...ogni sera, quasi appena coricata nel suo letto, scendeva in un lungo sonno, apparentemente vuoto di sogni. In realtà, io credo, essa sognava..." Or on p. 52, after the police investigation of Ida's mother's drowning: "Il caso fu archiviato sotto il titolo: *morte accidentale per annegamento*. E questa, secondo me, è la spiegazione più giusta." And on p. 552, a startling interruption: "trascurai di dire che nell'inverno del 1945 a Roma era caduta la neve". ("I neglected to say that in the winter of 1945, it had snowed in Rome".) Even when not writing in the first person, the pseudo-narrator—who clearly cannot be an actual witness—makes her presence known with revelations of future and/or distant events, such as Gunther's death in the Mediterranean, rather like a bad actor who constantly reminds us that he's acting. In the worst cases—"oh, I forgot to mention that it snowed that winter"—one could think the writer was a mediocre high-school student.

Scattered through the book are many pages devoted to the characters' dreams. Even the dogs (more on them below) have dreams, and whether human or canine, the dreams contribute nothing to the story. As an off-the-cuff estimate, cutting out the dreams would save twenty or thirty pages.

In the second half, the writing really goes downhill; almost all of it after the liberation of Rome could be cut and the book would be the better for it. For one thing, Ida almost completely disappears for two hundred pages or so; indeed, one almost gets the feeling that Morante was writing a second novel and tacked a draft of it onto the first. The chapter in which Santina is murdered by the pimp is completely unnecessary and should have been cut. There is an interminable chapter in which Davide, drugged on morphine, rants and raves to the patrons of an *osteria*. Davide is an interesting character, or at least could have been. "Survivor's guilt" is certainly a theme well-worth exploring, as is the combination of ignorance and indifference displayed by the tavern patrons. But the *osteria* chapter's forty repetitive pages ruin whatever impact it might have had.

Then there are the dogs, Blitz and Bella. More space is devoted to Bella than to Ida in the second part, at least a hundred pages of which could be taken out and re-titled "A boy and his dog". Initially Bella belongs to Nino, who rather improbably abandons both his girlfriends and his beloved motorcycle so he can hang out with Bella. After Nino's death, Bella and Useppe become inseparable companions. This part of the story sometimes reminded me of the old TV show "Lassie": Bella rescues Useppe from drowning during a seizure, for example, and even has long (imaginary) conversations with him. It could make a good "Boy and his Dog" story, but it belongs in a different novel.

Among the various flaws in Morante's writing, the most annoying of all is Morante's use of parenthetical, superfluous explanatory remarks, that would only make sense if she was

writing for children or for imbeciles. I'll give just two of the many dozens of examples:

1. Useppe and Bella stumble on the hideout of 12-year old escapee from juvenile detention. He shows Useppe a short newspaper article about the escape, which mentions a certain Scimó Pietro as one of the culprits. "È il mio nome, questo. Sono io, Scimó," says the boy. We are then informed: "(Il suo nome completo, invero, come pure risultava del documento, era Scimó Pietro. Scimó era soltanto il cognome. Ma lui s'era avvezzo a venir chiamato col suo cognome.)" To give this explanation, Morante must think her readers are complete idiots.

2. At the end of the book, a news account about Useppe's death relates that in the course of removing the body from the home, "Si è reso necessario abbattere la bestia". "La bestia" is of course the dog Bella, occasionally referred to as "la pastora". But just in case we don't get it, Morante adds: "Quest'ultimo particolare—facile capirlo—si riferiva alla nostra pastora." It's as though she were reading the story out loud to a group of elementary-school children.

It's a pity because *La storia* could have been a great novel. A good editor, which Morante evidently lacked, could have and should have insisted that it be trimmed by two or three hundred pages, and that the writing style be tightened up considerably, at the very least eliminating the intrusive narrator and the unnecessary, intelligence-insulting explanatory remarks. In any event, despite all this criticism, I still recommend giving *La storia* a try. But when you get to the liberation of Rome (June 1944), you might as well quit.

Alberto Moravia (1907-1990). Moravia was married to Elsa Morante from 1941 to 1961, and lived with Dacia Maraini for twenty years after that. Morante and Maraini are also reviewed above.

1. *Gli indifferenti*, 381pp, (1929). This was Moravia's first novel, written at the age of 22. According to various online sources, common themes in his work are "social alienation", "moral decadence" and "existentialism". Although the first two themes are certainly prominent in *Gli indifferenti*, one could equally, albeit irreverently, describe it as a twisted family soap-opera.

There are only five characters: The widow Mariagrazia, her daughter Carla (age 24, a "fanciulla"), son Michele (a "ragazzo" in his late teens), Maria's friend Lisa, and Maria's rich boyfriend ("amante"), Leo. The entire story takes place over two or three days. Here is the plot in a nutshell: Maria and her children are very well-off, even rich, living in a fancy villa. However, their money is running out and they are barely able to stave off foreclosure by taking loans from Leo, who for his part is anxious to get his money back. Leo seduces Carla; Lisa (who once had a relationship with Leo and feels that Maria stole him from her) attempts to seduce Michele. Meanwhile the utterly clueless and pathetic Maria suspects that Leo and Lisa are secretly renewing their affair. I'll stop there to avoid giving too much away.

Before going further, I should say that in my opinion *Gli indifferenti* is very well-written, and I enjoyed it. Even the ending, often the most difficult thing for a writer to get right, fits perfectly with the mood and style of the story leading up to it. But I do have problems with certain aspects of the book.

First of all there is the “social alienation”, here formulated as “indifference”. In American rock music one often finds lyrics which, when properly translated, go as follows: “I’m an angry disaffected youth, sure, I have unlimited opportunities that people in other parts of the world can only dream of, and I get paid a boatload of money despite having no talent, but life sucks and the world owes me, yeah, and anyway I don’t give a shit, blah, blah, blah.” In *Gli indifferenti*, the pathologically indifferent Michele, and to a lesser extent the passive, unimaginative Carla, represent a 1920’s Italian version of the same phenomenon. They live in a fancy villa. They go to the theater, they go dancing, they play tennis. They don’t work; indeed, among the five characters only rich businessman Leo works for a living. They even have servants (at least one, in any case). True, their life of privilege could be coming to an end, but they’ve been living this way for many, many years and to all appearances have done absolutely nothing to take advantage of it, other than learning to play the piano. Their mother and her friend Lisa are no better. This indifference is part of what Moravia wants to portray, but how much can the reader take?

Then there is the usual issue, i.e. sexism. Given that the author is a young man writing in 1929, it probably isn’t fair to apply too high a standard. Moreover, what’s really needed is a global study of the Italian brand of sexism as represented in literature (it’s been done, no doubt). Women are either young and attractive, old and fat, or on the verge of becoming old and fat. In all cases they are defined in terms of their husbands, boyfriends, lovers, or lack thereof. They are wives, mothers, prostitutes or spinsters. It won’t do to say that the author (I now refer to Italian authors in general, including even some of the women) is merely reflecting the realities of life, because this simply isn’t true; why does no one write about women like Tina Pizzardo, to cite just one example (see my review of Pavese)?

It is curious that Italian men of this generation so often chose to write from a woman’s point of view: Pavese and Cassola for example, and here Moravia, who gives us the innermost thoughts of all five characters including the three women. There is nothing wrong with this, in principle, but in the end I’m not convinced by Moravia’s female characters. In contrast, the long description of Michele’s teenage-boy fantasy of killing Leo is spot-on, as Moravia is then writing about something he really knows.

In any case, *Gli indifferenti* is a remarkable piece of work for so young a writer, and I recommend it. But this review is getting too long, so I will end with a question: If *Gli indifferenti* accurately represents Italy in the 1920’s, a teenage boy could find a gunshop on Main Street, walk in and say “I’d like a revolver”, and walk out with the weapon and a supply of ammunition. Was this really true?

2. Audiobook of *Gli indifferenti*, read by Toni Servillo c. 2007 (six discs, so > 6 hours; oddly, neither the timing nor date of production is given). The reading by Servillo is excellent, and I enjoyed the audiobook too. Unfortunately, it does have one major flaw: Some idiot decided to add music.

Moravia did not write an opera. He did not write a musical. He wrote a novel. Adding music—any music—to someone else’s work is an act of incredible arrogance, even if it is good music and even if it only comes in pauses between chapters. In this case it is like fingernails on a blackboard and periodically plays in the background while Servillo is reading, serving no purpose whatever other than to annoy and distract the listener. Perhaps it is intended to set the mood or contribute to it, but therein lies the arrogance: Moravia’s work speaks

for itself; how can the composer presume to tell us what we're supposed to feel?

The composer, by the way, is Fabio Vacchi (b. 1949), who, according to the credits on the CD case, won a composition prize at Tanglewood in his youth and went on to great fame and fortune. In other words, absolutely the wrong sort of person for the job, inclined to impose his own ideas on the text rather than adapting to it. Anything other than Vacchi's ghastly screeching strings would be improvement, but this isn't the point: *any* music would be irrelevant, at best. If you want to set a book to music, write your own. Or write an opera, as Vacchi apparently has done (performed at La Scala in 2007).

The audiobook of Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* also has music, mostly by Grieg, Sibelius and Dvorak. Now, I have nothing against Grieg or Sibelius, and Dvorak is one of my favorite composers. But what does their music have to do with Fallaci's book? Answer: nothing. In this case, however, the music only comes in between chapters, and more importantly, Fallaci herself is the reader. I still think the music is an irrelevant distraction, but it's her book and she's certainly free to do what she wants with it.

Fortunately, only a small fraction of Servillo's excellent reading is subjected to musical accompaniment. When the fingernails-on-a-blackboard comes in, just grit your teeth and wait for it to go away.

3. *Il conformista*, 290pp (1947). I had hoped that this novel would in some way treat seriously the issues of fascism in Italy and the role of conformism, but it does not. Like *Gli indifferenti*, it is another study of exceedingly dysfunctional and often unbelievable characters, featuring frequent use of Moravia's favorite word "indifferente", and whose gloomy plot takes a number of implausible turns. To make my point, it will help to give a detailed outline of the plot (a complete outline, so proceed no further if you were planning to read it yourself). The book is divided into four parts: Prologo, Parte Prima, Parte Seconda and Epilogo.

Prologo: The main character Marcello is obsessed with the idea of "normalità" and fear of his own "anormalità". This fear dates to his childhood, when he capriciously killed several lizards with his slingshot, and accidentally killed a cat. Later—still in pre-adolescence—he is accosted by an ex-priest, Lino, who lures Marcello to his home on the promise that he'll give Marcello the revolver the boy covets (for the purpose of impressing the bullies at school who tease him for being effeminate). Marcello doesn't understand what it is that Lino wants, but he knows it's something illegitimate. When Lino tries to assault him physically, Marcello manages to step away and grab the revolver. Lino, on his knees, begs Marcello to shoot him. He does, and runs away.

Parte Prima: The story picks up again with Marcello at age 30. Lino's death was ruled a suicide, and remains Marcello's guilty secret—although it is not so much guilt that he feels as fear of "anormalità". His father has been involuntarily committed to an insane asylum. His mother lives in the now filthy family home with ten Pekinese dogs and a chauffeur half her age who has become her lover. At one point she says to her son: "Tu non puoi capire cosa vuol dire per una donna non essere più giovane...è peggio della morte." Marcello works for the fascist *Servizio Segreto*, although few details are provided about what he actually does on an average day. His pursuit of *normalità* requires finding a wife, for which practical

purpose he chooses the 20-year old Giulia. Giulia, inexplicably, is madly in love with him and desperately needs reassurance that he loves her. Meanwhile Marcello has been ordered on a mission to Paris, to track down an old professor of his who is now in exile spreading anti-fascist propaganda. He isn't told the goal of the mission, but it's clear to Marcello that his role is to set up the professor for assassination. The perfect cover for the mission comes to Marcello in a flash: a honeymoon in Paris. The idea of killing the professor doesn't seem to bother him too much, although he still feels guilty about the lizards.

Parte Seconda. On the train to Paris, on their wedding night in the sleeper car, Giulia confesses that she is not a virgin. In what could be construed as one of the rare moments of humanity in the novel, Marcello “Rispose in tono affettuoso: ‘Non preoccuparti...ti ho sposata perché ti volevo bene...e non perché eri vergine.’” However, Marcello is in fact motivated primarily by his desire for *normalità*, not out of any love for Giulia. She goes on to explain that at 15 she was forced into a sexual relationship with a 70-year old family friend and that not until recently did she terminate the relationship. Even at this Marcello feels no hatred against the abuser—who was even a witness at the wedding—nor pity for Giulia. A sudden movement of the train causes him to accidentally hit her in the face with his elbow. Giulia thinks he did it on purpose and runs out planning to kill herself by jumping off the train. Marcello stops her just in time.

In Paris, Marcello and Giulia call on old Professor Quadri. (Incidentally, Quadri is living there openly. The Servizio Segreto had no need of Marcello to find him.) It turns out that Quadri, meanwhile, has married a young woman named Lina (not to be confused with the defrocked priest, Lino). Lina is openly hostile to Marcello, because she somehow knows that he is a fascist agent. Marcello instantly falls in love with her and right there on the spot decides he will leave his new bride and make a life with the hostile Lina. When Quadri and Giulia are out of the room he makes a pass at her. At first Lina fiercely resists but then suddenly gives in and returns his passionate kisses. What can be the explanation of this surprising behaviour? Well, it turns out that Lina is lesbian and is smitten by Giulia. Thus to have a chance at Giulia, she has to appease Marcello.

Later Marcello goes for a walk during which a rich old man, evidently gay, tries to pick him up in his chauffeured limousine. Although he is reminded of his childhood experience with Lino, Marcello accepts a ride back to the hotel. The old man, however, has the driver head toward his own house instead. Luckily, Marcello now has a revolver of his own. By threatening the old fellow he gets dropped off at his hotel, although not before accepting the gift of a gardenia: “Per vostra moglie”. But Marcello can think only of Lina, “la sua vera moglie”, and decides to give it to her at the first opportunity, for example when he has a chance to get her away on some pretext so they can discuss their future together.

Upon arriving at the hotel room, however, he realizes that Giulia and Lina are together in the bathroom. Giulia is apparently just out of the bath, with only her upper half loosely covered by a towel. As far as we know, Giulia is not lesbian, and yet seems to find nothing odd in the fact that a woman she has just met is kneeling at her feet “in atto di circondarle con ambedue le braccia le gambe, la fronte contro le ginocchia e il petto contro gli stinchi”. After spying on them for a while, unseen, Marcello goes back outside, throwing away the gardenia.

Once everything is set up for the murder of Quadri (by other fascist agents), Marcello

tells Giulia they'll have to cut short the honeymoon and return to Rome; he's been called back. They haven't even had time to see the sights, although they did have a night out with Quadri and Lina at a club where all the women dress in men's clothing. Giulia is glad to get away from Lina, who, unfortunately for her, has at the last minute decided to join her husband on a road trip. Both of them are killed by fascist hitmen.

Back in Rome, Marcello learns that a counter-order was issued calling off the murder of Quadri, because the government wanted to improve relations with France. Unfortunately, the order did not arrive in time. He then learns that Lina was killed too. But the news leaves him more or less...well, *indifferente*.

Epilogo. We skip forward in time. Marcello and Giulia have a six-year old daughter, Lucilla. Mussolini's government has fallen, but the war is not over. Fearing reprisals, Marcello and Giulia make plans to get out of town, maybe eventually emigrate to Argentina. There is also the ever-present fear "che vengono gli aeroplani", but this doesn't stop Marcello and Giulia from leaving Lucilla at home in bed, alone, while they go for a "giro nel centro", in Marcello's words to see "come cade una dittatura". After mingling with the cheering crowds they go for a walk in the dark woods of a park. Giulia is seized by a sudden urge to make love under the trees. Things are just getting started when they see a flashlight wandering in their direction: a park guard making his rounds. Now for the shocker: the guard is none other than Lino, the defrocked priest. It turns out that the bullet didn't kill him, but while in the hospital his records got mixed up with those of his roommate, who died. Lino eventually got married. After his wife died he took up the night watchman job with a view to finding more boys to molest in the woods. Marcello takes from this encounter some lesson about *normalità*, and goes home with Giulia.

The next day, Marcello, Giulia and Lucilla flee from Rome by car. They reach a town being bombed by fighter planes (whose planes, we don't know). Don't worry, says Marcello, it's over and they're leaving. One of the pilots turns back and strafes the car with machine-gun fire, killing all three. Here the story ends.

I still think that Moravia was a talented writer, in a technical sense. But it completely escapes me how this novel, with its absurd plot and unbelievable characters, can be regarded as great literature. Any credibility remaining to the story is destroyed by the ludicrous episodes involving Marcello, Lina and Giulia. Moravia (and Pavese) would have been better off not writing about lesbians, because nothing they write about it rings true. (In Moravia's world, apparently, women can only be wives, mothers, lovers, prostitutes and lesbians.) And having Lino suddenly turn up at night in the park is the last straw. At that point it is clear, if wasn't so already, that this is not a novel about real people. But then what *is* it about? A commentary on fascism or the war? No, it has little of interest to say on that subject. A philosophical statement on conformity? Some deep existential message? Hardly. Although it does have some interesting scenes (e.g. when Marcello goes to confession for the first time since childhood), in the end it seems little more than a 290-page riff on the theme "life sucks and then you die". Given the enormous, varied and deep potential of the war, fascism, and the resistance as a source of literary inspiration, especially for those who actually lived it, it is a shame that a writer of Moravia's talent could come up with no better than this.

3. *La provinciale*, audiobook 3hr. 22 min. read by Maria Grazia Mandruzzato (book

published in 1937). This novella is the best piece by Moravia I've come across so far. The interesting cast of characters includes the luckless young protagonist Gemma ("la provinciale"), socially clueless physics professor Vagnuzzi, and manipulative Romanian meddler Elvira Coceanu. I haven't seen the 1953 movie (directed by Mario Soldati) but my expectations for it would be very, very low, with Gina Lollobrigida ludicrously miscast as Gemma. A poster for the English version, entitled "The wayward wife", appears to have been conceived by someone who never read the book or even had the foggiest idea of what it was about.

4. *La noia*, 347pp (1960). I'm embarrassed to admit that I read this almost to the end before skimming. Not only because it is the semi-pornographic story of the perverse sexual affair (definitely not a love affair) between the 35-year old narrator and a 17-year old girl, but because the title itself gives fair warning of what to expect. The narrator is yet another useless protagonist drawn from the ranks of the idle rich; I kept hoping he would fall under a bus and thus bring the novel to a merciful end. The girl is portrayed very deliberately as an empty shell, devoid of personality, interest or humanity. A philosophical tone—or perhaps this some private joke of Moravia's—is set in the opening chapter, with the narrator's tedious exposition of his theory of "la noia". *La noia* is equated with a lack of connection to reality, as is illustrated with pretentious analogies e.g. to the perception of "un bicchiere".

Well, I have only myself to blame. Moravia was good at the mechanics of writing, and I kept foolishly hoping that something interesting would come of it all. This is my last Moravia novel.

Claudio Paglieri, *L'ultima cena del commissario Luciani*, 407pp (2014). Entertaining murder mystery, the latest in a series featuring il commissario Luciani. According to *La Repubblica* (cited on the cover), "Chi definisce Paglieri il miglior giallista italiano ha probabilmente ragione".

Cesare Pavese (1908-1950). I have very mixed feelings about Pavese. On the one hand, I like his style a lot, in particular his dialogues and his ability to paint characters with a few short brushstrokes. On the other hand, one can only take so much of his relentlessly negative view of humanity. Indeed, if one's knowledge of the Italian people were based solely on the writings of Pavese, one would have to conclude that they were the gloomiest, most cynical, most depressed people on the planet.

From his writing alone it is clear that Pavese had some serious issues with women, an impression all too sadly confirmed by his life story. He committed suicide at 41, over a brief, failed love affair with the American actress Constance Dowling. Earlier romantic involvements ended badly too, notably a much longer relationship before the war with Battistina "Tina" Pizzardo. Pizzardo seems to have been a very strong, independent, intelligent young woman (she chose to study mathematics and physics in a male-dominated university, certainly neither a common nor an easy choice for an Italian girl in the 1930's). But from reading Pavese, you would never guess that such women even existed in Italy. Oddly, despite his difficulties relating to women, he frequently wrote from the perspective of a female character—even in the first person.

Spoiler alert: In the reviews I often discuss how the story ends, so it might spoil it for you to read further. But in Pavese's world no one lives happily ever after, and after a while

the endings no longer surprise.

1. *La luna e i falò*, 164pp. Widely regarded as Pavese's masterpiece, this is a beautifully written, hauntingly nostalgic tale. It's certainly my favorite so far. The narrator—an orphan who is never named, apart from his childhood nickname Anguilla—returns after the war to the Belbo river valley (roughly halfway between Torino and Genova) where he grew up. His friend Nuto is a sympathetic character, one of the few to be found in Pavese's writing. Although the war, fascism, and the resistance play a role, especially at the end, in my view the best of the story lies elsewhere: in Anguilla's recollections of childhood, his friendship with Nuto, and his descriptions of life around the Belbo. The weakest episodes are those taking place in the United States, which would have been better omitted: Pavese never set foot outside of Italy in his life, and it shows. The novel ends with a story of the execution of a woman as a traitor by the partisans.

2. *La bella estate*, 100pp. This was the first work of Pavese's I read. Written in 1940 but not published until 1949. Story of a 16-year old girl, Ginia, in Torino. Told from her point of view. Falls for a twenty-something bohemian artist, learns the hard way that his interest in her doesn't go much beyond sex. Her older, more sophisticated friend Amelia is lesbian. That Pavese is qualified to write on these themes is questionable at best. Interesting but not particularly compelling.

3. *I racconti*, from various sources:

a. *Notte di festa e altri racconti: gli intensi racconti sul male di vivere*, Einaudi 2005, 289pp. 23 stories; I've read most of them.

b. *Notte di festa*, 28pp, audiobook 1hr 4 min. read by Alberto Rossatti. Just the one story, alas. Rosatti is yet another excellent reader.

c. *Le case*, in [Trevelyn] below but not in the collection (a).

Most of the stories are dark and/or cynical, and some are very dark indeed. The atmospheric *Notte di festa* is one of the best. I also like the cryptic, intriguing *Misoginia*.

At the opposite extreme is the disgusting *La draga*: Two young women go boating on the river. A storm comes up, one of them is swept away and presumably drowned, while the other manages to swim to a barge (*draga*) to get help. Instead one of the two men on the barge rapes her, while the other waits his turn. But she escapes into the river after the first rape, is swept away and presumably drowned. What great luck, says rapist no. 1 to no. 2 while they have a smoke; don't worry, next time you can go first. The end. Pavese wrote this story after Pizzardo broke up with him.

Suicidi is almost as bad. The male narrator (never named, if I'm not mistaken) gets involved with Carlotta, who is separated from her husband. She's very much in love with the narrator, who for his part is only interested in a convenient sexual partner. He's honest with her about not wanting any commitment, but she keeps hoping. Finally he breaks it off for good. Many weeks later he notices she seems to no longer be working at the cafe where they met, and makes inquiries. Oh, she was found dead in her bed a month ago. With the gas on. The end.

Many of the other stories involve less tragic but still depressing, often peculiar relationships with women. In *L'idolo* Guido goes to a prostitute and is shocked to discover that the

woman, Mina, is an old flame of his that he broke up with long ago. For some reason her new profession rekindles his feelings for her, but in the end it's too late: Mina marries someone else and leaves Guido devastated, old and alone. In *Primo amore* (its original title "Le tre ragazze" is more appropriate) Pavese narrates in the first person as Lidia, a young woman. He isn't convincing in this role, and it's hard to see what the point of the story is. The two-page *Anni* is yet another gloomy tale in which an unnamed first-person narrator spends the night with "Bruna". He's desperate to stay—"where will I go? what will I do?"—but Bruna insists that he leave, prompting his reply: "Tu sei come una prostituta, e lo sei sempre stata." This little scene sums up Pavese's own behaviour with women: the adolescent angst and whining (many who knew him described him as a perpetual adolescent), putting the responsibility on the woman to tell him what to do, and the immature reaction to rejection.

4. *Tra donne sole*, 148 pp (1949). This one ends with a young woman committing suicide in a hotel room. And again Pavese narrates in the first person as a woman, Clelia. Some women (my wife, for instance) maintain that it is impossible for a man to write from a woman's point of view. Be that as it may, Pavese certainly isn't the man for the job. In a letter to Pavese, Calvino wrote:

E la cosa che scombussola di più è quella donna-cavallo pelosa, con la voce cavernosa e l'alito che sa di pipa, che parla in prima persona e fin da principio si capisce che sei tu con la parrucca e i seni finti che dici: "Ecco, una donna sul serio dovrebb'essere così."

"And the most upsetting thing of all is that hairy horse-woman, with the cavernous voice and the breath smelling of pipe, who speaks in the first person and from the beginning it's clear that it's you in a wig and fake breasts saying: 'Look, this is what a real woman should be like'."

Lesbianism plays a major role in the story, more so than in *La bella estate*, and again Pavese is not at all credible. In the same letter Calvino writes "al lesbismo invece nessuno ci crede" ("on the other hand no one believes in lesbianism"). If by this he meant "no one believes in your portrayal of lesbianism", he is certainly right; if he meant it literally, then Calvino was living in a fantasy world of his own. In any case, I find it puzzling that Pavese kept trying to write as a woman, and even more puzzling that this work was so well-received.

Admittedly, I would probably flunk even *English Literature 101*, as I have little patience for novels about shallow, uninteresting characters who apparently have little better to do than sit around drinking, smoking and partying, e.g. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. (The latter consists mainly of: "In the morning we bought a few beers. Then we went to Joe's house and drank wine. Later we got some whiskey and watched bulls being stabbed to death.") Why should we care about any of these people? I have a similar problem with *Tra donne sole*, even after setting aside Pavese's customary depressing ending and ill-advised attempt to write as a woman. For the most part they drink, smoke and party, complain about life and seem barely aware that a larger world exists outside Torino and Rome (although distant lands such as France and Switzerland are occasionally acknowledged). All of which is hard to fathom given that Italy has just been through the war, fascism, the resistance etc. Presumably, this is part of what Pavese wants to portray—at one point Clelia says (to herself) "sembrava che la guerra non ci fosse

stata”—but whether it is realistic or not, in my opinion it makes for tedious reading. Where are the women like Tina Pizzardo? Now *she* would make an interesting character.

I kept trying with Pavese because I like his writing style a lot, I do like some of his stories, and it's often an interesting challenge trying to figure out what the hell he's getting at. After *Tra donne sole*, however, I was ready to give up—his negativity was just too much—until I found *Cesare Pavese and America*, by Lawrence G. Smith (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). One learns that despite his great talent, he really *was* the pathetic, tortured soul reflected in his writing, at least in his relationships with women, and even though his trials were of his own making, one begins to feel a certain sympathy for him.

5. *La casa in collina*, 123pp. (1948), audiobook about 5 hours, read by Massimo Malucelli. For my money, this is Pavese's most interesting novel. Set in Torino beginning in the summer of 1943, it is the only one I know of that deals directly with the war. (I have to admit that having an audiobook, in this instance superbly read by Malucelli, tends to enhance my appreciation of any Italian novel.) Torino was already being heavily bombed by the allies, usually at night, and many of its residents would flee to the hills—“...povera gente che sfollava a dormire magari nei prati, portandosi il materasso sulla bicicletta o sulle spalle”—and then return to what was left of their homes in the morning.

That summer turned into a period of utter chaos and confusion for Italians, beginning with the overthrow of Mussolini in July, followed on September 8 by the new government's “armistice” with the allies. “È finita la guerra?” was the question on the minds of many, but of course the war was just beginning. The incompetent and cowardly leaders of the new government—the useless Marshal Badoglio and the even more useless king, whose main concern seemed to be the danger that that fascism could be replaced by democracy—secretly packed their bags and left Rome, leaving the Italian people to the wolves. That is, to the Nazis, who immediately invaded from the north. Left in the lurch, Italian soldiers didn't even know who they were supposed to be fighting. Hundreds of thousands were disarmed by the Nazis and deported to slave labor camps in Germany, where many of them died. Meanwhile the allies by August had taken Sicily and on September 9th landed in Salerno, south of Napoli. Allied bombing of Italian cities continued. For Italy, the war became a civil war.

Ordinary citizens, such as those portrayed in *La casa in collina*, had to make decisions based on what information they could gather from Italian radio, broadcasts from London and the grapevine. Many fascists remained fascist; many people joined in or supported the resistance; others, dubbed the “attendisti”, thought it best to just wait for the allies to arrive. To the extent that the varied partisan contingents presented a united front, that unity was only a temporary expedient. There is a revealing dialog between Corrado (the narrator) and an acquaintance, Giorgio. The last time Corrado saw him, Giorgio was fighting for the fascists; now he is with the resistance.

“Ma la guerra fascista era un'altra. Chi sono adesso i sovversivi?” dissi.

“Tutti quanti,” rispose. “Non c'è più un italiano che non sia un sovversivo.”
Sorrise secco, bruscamente. “Non crederà che si combatta per quei fessi suoi amici.”

“Quali fessi?”

“Quelli che cantano ‘Rivoluzione’,”. Buttò la cicca con disgusto. “Finito il lavoro coi neri,” tagliò, “si comincia coi rossi.”

(“But the fascist war was something else. Who are the subversives now?” I said.

“All of them,” he replied. “There’s no Italian left who isn’t a subversive.” He smiled dryly, abruptly. “You don’t think that we’re fighting for those idiot friends of yours.”

“What idiots?”

“Those who sing ‘Revolution’.” He threw down the cigarette butt in disgust. “When we’re finished with the black[shirts, i.e. fascists], *tagliò* [maybe “he said sharply”?], we’ll start on the reds [communists].”

Corrado follows a path similar to that taken by Pavese in real life. He does not join the resistance; he takes refuge in the hills—*la casa in collina*—and then with the priests in the Collegio di Chieri. Corrado is a man who, to quote from the brief notes accompanying the audiobook, “affronta la Seconda guerra mondiale con grande indifferenza e apatia”. Indifference, apathy and cynicism are typical of Pavese. According to the same notes, a secret notebook discovered after Pavese’s death contains a number of comments favorable to fascism (“alcuni giudizi favorevoli nei confronti del fascismo”).

In any case, although it’s hard to find much to admire in Pavese the man, it’s worth hearing what Pavese the writer has to say. One welcome feature of *La casa in collina* is that his weird attitude toward women is not so prominent as it is in many of his other works. In the hills Corrado runs into an old girlfriend, Cate, who has a son that may or may not be his. Despite the usual Pavese-isms such as “Tra uomini una ragazza è sempre qualcosa di indecente”, Cate emerges as the most sympathetic, real female character I have yet found in Pavese.

If you want to read Pavese, I strongly recommend starting with *La casa in collina* and then *La luna e i falò*. After that, proceed at your own risk.

6. *La famiglia*, 33pp. (1941-42) and *Il fuggiasco*, 5pp. (1944).

These two short stories are included with *La casa in collina*, at least in the 2008 Einaudi edition. They are also included with the audiobook (about 90 minutes for *La famiglia* and 16 for *Il fuggiasco*). The main characters of *La famiglia* are similar to those of *La casa in collina*, even with the same names: Corrado, Cate, Cate’s son Dino who may or may not be Corrado’s. Yet the setting no longer involves the war, so it’s not clear to me how the stories are supposed to be related. In any event, although *La famiglia* is not without some interest, it’s hard to muster much enthusiasm for yet another tale of dysfunctional men and the unfortunate women who have to deal with them. *Il fuggiasco* is another war story, likely based on his own experiences, in which the narrator hides from the Nazis in a small abandoned church in the hills—Pavese’s ever present and beloved “colline”.

7. *Il diavolo sulle colline*, 127pp (1949). I complain about Pavese, yet keep reading him. In this one his glowing descriptions of the beloved “colline” make interesting reading. On the other hand, it is yet another tale in which the main characters apparently have little else to do besides drink, smoke, gossip and party.

8. *La spiaggia*, 101pp. (1941). This one might be my last, however. Again the dull, thoroughly uninteresting characters smoke, hang out at the beach, and smoke some more. The men make inane comments on the nature of women. As in all Pavese's novels, the verb "discorrere" (to talk or chat) occurs over and over again. The characters are constantly discorrer-ing, usually about nothing. They seem to have no interest in, or even awareness of, the world outside their own tedious little soap opera. Is this really worth writing about?

Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), 1. *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, 212pp (1904), audiobook 8hr 30 min. read by Claudio Carini. A highly original, entertaining novel. The basic premise is this: Mattia Pascal is trapped in a loveless marriage, living with a wife and mother-in-law who resent and despise him. He still mourns the loss of two daughters, both of whom died in infancy. He owes a lot of money. Desperately unhappy, Pascal disappears for a couple of weeks, although intending to return home. While he's gone, however, a badly decomposed body is found in the river and mistakenly identified as his, a presumed suicide. Upon reading about it in the paper, it suddenly occurs to him that this is his chance for freedom and a new life. Mattia Pascal is dead! But he soon discovers that becoming a new person is not so easy.

Along the way Pirandello examines various human foibles such as addiction to gambling and speaking to the dead through "mediums". Later in life Pirandello was successful as a playwright, and in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* his talent for dialogue is already in evidence. As the narrator, Pascal also talks to himself. Among other things this makes for an excellent audiobook; as always Carini is a fine reader, with exceptionally clear diction to go along with his good acting.

Twenty years later Pirandello added an interesting note at the end, *Avvertenza sugli scrupoli della fantasia*, responding to critics who considered his plots and characters "inverosimile", i.e. unbelievable. After introducing an analogy with zoology, he writes:

Si domanda a questo punto se vogliono esser considerati come zoologi o come critici letterarii quei tali signori che, giudicando un romanzo o una novella o una commedia, condannano questo o quel personaggio, questa o quella rappresentazione di fatti o di sentimenti, non già in nome dell'arte come sarebbe giusto, ma in nome d'una *umanità* che sembra essi conoscano a perfezione, come se realmente in astratto esistesse, fuori cioè di quell'infinita varietà d'uomini capaci di commettere tutte quelle sullodate assurdità *che non hanno bisogno di parer verosimili, perché sono vero.*

"One can ask at this point whether they want to be considered as zoologists or as literary critics, such gentlemen who, judging a novel or a novella or a play, condemn this or that character, this or that depiction of facts or feelings, not in the name of art as would be appropriate, but in the name of a "humankind" that they seem to know perfectly, as though it really existed in the abstract, that is, outside of the infinite variety of humans capable of committing all those "sullodate" absurdities that have no need to seem believable, because they are true."

(I couldn't find a translation of "sullodate".) The short version of Pirandello's argument is simply "truth is stranger than fiction", and he gives two illustrations. The first is a bizarre

love-triangle/suicide case that occurred in Buffalo, New York; the second a 1920 case from Italy (two decades after the novel) very similar to that of *Mattia Pascal*, in which the body of a drowned man is identified as someone else.

I admit that I am one of those signori who often complains about *inverosimili* plots and characters. But Pirandello is certainly correct: truth *is* stranger than fiction. In any event, I did not find *Il fu Mattia Pascal* to be so far-fetched. To me, it is both a highly entertaining read and an interesting exploration of the question: Could one really make a new life under such circumstances?

2. *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, audiobook 6hrs read by Claudio Carini. This is one of the more boring novels I've ever read. In fact it isn't so much a novel as a forum for the narrator to set forth a certain philosophy, the gist of which seems to be that it is impossible for us to see ourselves as others see us. This is hardly a revelation. In 1786 Robert Burns famously wrote

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!”

And no doubt the idea precedes Burns by several millenia. Yet Pirandello repeats this theme over and over ad nauseum. The story that goes along with the philosophy isn't interesting enough to salvage it. There are those who regard it as a great novel, but I'm at a loss to explain why.

3. *Tre racconti: L'uomo dal fiore in bocca, La paura del sonno, e Due letti a due*, audiobook 78min read by Claudio Carini. All three stories are about death, the first in a serious vein and the second two more in the line of black comedy. Worth a listen.

4. *Pensaci, Giacomino! e altre novelle*, audiobook 4hr14min read by Fabrizio Falco. Twelve short stories. Creative, unpredictable plots and themes (sometimes hard to follow, at least in audiobook form).

Ugo Pirro (1920-2008), *Le soldatesse*, 156 pp., (1956). The setting of this possibly autobiographical novel is probably not well-known to American readers: the Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940, or as the notes on the bookcover put it, the “aggressione, inutile e vergognosa, dell'Italia fascista alla Grecia”.³ The premise is that the narrator, a 22-year old Italian soldier, has been given the task of delivering a “cargo” of very young Greek prostitutes to various Italian army contingents in the region. Along the way he begins to realize that the Greeks are not the enemy, and questions the whole point of the war. Meanwhile the locals are starving to death, and it is clear that the girls are not prostitutes by choice.

Although parts of the novel are well-written and absorbing, by the time it reaches its thoroughly unsatisfying, anti-climactic end, it has become simply depressing. In a sense it is not even about the war; whether intentionally or not, it is about the relentless devaluation, dehumanization and exploitation of women by Italian men. One has the distinct impression

³The novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* by British author Louis de Bernières takes place later in the Italian-German occupation of Greece. Just to inject a note of levity into these otherwise grim proceedings, I'll mention that in the 2001 movie version Nicolas Cage sings the Puccini aria “O mio babbino caro” to Penelope Cruz. Cage is not a bad singer, but it's a little weird when you consider that in the opera (*Gianni Schicchi*) a young woman (soprano) sings this aria to her father, threatening to throw herself off the Ponte Vecchio if she can't marry her true love.

that the 36-year old Pirro, writing in 1956, was not even aware of the extent of his anti-female prejudice. These are issues that cut across all cultures, of course, especially in wartime. Nevertheless it seems that there was, at least at that time, a distinctly Italian version of sexism and male obsession with sex. In his 1949 novel *La pelle*, Curzio Malaparte writes: “La vera bandiera italiana non è il tricolore, ma il sesso, il sesso maschile.” Malaparte was fond of outrageous hyperbole, designed to provoke the reader (see the review above), and one can’t always take him seriously. But in *Le soldatesse* you will find little to refute Malaparte’s assertion.

Vasco Pratolini (1913-1991).

1. *Il Quartiere*, 179 pp. In marked contrast with Pavese, Pratolini’s stories feature sympathetic characters that one can really care about. This novel follows the lives of a group of young people in Firenze, in the years 1932-37, before World War II but including the war in “Abissinia”. Most of them are about 14-17 years old at the start of the story. The other main character is “Il Quartiere” itself—that is, the working-class neighborhood of Firenze in which they live. One of my favorite Italian novels so far.

2. *Lo sgombero*, a short story that can be found in the volume [Trevelyan] below. A simple, touching, delightful tale of a grandmother and her grandson who are evicted from their apartment in Firenze so that it can be remodelled for the 1920’s equivalent of yuppies moving in from Torino. Wonderful.

3. *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano*, 112 pp., 1948. The plot: A young man about 25 thinks he’s God’s gift to women and keeps half a dozen girls on a string, telling each of them that they’re the one he’ll marry eventually. In the end the girls get together and exact a dramatic revenge. It’s an interesting, enjoyable read, but lacks the substance of *Il Quartiere*.

4. *Cronache di poveri amanti*, 557 pp. (although the edition I have has small pages, so it’s not as long as it might seem), 1947. Like *Il Quartiere*, this is another wonderful “Romanzo corale” in which a large cast of characters takes turns coming to the front of the stage: now a solo, now a quartet, now a duet...In fact there are at least thirty principal characters; I had to make a list to keep track of them all. The setting is once again Pratolini’s beloved Firenze, this time in the 1920’s up to 1926. More specifically it is Via del Corno, where Pratolini himself grew up. The residents of Via del Corno—the “cornachiai”—are mostly poor but not starving working class folk, living at such close quarters that everyone knows everyone else’s business. And gossips about it. Various young couples fall in and out of love, get married, and have affairs, all to the accompaniment of the rise of fascism. During “la Notte dell’Apocalisse” fascist thugs roam the city shooting communists and other undesirables marked for execution. Among the cornacchiai there are some communists, a few fascists, and a majority who are just trying to get by from day to day.

As always, Pratolini shows a great sympathy for most of his characters, including especially the women. There is one very peculiar character, however: the elderly “Signora”, one of the more unpleasant and by far the most well-off financially of the cornachiai. I don’t know what Pratolini was trying to say through *la Signora*, but to me she was the least believable of the cast (I noticed online that there is even a scholarly treatise analyzing *la Signora*, but

I haven't looked at it). The ending of the story is also a bit of puzzle. I have some ideas but, to avoid spoiling it, I won't get into it here.

Finally, there are two aspects of Pratolini's style worth noting. One is that he likes to talk directly to the reader, along such lines as "we will soon see that things don't work out as so-and-so hoped" and so on. All of his writing that I've seen so far uses this device, which I'm not particularly fond of. He also grossly overuses exclamation points! Exclamation points should be used only when exclaiming! Any manual of English style will tell you this! Surely it is the same in Italian!

But these are minor quibbles. Overall, I liked this book as much as *Il Quartiere*, and indeed had trouble putting it down.

5. *Cronaca familiare*, 181pp. (1945) (in an edition with a large font and small pages; it's actually much shorter than *Il Quartiere*, for example). This autobiographical novel is written in the form of reminiscences addressed to his younger brother, who died in 1945 of a disease that was never diagnosed. "È un colloquio dell'autore con suo fratello morto. L'autore, scrivendo, cercava consolazione, non altro." It's very sad in the end, of course, but also a fascinating glimpse into the life of Pratolini. His mother died shortly after his younger brother was born, apparently of either meningitis or the so-called "Spanish flu", and he was raised by his grandmother. Some of the anecdotes about the grandma are quite amusing (it's clear that the grandmother of *Lo sgombero* was based on her).

A grammatical note: The most irregular conjugation in Italian is the passato remoto of -ere verbs (along with their past participles), but only in the third persons, and the first person singular. In particular the second person singular is almost completely regular, apart from the usual exceptions such as *fosti* and *facesti*, an exasperating irony since this is exactly the case that a non-native speaker is least likely to ever need. But in *Cronaca familiare* Pratolini is addressing his brother in the *tu* form, in passato remoto, and hence we have at long last a practical application, as it were, of this rare but pleasantly regular conjugation.

6. *Diario sentimentale*, 254pp (1956). A collection of reminiscences of youth, beginning with his childhood in Firenze and continuing through a dozen or so early love affairs and a couple of short accounts of the war years. The stories of life on Via de' Magazzini with his parents and grandparents are my favorites.

7. *Metello*, 327pp (1952). This might be my favorite Pratolini novel yet. The story takes place mostly in the years 1890-1902 (in Firenze, needless to say). Although it has some of the "romanzo corale" style of *Il Quartiere* and *Cronaca di poveri amanti*, there is a strong focus on the title character. Metello is a young man who lost his parents early in life, and was raised by relatives. He becomes a "muratore", probably best translated as "bricklayer". The plot revolves mainly around a strike by the poorly paid construction workers, and Metello's love affairs and eventual marriage. His wife Ersilia is a major character, treated by Pratolini in his usual sympathetic way. Highly recommended.

8. *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, 259pp, 1947. This is the most un-Pratolinian of Pratolini's novels. First of all, it isn't set in Firenze, but in a city that must be Torino (if I'm not mistaken, the city is never actually named) in view of the heavy snow. More significantly,

it is a brutal, horrific story that can be briefly summarized thus: We are at the New Year of 1945-6, just after the end of the war. A fascist boy of 16 and a widow of 33, whose husband was executed by partisans, have a sordid sexual affair. At the end the boy kills her by repeatedly impaling her neck on the spikes of an iron gate. The boy, by the way, is the “eroe del nostro tempo”.

The only reasonable interpretation of the novel is the obvious one, namely that Pratolini, who was with the partisans during the war, wrote it as a condemnation of the moral depravity of the fascists. Although this is a worthy goal, and Pratolini certainly drives home the point, it does seem an odd way of going about it. The woman, Virginia, is a pitiable wreck who grew up subservient to her father and subsequently was dominated by her husband. She forgives the boy, Sandrino, every time that he beats her, and assumes the fault must be hers. Sandrino longs for the day when the fascists return to power and he can take part in the extermination of partisans, communists, etc. The two meet because they share a house occupied by five people in all: Virginia, Sandrino and his mother who are in the room next to hers, and a young partisan couple,

J.K. Rowling, 1. *Harry Potter* (3500 pages total). Absolutely fantastic. I never got into Harry Potter in English, but in Italian it's awesome. To me, all of the characters are thoroughly Italian, the English setting notwithstanding. In fact most of them I know only by their Italian names. Great stories, easy to read, and you learn a lot of practical vocabulary concerning witches, dragons and the like. The audiobooks, read by Giorgio Scaramuzzino, are even better. Fabulously entertaining and excellent listening practice. Unfortunately, they only made audiobooks of the first two. When I found this out I was depressed for weeks, and still haven't gotten over it.

1. *La Pietra Filosofale*
2. *La Camera dei Segreti*
3. *Il Prigioniere di Azkaban*
4. *Il Calice del Fuoco*
5. *L'Ordine della Fenice*
6. *Il Principe Mezzo-Sangue*
7. *I Doni della Morte*

8. *Il richiamo del cuocolo* (by Rowling, writing as John Galbraith),...

An entertaining detective story. I was a bit surprised that someone as creative as Rowling would write such a generic “private eye” story, incorporating many standard clichés of the genre. But it doesn't matter; she does it in fine style, and I enjoyed it.

J.D. Salinger, *Il giovane Holden*, 242pp. Translation of “Catcher in the Rye”, with an odd choice of title. I read this out of curiosity, wondering how it could possibly be translated into another language. My first answer was that it doesn't work well in Italian, but subsequently one native Italian fan of Salinger assured me that it does.

Clara Sanchez, 1. *Il profumo delle foglie di limone*. Translated from Spanish. On a beach in Spain, a young, single and adrift pregnant woman is befriended by an elderly Norwegian couple. It turns out (no spoiler alert needed, as you learn this at the start) that

they are ex-Nazis—indeed still Nazis—who worked in the death camps and were personally responsible for many deaths.

Audiobook read by Jenny De Cesarei and Riccardo Rovatti (narrating the points of view of the young woman and an elderly Nazi-hunter, respectively). 12 hours 40 minutes.

2. *Entra nella mia vita*, audiobook 13hr 45min read by Perla Liberatori. Veronica would have grown up with an older sister, but the sister died at birth. Or did she? I won't say more to avoid spoiling it, especially since the author herself has a tendency to give away secrets too soon. An entertaining listen.

3. *Le mille luci del mattino*, 263pp. (2004). A pointless novel, in my view, in which the thoroughly uninteresting protagonist gossips endlessly to the reader about who's cheating on who in the office building where she works.

Giorgio Scerbanenco, *Nebbia sul naviglio, e altri racconti gialli e neri*, 196pp. A collection of dark short stories that originally appeared in serialized form in newspapers between 1936 and 1948. Many of them take place in the U.S., and feature gangsters, G-men and rather contrived “gotcha” endings.

Leonardo Sciascia (1921-1989), 1. *Una storia semplice*, 60pp. (1989). A short-story murder mystery—very short; could easily fit into 30 pages, but strangely (and expensively) sold as a single volume. It's an enjoyable read, although occasionally difficult due to convoluted word order and profligate (even by Italian standards) use of colons.

2. *Il giorno della civetta*, 118pp., 1961. Sometimes described as Sciascia's most famous novel, as a police-story/murder-mystery *Civetta* is of marginal interest: not much mystery, undeveloped characters, no resolution. But it is not so much a detective story as a commentary on the elusive mafia in Sicily, and on corrupt Italian politics in general. Once again (compare e.g. Chevalley in Tomasi's *Il gattopardo*, or the title character of Camilleri's *Il giudice Surra*) we find a northerner, in this instance a police captain from Parma, struggling to cope with Sicilian ways.

3. *A ciascuno il suo*, 151pp. (1966). A well-constructed, well-written murder mystery, but of the dark variety in which the bad guys win in the end. I've never seen the point of such writing myself, but if you like the genre, this is a good one. Audiobook 4hr19min read by Massimo Malucelli. Perhaps it is intended for non-native speakers, but even so much of the reading is at an exasperating slow pace. Malucelli also tries too hard to act the parts of the various characters, with some of the voices simply irritating.

Matilde Serao (1856-1927), 1. *Il paese di cuccagna*, 555pp. (1891). To judge from Serao's novel, today's madness for “Power-Ball” is nothing compared to the obsession of *i napoletani* for the national lottery. One character after another goes first into debt and finally into complete financial ruin, in an irrational quest for the big jackpot. Cesare and Luisa Fragalà are a successful middle-class couple with a beautiful little daughter, Agnesina. But unbeknownst to his wife, Cesare is spending all their savings and more on lottery tickets, until finally they lose their business, their home, everything. Widower don Carlo Cavalcanti, marchese di Formosa, is a rich man of noble birth, with a devoted twenty-year old daughter

Bianca Maria. He too is addicted to the lottery, even enlisting the services of an “assistito”—a kind of psychic-charlatan who specializes in predicting the winning numbers (like any good prophet, the assistito takes the precaution of relating his visions in vague, symbolic terms, avoiding mention of actual numbers). Cavalcanti borrows ever larger sums of money; he sells off family art, heirlooms, and furniture; he blames the Madonna and Jesus Christ for not answering his prayers, and in a fit of anger takes an Ecce Homo (the scourged Christ) statue from the family chapel and dumps it into the well. He is convinced that his pure, virginal daughter must be in direct contact with the Holy Spirit and wakes her up in the middle of the night, badgering her to reveal the winning numbers.

It’s an interesting portrait of a narrow slice of life in late 19th-century Napoli. The main weakness of the novel is that it is too long, and repetitive. Serao hammers on the evil of the lottery over and over and over: enough already, we get it! After almost 500 pages of this (spoiler alert), the novel ends with the long, drawn-out death of Bianca Maria from an undetermined illness. She is in love with the doctor Amati, who is twice her age. Amati first wants to help her and cure her, then wants to marry her too but her father forbids it; in fact, he insists that she should never see Amati again. Bianca Maria is old enough to make her own decisions, but won’t go against her father’s wishes. Only on her deathbed does the marchese finally allow Amati to see her again. But of course it is too late, and she dies.

In sum, despite its excessive length and odd change of direction at the end, I enjoyed it. Recommended.

2. *Il ventre di Napoli*. Part description of the poor side of Napoli, part impassioned political statement in support of the poor napoletani. Of its two parts, I found the first more interesting because of its vivid, detailed descriptions. T

Ignazio Silone (1900-1978). 1. *Vino e pane*, 283pp (1937). Silone is a pseudonym; his real name was Tranquilli. His parents and all but one sibling were killed in the 1915 earthquake, when Silone was 15. The remaining sibling, a brother, was arrested as a communist, imprisoned and tortured by the fascists in 1928, leading to his death four years later. Silone himself went into exile in Switzerland, where he remained until the end of the war.

Overall, I liked the book a lot, setting aside my few reservations given the circumstances in which it was written. It is really three books combined into one.

First there is a kind of suspense story that includes hints of romance and even some humorous bits: The main character Pietro Spina (who represents Silone himself) is an anti-fascist and sometime communist, although, like Silone in real life, he has become disillusioned with the communist party. He returns to Italy from exile abroad, disguising himself as a priest and taking refuge in a remote little village in order to stay one step ahead of the police. That this disguise could have worked is extremely implausible, since (a) the police are actively looking for him in the area; (b) he is a highly atypical priest who never does mass or confessions and talks more like a revolutionary; and (c) thanks to the constant gossiping of the villagers, everyone for miles around knows of this strange priest who appeared out of nowhere. But I’m happy to accept it because it makes a great story, with a number of humorous incidents involving the ignorance and absurd superstitions of the villagers (several scenes made me laugh out loud, for instance the one in which the village “maestra” attempts to convince them that Mussolini’s Italy is the envy of the rest of the world).

At the same time (“book 2”), *Vino e pane* is a political tract, in which various characters at times serve as mouthpieces for the views of the author. I’m sympathetic to Silone’s views on politics and religion, and needless to say the political side was deadly serious at the time, both in general and for Silone personally. Still, toward the end of the book some of the monologues go on for so long that the action of “book 1” slows to a crawl—which is too bad, since “book 1” is a great story in itself.

The final short chapter constitutes the third part of the book. I don’t want to reveal the ending here, other than to say that it includes a cheap shot of a kind that I always find disappointing: a superfluous tragedy that has little to do with the rest of the story, and therefore detracts from it.

Overall, however, I highly recommend *Vino e pane*. As a bonus, it has a very high percentage of dialog, which always makes for an easier read.

2. *Fontamara*, 166pp, (1933). This was Silone’s first novel, written around 1930 and first published in German in Switzerland in 1933, after which it had a major impact worldwide. For evident political reasons, it was not published in Italy until 1947; oddly, no Italian language edition at all was published until then. The circumstances that led to Silone’s becoming an author are quite fascinating; see e.g. the references below under “Il caso Silone”. Very similar in style and spirit to *Vino e Pane* (which came later), *Fontamara* can be regarded as primarily a political statement: against fascism to be sure, but more generally against the exploitation of the poor and weak by the rich and powerful. What makes it work is Silone’s vivid, sympathetic portrait of the “cafoni”, the poorest of the poor in rural Abruzzo.

As in *Vino e pane*, there are some holes in the plot. For example, it hardly seems credible that the police would even for a minute believe Berardo’s (false) confession that he’s the one who’s been distributing anti-fascist newspapers. But again as in *Vino e pane*, it doesn’t matter; the plot is almost beside the point and what matters is the message. I found it quite powerful and moving, as well as entertaining (Silone has a sly sense of humor).

3. *Uscita di sicurezza*, 239pp. (1965). This is a collection of essays and autobiographical stories, many of them written much earlier. The interesting political essays include:

Uscita di sicurezza, 58pp. (1949). Silone relates what led him to leave the communist party. The beginning of the end transpired at a meeting in Moscow in 1927, at which the assembled delegates were asked to condemn an article by Trotsky—even though no one, apart from Stalin and some of the other Russians present, had even read it. It’s a fascinating and chilling story. Early on, however, Silone includes a characteristically humorous anecdote from his childhood, involving a puppet show, a priest, and the devil.

Situazione degli ex, 11pp. (1942). “ex” refers to ex-communists. Written during Silone’s exile in Switzerland.

There are also a number of Silone’s wonderful stories (apparently autobiographical) about life in Abruzzo circa 1915, many of which have a moral to offer. *Incontro con uno strano prete* relates how Silone was influenced at a critical stage of his youth by don Orione, the “strange priest” of the title. (Orione was a well-known advocate for orphans and the poor, eventually

made a saint.) *Visita al carcere* is a simple, beautiful tale on the theme of human dignity and respect for all. *La chioma di Guidita* reads a little more like fiction, in my estimation, but it certainly could be true and in any case provides another fascinating glimpse into life among the poor *contadini* of early 20th century Abruzzo. The title of *Polikusc'ka* refers to a tragic Tolstoy story that the young Silone reads to the *vecchi* of the *lega dei contadini*; in the end Silone the writer brings it back to his experience in Russia.

4. *Il segreto di Luca*, 135pp (1956). Luca was sentenced to life in prison for a murder he did not commit. Forty years later he is exonerated, thanks to the confession of the real culprit. The *segreto* is that Luca made no effort to defend himself at trial, refusing to even give an alibi. Why? It could be a great mystery novel, and indeed is interesting for a while. But there is no great revelation at the end, only a monumental anti-climax. You can see it coming a mile away, and doesn't ring true. Not nearly as good as items 1-3 above.

Il caso Silone. Beginning in 1998, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali discovered documents in the archives of the "Ovra" (the fascist police) which, they claim, show that Ignazio Silone was an informer for Ovra throughout the 1920's. The first I heard about it was in Dario Biocca's *Silone: la doppia vita di un italiano*, a fascinating biography that I took it more or less at face value, since Biocca appeared to be a rational person with no particular axe to grind. But the accusation ignited a firestorm in Italy and even around the world. Arguments rebutting Biocca's claims can be found in:

1. *Processo a Silone: La disavventura di un povero cristiano* (2001), by Giuseppe Tamburrano, Gianna Granati and Alfonso Insinelli (the title is an allusion to Silone's *L'avventura di un povero cristiano*).

2. *Silone, la libertà* (2007), edited by Aldo Forbice. This is a collection of papers on Silone, among which I'll point out:

Sergio Soave, *Le ragioni che "possono aspettare"*

Giuseppe Tamburrano, *I fatti, gli errori, l'abbaglio dei media* Yukari Saito, *La presunta doppietta della vita vissuta* Francesco Sidoti, *Un "caso" che doveva neppure essere aperto.*

By now I've seen enough to have a more definite opinion. First of all, the evidence for the Silone-as-spy theory is at best very thin indeed, and yet Biocca and Canali present it as though it were conclusive. That fact alone is enough to destroy their credibility. Second, Silone's life and work—that is, as known prior to 1998—is so completely contradictory to that of a fascist informer that the theory just makes no sense; it as though Martin Luther King were accused of being an informer for the Ku Klux Klan. That doesn't make it impossible, of course, but the evidence for such an accusation would have to be overwhelming. Here, it is quite the opposite. In fact, according to Tamburrani and others, much of the evidence claimed by Biocca-Canali is non-existent, erroneous, or fabricated. And what would have been Silone's motive? Here Biocca sinks to the level of insinuating, based on nothing but speculation, a homosexual relationship between Silone and a high-ranking Ovra official named Bellone, and to questioning Silone's mental health.

That Silone knew Bellone, corresponded with him around 1928-30, and even provided some information to the police, is not in dispute. But at the time his brother was in a fascist prison, falsely accused of complicity in the Milan bombings. He was being badly beaten in

prison, and eventually died from his injuries in 1931. So it is not surprising that Silone, who had already lost the rest of his family (his mother died in the Abruzzo earthquake of 1915), would take desperate measures to aid his brother. In any case, who among us is in a position to judge him on that score? But Biocca maintains that Silone's career as an informer began in 1919 and continued through the 20's.

Compounding the injustice, the media reacted by simply passing along the Biocca-Canali allegations unchallenged. After all, Silone as fascist informer makes a great story, and sells newspapers. Even today, if you search the internet you'll find a number of websites (Wikipedia, for example) that regurgitate—the word is apt—Biocca's version of the story without further comment, as though Silone's guilt was a universally accepted fact, proved beyond a reasonable doubt. Now, I can't and don't claim to be an expert on the matter, and certainly don't intend that one should accept e.g. Tamburrani's analysis unchallenged either. But there is one part of Tamburrani's argument (see *Processo a Silone*) that anyone can easily verify for themselves, by simply reading Silone's work and the story of his life: To believe the allegations entails believing a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story of monstrous proportions. And therefore overwhelming evidence is needed to believe it. Until I have seen such evidence myself, I remain on the side of the Silone supporters.

Georges Simenon (1903-1989), 1. *Il porto delle nebbie*, audiobook 4hr 53min, read by Giuseppe Battiston. This is an Inspector Maigret, or rather commissario Maigret, mystery (Simenon wrote an astonishing 75 novels and 28 short stories featuring Maigret). Entertaining detective tale with great reading by Battiston.

2. *Il cane giallo*, audiobook 4hrs 2 min. The same series. Entertaining.

3. *La ballerina del Gai-Moulin* audiobook 3hrs 40min. Simenon's denouements are always very contrived, and this story is no exception. But the journey to get there is entertaining, with the usual great reading by Battiston.

4. *La balera da due soldi* audiobook 3hrs 54min. More of the same.

Graeme Simsion, *L'amore è un difetto meraviglioso* 299 pp., 2013. A translation of "The Rosie Project" by Australian writer Simsion. A light and entertaining romantic comedy that reads like a screenplay more than a novel (I'll be surprised if it doesn't get made into a movie). Apparently it's already a hit in Italy—well, at least according to the publisher, Longanesi. Translations from English are usually much easier to read, whether lightweight or not, and hence—heretical though it may seem to some—I enjoy the change of pace.

Mario Soldati, *La finestra* 130pp (1950). [As with many of the older books in these reviews, this is an old copy with small pages and large print, obtained from the University of Washington library. It is a very short novel, a genre that seems to have been quite popular in Italy.]

Natalia Ginzburg thought this story worthy of an eight-page *prefazione*, in which she describes it as "uno dei racconti più belli di Mario Soldati". To me, the characters are not at all convincing, especially the women (as is often the case in novels by Italian men of Soldati's generation). The plot involves enough of a mystery to keep one reading: Whatever happened to Gino, the lover of "Twinkle"? He disappeared, literally out the window of her London

flat, twenty years ago. But it all seems too manufactured and artificial, and ultimately a disappointment. Ginzburg, on the other hand, obviously felt differently.

Stendhal (pen-name of Marie-Henri Beyle), 1783-1842), *La certosa di Parma*, 448pp (1838), audiobook 17hr57min read by Silvia Cecchini. The word “certosa” is translated as “charterhouse”, meaning a kind of monastery. But you won’t see anything resembling a monastery until the end. The novel is said to have been written over a period of 58 days, which if true would certainly explain the occasional weak plot devices and (if I’m not mistaken) slight inconsistencies in the stated ages of the characters. In any case, it is a great novel. The reason I’ve given it only two stars in my zero-to-three star system is that I found the ending to be very unsatisfying.

It is the story of the life of Fabrizio del Dongo, from the Napoleonic wars against the Austrians in northern Italy, to a period of endless intrigues in the court of the prince of Parma. Stendhal was in Napoleon’s army (in Russia, for instance) and later lived for many years in Italy as a diplomat, so he writes from first-hand experience. The central relationship of the novel is the close friendship between Fabrizio and his aunt Gina, about fourteen years his senior. As Fabrizio becomes a young man, Gina falls in love with him. Although he considers Gina his closest friend, Fabrizio does not return her romantic feelings. His love life consists of an unending series of dalliances with actresses, singers, their servant girls, etc., in which Fabrizio imagines himself “in love”. In the second half of the novel he finally finds true love with the daughter of the governor of the fortress in which he is imprisoned. From a 21st century standpoint it is a ridiculous love-at-first-sight that goes on even though the two really don’t even know one another. But in a 19th-century novel, you have to accept this kind of thing.

It works best as a romantic thriller, with intrigues, daring escapes from prison, love affairs, and a host of fascinating characters—Gina being at the top of the list, in my view. Highly recommended; decide for yourself about the ending.

Italo Svevo (1861-1928), *La coscienza di Zeno* 413pp. (1923), audiobook 16hr43min read by Moro Silo. I only listened to the audiobook; didn’t read the book itself. I found it very, very boring and can’t imagine why some consider it a great work. For me, the main problem is that the narrator Zeno is just not a very interesting person. I only listened to the end because Silo’s reading is excellent, it makes good practice, and every once in a while an interesting passage pops up.

Antonio Tabucchi, *Sostiene Pereira*, audiobook 4hrs 23min (the book was written in 1994) read by Sergio Rubini. Pereira is a widowed journalist for a minor newspaper in Lisbon, in 1938 during the Salazar dictatorship. He talks to a portrait of his deceased wife, and apart from writing his weekly column, has largely withdrawn from life—until he crosses paths with two young revolutionaries. The story develops very slowly, but by its dramatic conclusion I was thoroughly engrossed in it. A thought-provoking work that I’ll probably listen to again.

On a stylistic note, I should mention that the phrase “sostiene Pereira” or “Pereira sostiene” is used hundreds of times throughout: “Pereira sostiene che Monteiro Rossi ordinò un’altra birra”, “Quel pomereggio, sostiene Pereira, fece un sogno” etc. etc. I was a bit

put off by this device initially, but the more you listen or read, the more you find that—in some surprising way—it works. For non-native speakers listening to the audiobook, it has an unintended benefit, providing a momentary pause that gives you a chance to catch up if things have been moving too fast. In any case, I highly recommend it.

Giuseppe Tamburrano, Gianna Granati, and Alfonso Isinelli, *Processo a Silone: La disavventura di un povero cristiano*, 160pp (2001). See the discussion of “il caso Silone” under Silone above.

Tiziano Terzani 1938-2004. 1. *La fine è il mio Inizio: un padre racconta al figlio il grande viaggio della vita*, 466pp. Audiobook 14 hours, read by Edoardo Siravo. Terzani was born in Firenze in 1938 and spent thirty years as a journalist in Vietnam, Cambodia, China and other parts of Asia. He died of stomach cancer in 2004. This fascinating and ultimately moving book (audiobook highly recommended) consists of an extended series of interviews/conversations between Terzani and his son, not long before Terzani’s death.

2. *Un altro giro di giostra*, audiobook 23 hrs. You can get the book too of course, but I highly recommend the audiobook, again read by Edoardo Siravo. Siravo is a great reader; often I found myself forgetting that he and not Terzani himself was telling the story. This is the last book written by Terzani, an account of his attempts to deal with cancer through both “Western” science and “Eastern” alternatives, the latter mainly in India but also in Thailand and the Philippines. Fascinating, provocative, inspiring.

In both books Terzani has much to say about America, little of it favorable. I agree with most of his criticisms, especially when it comes to foreign policy and the American brand of materialism. Indeed I would add another item, namely the deep-rooted and uniquely American anti-intellectualism that makes a virtue out of ignorance and views with deep suspicion any form of critical thinking.

On the other hand, he uses much too broad a brush in his depiction of “gli americani” themselves, making sweeping generalizations based on very limited experience. As a young man he spent two years at Columbia University, and toward the end of his life returned to New York City for cancer treatment at Sloan-Kettering. As far as I can determine, his only other experience of America consists of (i) a few weeks at a holistic health institution north of San Francisco, for people with terminal diseases, and (ii) a brief stop in my home town of Seattle during the same period. He comments on the unhappiness of the American people, and in particular implies that a woman who has a career and works out at the gym can’t be a happy person. His opinion of Seattle and the Northwest (specifically, Lummi Island near Bellingham) seems to be based entirely on (i) the homeless people he saw downtown; (ii) the fact that everyone (everyone?) on Lummi Island drives a pickup truck; and (iii) Bill Gates. Whether item (iii) is regarded as a plus or a minus isn’t clear, but I suspect the latter.

Of course, these comments of mine are also oversimplified and perhaps unfair to Terzani. In any case, I find what he has to say interesting even when I disagree with him, and overall I find Terzani to be an amazing, inspiring person.

3. *Lettere contro la guerra*, 181pp (2002). A series of letters written after 9/11 and before the invasion of Iraq, “la guerra” in this case being the war in Afghanistan. They should be required reading in the U.S. (the book has been translated into English).

4. *Un indovino mi disse*, 429pp (1995). In 1976 a fortune-teller in Hong Kong warned Terzani that he was at great risk of dying in 1993 and absolutely should not fly. When the fateful year arrived, Terzani decided to use the prophecy as an excuse to avoid air travel. Most of the book recounts his travels by train, car, boat etc. in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Toward the end there is a rather abbreviated account of his return to Europe via Mongolia and the trans-Siberian railway, then back to Thailand and Burma by boat.

As usual, Terzani's observations on culture and politics are fascinating. He also made a point of consulting fortune-tellers, astrologers, palm-readers, card-readers, tea-leaf readers and the like everywhere he went, and although these episodes are interesting for a while, they soon become tediously repetitive. Terzani was of course well aware of the absurdity of the enterprise, and it's surprising that he had the patience to listen to the same nonsense over and over again. Several of the fortune-tellers prophesied that he would live to be 85 or more. They were, sadly, wrong by twenty years.

5. *Buona notte, Signor Lenin*, 413 pp. (1992). At the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, Terzani happened to be in Siberia visiting (among other places) the island of Sakhalin. He thereupon embarked on a journey from Siberia to Moscow via Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, to see for himself what was happening in the newly independent republics. A fascinating, albeit often depressing, first-hand account of events.

6. *La porta proibita*, 270pp. (originally published in 1984, there is a 1998 edition as well). Terzani lived in China for about four years beginning in 1980 (with his family, apparently, at least for most of that time). In this book he reports firsthand on the devastation wrought by the communist government and especially the so-called "Cultural Revolution", with an emphasis on the destruction and/or elimination of the traditional culture. It is another remarkable piece of reporting from Terzani, one of his best. I do wish he had written more about his own personal experiences, and about his family. But at least there is a chapter written by his children on their experiences in the communist schools, and a final chapter describing Terzani's arrest and "re-education" before being expelled.

7. *Pelle di leopardo*, 169pp. Terzani's reports from Vietnam in 1972. This Longanesi edition was published in 2000, combined with "Giai Phong!", to be reviewed later. It includes a preface written by Terzani for the 2000 edition. Fascinating and, for those of us who lived through the Vietnam war era in the United States, very sad. The title "Skin of the leopard" refers to the appearance of contemporary maps indicating which areas were controlled by the Vietcong and which by Thieu's government.

8. *Giai phong!* 272pp. The title means "liberation". Includes a gripping account of the fall of the Thieu et. al. dictatorship and the evacuation of Saigon in 1975 (again, Terzani was an eyewitness), i.e. of the liberation of Saigon in the eyes of many. There was no bloodbath in Saigon as predicted by American propaganda—on the contrary, there was an unprecedented spirit of conciliation and forgiveness, and for many the hope of a new, more just society. On subsequent visits beginning in 1976, however, Terzani was rapidly disillusioned and then disgusted to find that the revolutionaries had merely replaced one repressive dictatorship

with another. He wrote about this too, and was soon declared *persona non grata* and refused entry into the country.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), *Anna Karenina*, 949pp., audiobook 37hr27min read by Silvia Cecchini. Many critics consider *Anna Karenina* the greatest novel of all time. I wouldn't know about that, but there is no doubt that it is a great novel.

The most widely known version of the plot may be summarized as follows: Anna is unhappily married to Karenin, with whom she has a nine year-old son. She meets Count Vronsky, a dashing cavalry officer, and they fall in love. Their passionate affair is doomed from the start, and in the end Anna commits suicide by throwing herself under a train.

But this is only part of the story. The other most important part follows the life of Levin, an aristocrat who has for the most part abandoned the high society of Moscow, and lives in the country managing a farm. Levin is in love with a young debutante named Kitty. His awkward attempt at courtship doesn't go well, and for hundreds of pages the reader is left hanging as to whether they will finally get together or not. (The novel was published in serial form over a period of several years.) Suffice it to say that this track of the story has a happy ending.

The two stories are interwoven in two principal ways. First, Kitty is the youngest sister of Dolly, who is married to Oblonsky, who is Anna's brother and a friend of Levin. Second, Kitty's initial refusal of Levin is a result of her infatuation with Vronsky, who she mistakenly believes is about to propose to her. (I use the nicknames "Kitty" and "Dolly" because this is how they are most often referred to in the book, even in the Italian.) The novel's title notwithstanding, the story of Levin is at least as important as that of Anna. In fact Anna dies at the end of the seventh of the book's eight parts, and is only briefly mentioned in Part Eight (for which see below). Moreover, Levin is standing in for Tolstoy himself. He gives voice to many of Tolstoy's political and religious view at the time, and even some details of his story are taken from Tolstoy's life—for example, Levin's ill-advised decision to show Kitty his diary, which contains details of previous liaisons with peasant women. Tolstoy did the same with his wife Sophia.

A substantial fraction of the novel is taken up by discussions of politics, philosophy and religion. The discussion is often surprisingly modern in character, including open debate about democracy, socialism, women's liberation, evolution and the role of the church. This reflects the relatively liberal reign of Czar Alexander II. Some of it is interesting, although there are also some tedious chapters on local politics and agricultural policy that I skimmed through (topics that were no doubt of greater interest to Russian readers at the time).

The great strength of Tolstoy's writing is his sensitive, insightful treatment of a wide variety of characters: male and female, old and young, adults and children, aristocrats and peasants. There is no character in the novel who is all good or all bad; all are realistically portrayed as simply human—some with more faults than others, some with less, but there are no saints and no evil caricatures. Personalities change, but only after the context for change has been carefully developed. Kitty is transformed from a rather empty-headed adolescent, interested mainly in the next ball and her naive view of romance, into a mature, thoughtful young woman who sacrifices her own personal comfort to care for Levin's dying younger brother. Tolstoy lays the groundwork for this transformation earlier: During a stay at a spa in Germany (ostensibly to recover from an illness, although in fact to mend a broken heart)

Kitty is profoundly influenced by the saintly Varenka and her selfless devotion to the ill and unfortunate.

Minor characters come to life through vivid scenes of everyday life; Levin's old governess Agafja is one of my favorites. It's obvious that Tolstoy spent a lot of time around small children (he and Sophia in fact had thirteen children, eight surviving to adulthood), as is illustrated by a charming early scene in which several of the Oblonsky's young children clamor for the attention of their Aunt Anna.

For a modern reader, the setting in 1870's Russia (mostly Moscow, St. Petersburg, and in the country) is of interest in itself. Electric lights had just been invented, and being very rare are a topic of discussion. Karenin is a subject of derision because he doesn't challenge Vronsky to a duel. During a game of lawn tennis at Vronsky's summer estate, a male participant removes his jacket, but only after first getting permission from the ladies present. Little details like these can be fascinating. On the other hand, just one chapter about bird-hunting in the marshes would have been more than enough for me. Still, one can skim past the dull parts.

In the final Part Eight, only one chapter refers to Anna's death. Part 8 has instead two main themes, the first of which is of considerable historical interest, but is not particularly relevant to the main plot. The first theme is a war between the Serbs and the Turks that was taking place at the time Tolstoy was writing. Although Russia did not formally join the fray, many Russian volunteers went to the aid of (as they saw it) their Slavic brothers. Although Tolstoy contrives a connection between these events and several main characters, e.g. Vronsky and Levin's older brother Sergej, it is clear that his main purpose is to make a statement against Russian involvement in the war and against war in general. In fact his editor apparently refused to publish Part Eight in the original serial edition of the novel, and it only appeared in a later version.

The second theme is Levin's reflections on the meaning of life, and in particular his coming to terms with Christian faith. Tolstoy himself detested the church, which he regarded (as do many others) as antithetical to the teachings of Christ related in the gospels. The problem for Levin is to formulate and maintain his own, primarily moral, Christian beliefs, and at the same time accept or at least coexist with the more traditional faith of Kitty, her family and others close to him. It might seem an odd, puzzling way to end the novel, disjoint as it is from the tragic fate of the title character. Yet it grew on me, to the point that in retrospect it seemed the perfect ending, especially in the way that Tolstoy blends philosophical speculation with the simple realities of everyday life: Kitty and Levin giving their infant son a bath; Kitty reminding Levin to get the guest room ready for his brother. It's a beautiful novel.

The audiobook is excellent too, as read by Cecchini. Its only drawback is that some imbecile decided that there should be music between chapters. This might seem harmless enough, until you realize that (a) it is about thirty seconds of music each time, and within each part it is the same music; and (b) there are 216 chapters in all. If you do the math, you'll see this means that the music, which in any case serves no purpose whatsoever, occupies about an hour and fifty minutes. Unbelievable.

One final note: The translation I read is by Claudia Zonghetti, in an Einaudi 2016 edition of the novel. As far as I can judge, it seems an excellent translation. It is interesting to

compare it with the translation used in the audiobook; the two differ considerably.

Raleigh Trevelyan (editor), *Parallel Text Italian Short Stories*, 183pp. (including notes). A set of eight short stories by eight different, well-known mid-20th century authors. My favorites are the delightful *Lo sgombero* by Vasco Pratolini, and the haunting *I passi sulla neve* by Mario Soldati. I hope to review some of these stories individually. The danger of the parallel text format is that you're tempted to be lazy and constantly look over at the English side instead of sorting out the difficult bits yourself. But as long as you resist overdoing it, it's interesting to see the translations by various experts. The notes are helpful too, assuming you are not already fluent in such things as "Ligurian fisherman's dialect".

Laura Trossarelli, *Eglantine*, 342pp (2008). Trossarelli, who passed away in 2014, taught high school in the Pinerolo region southwest of Torino, and published a number of novels. This one follows the life of the title character, starting when she is a young girl during the second world war, and continuing up to the present day. The first few pages grabbed me, and I continued to enjoy it for a while, but about midway through I began to lose interest. One episode, often tragic, follows another, and there are many interesting characters—yet somehow it doesn't hang together to form a coherent whole. Some people love the book, however, and I recommend giving it a try.

There is one fascinating historical feature of the book that surprised me (here I display my ignorance). It takes place mainly in the Val di Pellice, a mountainous valley just to the west of Pinerolo (Trossarelli was born in Torre Pellice, the principal town). A central drama of the novel is that Eglantine's mother is bitterly opposed to her marrying a certain Franco because "he's catholic". I was visiting the region at the time, and was equally puzzled by street signs indicating a "Chiesa cattolica". Is this not redundant in Italy? Well, it turns out that this is the one region of Italy with a substantial Protestant population, who call themselves the "Valdesi". The Valdesi are frequently mentioned in the novel and in the local tourist literature, but I didn't make the connection that this is the same group known in English as the Waldensians. The Valdesi were denounced as heretics in medieval times and later joined the Protestant reformation. Many of them fled to neighboring countries to avoid persecution, but eventually returned.

Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), *Padri e figli*, 159pp (1862), audiobook 6hr39min read by Silvia Cecchini.

Nicola Kirsanow, a modestly wealthy landowner, lost his beloved wife Mascia twelve years ago. They had a son, Arcadio, who has just returned from university in St. Petersburg for the summer and brought with him a friend, Basarow. Basarow is self-described nihilist, whose central belief is to negate everything. Arcadio also claims to be a nihilist, although one can see that his heart isn't in it. The negative, disrespectful attitude of Basarow creates conflict with Nicola and even more so with Nicola's conservative brother Paolo. The youth of today have no respect for their elders. Things were so much better in the good old days.

Nicola and a young servant, Fenicka, fell in love some time ago and now have a one-year old son. But they are not married. Arcadio thinks he is in love with the Signora Odinzow, an "older woman" who is all of 27, and takes some time to realize that her younger sister Caterina is a much better match. Basarow too is in love with Signora Odinzow, hard though it is for a nihilist to admit to succumbing to such a frivolous bourgeois emotion.

Meanwhile Basarow's parents, Vassili and Ariscia, haven't seen him in three years and miss him terribly. They are overjoyed when he returns home for a visit, then devastated when he leaves again after just three days. A touching scene ensues:

“Ci ha abbandonati!” balbettò [Vassili]; “ci ha abbandonati; si annoiava qui con noi. Solo adesso, eccomi solo!” ripeté più volte.

Allora gli si accostò Ariscia, e chinando la bianca testa sulla bianca testa di lui, disse:

“Che ci vuoi fare, Vassili! ...Io sola per te non cambierò mai, come tu per la tua povera vecchia.”

Vassili si tolse le mani dal viso e abbracciò la moglie, l'amica sua, così forte come nemmeno in gioventù l'aveva abbracciata: ella lo aveva consolato nel momento del dolore.

Although the story does not end well for Basarow and his parents, there is a surprising “happily-ever-after” ending for Nicola, Fenicka, Arcadio and Caterina. All in all, an interesting portrait of mid-19th century Russia. Recommended.

Fred Uhlman (1901-1985), 1. *L'amico ritrovato*, 92pp (1971). Uhlman was a German of Jewish descent (born in Stuttgart), who fled Germany shortly after Hitler's rise to power and eventually settled in England as an artist. (To say he “settled” there is misleading to say the least; see the next review.) Originally written in English with the title *Reunion*, this novella went almost unnoticed for six years after publication, then was republished to great international acclaim. Although it came highly recommended by my Italian teacher, for a time I resisted the idea of reading an Italian translation of a novel that was originally in English by a writer whose native language was German. Finally I ordered it, and in the introduction by Arthur Koestler found the following remarkable evaluation (I'm translating back into English from the Italian version): “There is nothing of Wagnerian fury here; indeed, it is as though Mozart had rewritten *The Twilight of the Gods*.”

That image was impossible to resist. I started to read, and could not put it down. Let me say only that it is the story of a friendship between two high-school boys in Stuttgart, one Jewish and the other from the German aristocracy. To say more risks spoiling it. It is an amazing piece of work, a masterpiece in miniature.

2. *Storia di un uomo*, 209pp. (1960). A fascinating autobiography. Uhlman left Germany just in time, went to Paris and took up painting. Evidently he had remarkable natural talent, as his work was well-received by critics and by the public. For a time he was also involved in the tropical fish business. While visiting a friend in Spain, just at the start of the civil war, he fell in love with a British woman, moved to England and married her (much to the consternation of her upper-crust British family). Early in the war, just a week before the birth of his first child, he was arrested and interned on the Isle of Man with hundreds of other German ex-patriates, including so many Oxford and Cambridge professors that one had to choose among various interesting evening lectures.

The pace and emphasis of the writing is a little odd, and especially in the latter parts of the book the story drags at times. In fact in many ways the most interesting part is Uhlman's description of his university days, including the frequent duels (with real swords) between rival fraternity-like organizations. Strangely, Uhlman says very little about the deaths of his parents and sister in the Nazi concentration camps, and what he does say I found rather

disturbing, in the sense that it doesn't reflect at all well on him. But he is certainly to be commended for honesty, and in any case, given the horrible circumstances, none of us is in a position to judge. Highly recommended.

Mariolina Venezia, *Mille anni che sto qui*, audiobook 7hr22min read by Anna Bonaiuto. Although entertaining enough as an audiobook, the novel tries to do too much in a short time. It follows several generations in Puglia beginning around 1860 and ending around 1990. The book must be roughly 200 pages, and that just isn't enough to do justice to a multi-generational family saga.

Giovanni Verga (1840-1922). *Note*: The first two items are two of my favorite Italian novels. I would like to have written longer reviews, but...so many books, so little time...

1. *I Malavoglia*, 212pp (1881). Audiobook 9hr 21min, read by Giancarlo Previati. "I Malavoglia" are a family of poor Sicilian fishermen. The story is set in the 1860's, beginning just after the unification of Italy, and is told almost entirely through dialogue. Although it's a sad tale, some of the dialogue is quite amusing. In particular one learns a wide variety of interesting curses, such as "sangue di un cane!" and "corpo della Madonna!". I'll mention just one of several serious themes: how contact with the wider world beyond Sicily leads to rising expectations and discontent. The patriarch of the family, padron 'Ntoni, is content to continue the old ways, provide for the family and (he hopes) die in the same house he was born in. His eldest grandson, on the other hand, is drafted into the armed forces of the new Italy, and learns there is more to life than their little fishing village. There are people out there in the Big City who don't scrape out a living through hard labor, like the Malavoglia. Highly recommended.

2. *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, 481pp (1889). This is the second of a five-volume work planned by Verga (I Malavoglia being the first). He started but never finished the third book. The main theme is implicit in the title: A "don" is a wealthy landowner, while a "mastro" is a skilled worker. Mastro-don Gesualdo is a self-made man, who becomes wealthy through his own hard work and for that reason is scorned by the titled quasi-nobility who were born into it. Nevertheless, out of desperation, one of the blue-blood families contrives a marriage between Gesualdo and one of their daughters. Again Verga displays his virtuosity as a writer of dialogue (the scene at the opera house is one of many terrific scenes). It's a shame that Verga was unable to complete the series.

The first English translation of *Mastro-don Gesualdo* was by D.H. Lawrence. Highly recommended.

3. *Cavalleria rusticana e altre novelle*, 320pp, *Novelle scelte* audiobook 3hr 25min read by Claudio Carini. There are 23 short stories in the book and 9 in the audiobook, with some overlap. Many of them are "verismo" tales that foreshadow *I malavoglia* and *Mastro-don Gesualdo*. The protagonist of "La roba", for example, is in clearly an early sketch of Mastro-don Gesualdo. At 27 pages he longest of the tales, "Nedda" is typical in its grim depiction of the realities of life for the *vinti*, the defeated, in mid-19th century Sicily: Young Nedda barely scrapes by from day to day, with practically no family left besides her ailing mother and an uncle. Her mother dies. She falls in love and her lover dies. But of course

she is pregnant and as an unmarried mother becomes an outcast. Her baby dies, and the story ends with:

“Oh! benedette voi che siete morte!” esclamò. “Oh benedetta voi, Vergine Santa! che mi avete tolto la mia creatura per non farla soffrire come me!”

(“Oh! Blessed you are to be dead!” she exclaimed. “Oh blessed are you, Holy Virgin, to have taken my little one so that he won’t suffer like me!”)

In a somewhat different vein is “Libertà”, a sobering (to put it mildly) fictionalized account of a small but bloody uprising in Sicily during Garibaldi’s “spedizione dei mille” in 1860, and its violent suppression. The actual event is known as the “massacro di Bronte”, and it’s hard to judge to what extent Verga’s depiction is historically accurate. He seems to favor the side of Generale Nino Bixio and his troops (who suppressed the uprising), and if his account of the facts is correct one would be hard-pressed to disagree with him. Other works such as *I malavoglia* and *Nedda* appear to show a greater sympathy for the downtrodden poor, despite the detached *verismo* style.

Finally, opera fans will certainly want to read “Cavalleria rusticana”, or “Rustic chivalry”, on which the libretto for Mascagni’s opera was based. It’s not much to base an opera on: a seven page story of adultery and revenge. But Mascagni’s music is good, and it was his one big hit.

Jules Verne, *Il giro del mondo in 80 giorni*, abbreviated version for kids (originally in French), 95 double-spaced pages, probably equivalent to about 40 real pages, with audiobook. I thought I was ordering the actual book and ended up with this short version. In any case, it’s good for a short and easy read/listen. But what exactly is the problem with these illustrators? The cover shows Phineas Fogg and co. crossing the alps in a balloon, but this episode isn’t even mentioned in the abbreviated text.

Sandro Veronesi, *Caos calmo*, audiobook 15 hrs 27 min. Although it begins with an interesting premise, this is easily one of the most boring, pointless novels I’ve ever had the misfortune to read/listen to. I continued to the bitter end only for the Italian listening practice and out of a morbid curiosity to see whether the climax at least might be enlightening. It isn’t.

Much space is taken up by the reflections of the main character and narrator Pietro, whose thoughts are, in the main, of no interest whatever. There is a tedious sub-plot involving a merger of large corporations that becomes increasingly predominant as the story wears on, including superfluous references to Nazis stealing gold from the Jews, none of which have anything to do with the story or indeed with anything at all, and concluding with an interminable, mind-numbingly boring scene between Pietro and one of the corporate bigwigs, complete with utterly contrived metaphors involving the Holy Trinity.

I forgot to mention that the basic premise is that Pietro’s wife is killed in an accident while he’s off at the beach saving a woman from drowning, and that he subsequently decides to stay in his car all day in the parking lot while his ten-year old daughter, Claudia, is at school. But it’s easy to forget this, because for most of the novel Pietro gives little thought to his daughter and none at all to his dead wife, although he does find the time to smoke opium with his annoying brother while Claudia is asleep in the next room, says the word “Mercedes” so many times that it must be a paid product-placement, and especially enjoys

talking about his erections (while saving the drowning woman, for instance, and later in a long and ludicrous pornographic scene with the same woman, with Claudia again sleeping nearby).

It defies belief that Veronesi received the Premio Strega for this frightfully dull, idiotic mess of a novel. And I am not alone in this opinion, as can be seen from the online reviews by Italian readers at ibs.it. However, I did get one interesting thing from *Caos Calmo*, a delightful palindrome that Claudia learns at school: *I topi non avevano nipoti*.

Marcho Vichi, *Morte a Firenze*, audiobook 11hr6min read by Lorenzo Degl’Innocenti. For most of its length *Morte a Firenze* is a good police-detective thriller, although a bit slow and with too much gory detail for my taste. Unfortunately, perhaps imagining himself a clever writer, Vichi has the bad guys win in a shocking, brutal ending. Ha ha! Fooled ya! What a crock. Furthermore, the ending is contrived by having the detective behave in ridiculous, ludicrously implausible ways. The bottom line: Avoid at all costs anything written by Vichi.

Renata Viganò (1900-1976), 1. *L’Agnese va a morire*, 228pp (1949). A moving, tragic-but-heroic tale of a simple, poor *contadina*—L’Agnese—who gets involved with a group of partisans fighting the Nazis. Viganò was a partisan herself, and wrote a short article (included in the 1994 Einaudi edition) “La storia di Agnese non è una fantasia”, in which she describes an example of the real women the story was based on. See also *La mia guerra partigiana* in the next review, in which Viganó says

L’Agnese è la sintesi, la rappresentante di tutte le donne che sono partite da una loro semplice chiusa vita di lavoro duro e di famiglia povera per aprirsi un varco dopo l’altro nel pensiero ristretto a piccole cose, per trovarsi nella folla che ha costruito la strada della libertà.

“Agnese is the synthesis, the representative, of all the women who left behind a simple, closed life of hard work and poverty to open up one passage after another out of their narrow-minded, mundane thinking, to find themselves among the throng that built the road to freedom.” [Not a great translation, but the best I can come up with at the moment.]

I found the novel gripping, suspenseful and emotionally draining, and beyond a certain point I couldn’t put it down and had to read through to the end.

L’Agnese is a woman of great character and courage, held in the highest esteem by the male partisans. She is also middle-aged and fat. That these qualities should coexist in a woman ought not to be remarkable, yet in the light of my experience with Italian literature to date, the fact appears as a startling novelty. And a welcome one.

The partisans express much bitterness toward the allied forces, for two reasons: On the one hand, the allies promise they will arrive soon and that the partisans should carry on to the utmost the battle against the Germans and fascists. Yet help seems never to arrive. On the other hand, allied bombings and shelling continue apace, indiscriminately destroying civilian homes and lives while—at least from the partisans’ viewpoint—having little effect on the enemy forces. For an American like me this bitterness is hard to hear, especially since my father served in Italy in the war (as a “field cryptographer”), while my uncle, unable to enlist because of a bad leg, volunteered as an ambulance driver for the American Field

Service in North Africa and toward the end of the war served in Italy (another uncle had it far worse, with the Marines in the Pacific). But the anger and frustration of the partisans is, of course, completely understandable.

One specific incident alluded to in the novel under review is the infamous “Proclama di Alexander”, i.e. the November 13, 1944 proclamation of British General Harold Alexander directing partisans to “go home for the winter” and wait until spring to begin a new offensive. Many of them had no homes to return to, and even if they did they would be risking imprisonment, forced labor in Germany, or execution. At any rate, this determines the time span of the story as summer 1944 to early spring 1945. As far as I can determine, the partisans of the story would be operating just north of the “Gothic Line”, the last line of defense of the German forces in Italy, running from the Gulf of Genoa south of La Spezia to the Adriatic south of Ravenna. Much of the action takes place in a marshy plain criss-crossed by rivers, canals and dykes. Presumably this is supposed to be somewhere in the Po basin, and not too far from the Apennines which provide another refuge.

I won't discuss the plot any further. Highly recommended.

2. *Matrimonio in brigata*, 162pp, (published in 1976 although the stories were written at various earlier times, obviously). A collection of 19 short stories about the resistance: often tragic and sad, but always a testament to the human spirit. Two of the stories are autobiographical: *La mia guerra partigiana* and *Assolto in istruttoria*; the latter is about the arrest of Viganò's husband in the years just after the war, a time when many fascists remained in power in the police, the judiciary, etc.

Especially noteworthy is the wide range of heroic female characters. There is the brave and ill-fated young bride of the title story; the 13-year old girl of *La stampa per Campalbo*, who takes over delivery of the news to the partisans when her older brother falls ill; the perhaps 40-ish woman of *La grande occasione* who comes late to the partisan cause and is “nata nella battaglia di Porta Lama”; the many anonymous women on whom L'Agnese was based and who are described beautifully in the opening paragraph of *La mia guerra partigiana*. The young heroine of *Tiro al piccione* is another favorite. Just to give some of the flavor of Viganò's writing, here is a condensed excerpt from the first page of *Tiro al piccione* (the ellipses are mine):

Era tutti occhi e capelli bruni, e la chiamavano “Nigréin”. Faceva la staffetta in brigata, correva di continuo in bicicletta dall'una all'altra delle basi partigiane dislocate nelle case dei contadini in mezzo alla campagna...

“Nigréin con tutta la sua famiglia era dentro fino al collo. La Resistenza era cominciata molto prima per tutti loro, tra persecuzioni, carceri e confino. Tanto che lei che i suoi fratelli erano cresciuti così, pareva che avessero succhiato l'opposizione al fascismo insieme al latte della mamma. Non che fossero allevati nell'odio, con sentimenti aridi e vendicativi, ma gli era stato insegnato, con le semplici leggi della terra, anche il diritto a una giustizia, a un rispetto della persona umana, che in quegli anni di tirannia torva e sorda non esisteva.

Piccola, giovane e scura, “Nigréin” amava il suo nome di battaglia, quasi si era dimenticata il vero nome di Adelia, che sembrava troppo gonfio e solenne per lei.

Le piaceva soprattutto il lavoro minuto, rischioso, industrie come quello di una formica che va su e giù, fuori e dentro, incessante...

“She was all eyes and brown hair, and they called her “Nigréin”. She acted as a courier for the brigade, running about continuously on her bicycle from one to another of the partisan basecamps set up in the farmhouses in the middle of the countryside...

“Nigréin’ and her whole family were in it up to their necks. The Resistance had started much earlier for all of them, between persecution, prison and exile. She as well as her siblings had grown up this way; it seemed they had suckled opposition to fascism together with their mother’s milk. Not that they were raised in hate, with feelings of cold-hearted revenge, but they had been taught, by the simple laws of the land, a right to justice, a respect of human beings, that in those years of dull, grim tyranny didn’t exist.

Small, young and dark, ‘Nigréin’ loved her battle name, and had almost forgotten her real name, Adelia, which seemed too inflated and solemn for her. Above all she liked the detailed, risky, industrious work, like that of an ant who goes up and down, in and out, never stopping...”

But the stories are not only about women. Far from it; Viganò portrays the men as well with great skill and sympathy, from the Russian prisoner of war in *Peter* to the title character of *Il comandante*.

As in *L’Agnese va a morire*, a recurring theme is the partisans’ frustration with the Allies: their slow advance, the Proclamation of Alexander, and their carpet bombing of the countryside. Even Allied soldiers testified to the indiscriminate bombing; one soldier reported that during the long and horrendous battle of Monte Cassino, more of his comrades were killed by Allied bombs—so-called “friendly fire”—than by the Luftwaffe. The British in particular are often ridiculed in contemporary Italian sources for their reluctance to engage the Germans on the ground. One can find allusions to this even in humorous writings such as Guareschi’s *Don Camillo* stories:

Don Camillo ricordava benissimo: la villa era circondata da tre ordine di sentinelle inglesi e non entrava né usciva una mosca, perché vicino si combatteva ancora e gli inglesi ci tengono particolarmente alla propria pelle.

“Don Camillo remembered it well: the villa was surrounded by three ranks of English sentinels and not even a fly went in or out, because fighting was still going on nearby and the English were especially concerned with saving their own hides.” (From *Il tesoro* in the first volume of *Don Camillo*.)

Historians—American historians, at least—also comment on the British reluctance to advance, which was a source of considerable friction between the British and American high commands. Setting aside any judgement on the matter, it’s interesting to hear the Italian point of view.

In any case, *Matrimonio in brigata* is highly recommended. “Renata Viganò, la più grande scrittrice della nostra Resistenza...è stata altrettanto amata per le sue straordinarie doti umane.” (From the backcover.)

Cesarina Vighy, *L'ultima estate*, audiobook 4hr 40min read by Ottavia Piccolo. Vighy was 73 when this book—her first—was published in 2009. She had earlier been diagnosed with ALS, and died of it a year later. The story is told in the first person, as though it were an autobiography, but it isn't clear to me whether it is actually autobiographical. In any case, it is at the least closely based on her own life, as one can see by checking her biography online. It includes some interesting stories about her (the narrator's) mother, and her own childhood, and ends with her descent into the hell of ALS. Sad, but also inspiring. Highly recommended.

Sharon Wood (editor), *Italian women writing*, 168pp (1993). A collection of thirteen short stories by Italian women (the title and commentary are in English, but the stories are in the original Italian). I've read almost all of them. Among my favorites are:

Marcellina, by Fausta Cialente (b. 1898, d.?). A strong, independent gutsy young woman (Marcellina) who takes no guff from anyone and in particular doesn't depend on a man, or men, for her livelihood or anything else. She does marry but on her own terms.

La ragazza con la treccia by Dacia Maraini. A fifteen-year old girl seeks an illegal abortion. The father could be either of two older men who seduced her, one of them her teacher. Of course, neither of them takes any responsibility or suffers any consequences whatsoever. A sad and all too familiar tale, well-told in a spare, moving style. (Earlier I panned Maraini's novel *Voci*, but now I'll have to try more of her work.)

All'aeroporto by Marina Mizzau. A clever, amusing tale reminiscent of some of Calvino's stories (e.g. *L'avventura di un soldato*, *L'avventura di una bagnante*) involving embarrassing, somewhat absurd social situations. Here the situation is that Signor Rossi has to pick up Signor Bianchi at the airport. They've never met before, so how will they recognize each other? "No problem," says Bianchi over the phone, "I'm really ugly". On the way to the airport Rossi belatedly realizes how awkward it's going to be...

Other interesting stories include *Il ladro* by Ginevra Bompiani, in which a chicken bone takes on a life of its own, *Roba da supermercato* by Anna Maria Scaramuzzino, in which a woman gives birth in a department store and is required to pay for the baby at the checkout stand, and *Donne in piscina* by Sandra Petrigiani, in which a group of women hanging out at the pool discuss their sex lives and an unfortunate frog is accidentally squashed by a chair.

For *Il cugino Venanzio*, see above under Elsa Morante. The volume also includes Natalia Ginzburg's *La madre*, which, as mentioned earlier (under Ginzburg above) I found well-written but pointlessly depressing.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), *Una stanza tutta per sé*, audiobook 3hr 56 min, read by Manuela Mandracchia. A feminist lament in which no words are minced and no punches pulled. Woolf was asked to speak on "women and fiction" by two female colleagues. She says: "This essay is based upon two papers read to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtaa at Girton in October 1928. The papers were too long to be read in full, and have since been altered and expanded." The title "A room of one's own" refers to the thesis that one needs of room of one's own and five hundred pounds a year to write, two luxuries that

few women of her day and virtually none from earlier times possessed. In particular she debunks the popular notion of the “poor poet”, citing for instance “The art of writing” by Literature Professor Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Quiller-Couch points out that of a dozen or more of the “great poetical names of the last hundred years or so”—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron et. al.—only one, Keats, was not “fairly well to do”.

But Quiller-Couch is of course writing from a purely male perspective. Woolf cites with admiration his assertion that “...the poor poet has not in these days, nor has had for two hundred years, a dog’s chance....a poor child in England has little more hope than had the son of an Athenian slave to be emancipated into that intellectual freedom of which great writings are born.” Nobody could put the point more plainly, says Woolf, but continues:

“Intellectual freedom depends on material things...And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog’s chance of writing poetry.”

Émile Zola (1840-1902), *Thérèse Raquin*, 211pp (1867), audiobook 6hr50min read by Silvia Cecchini. I can hardly complain about the darkness of the story, as I read this many years ago in English, and in any case the extremely dark plot is well-known. What I’d forgotten is what a boring tale it is. It’s well-written and interesting up to the murder of Thérèse’ husband, but after that it is unbelievably repetitive. In Italian, the words “paura”, “spavento”, “terrore”, etc. are repeated so many times that they lose all meaning. “Entrambi pensarono che le notti di terrore fossero finite.” “Ogni giorno, negli amanti aumentava l’orrore”. “Un brivido di spavento l’aveva squassato...” and so on.

What makes it worse is that the behaviour of Thérèse and Laurent is completely unbelievable. Their continual nightmares about the murder would make more sense if they had started immediately after it. But a year and a half has gone by before they finally get married and the “notti di terrore” begin. Furthermore the character of Laurent is by this point well-established; he is not the sort of person who is going to lose any sleep over what he’s done.

It’s hard to know what Zola had in mind when he wrote this dreary, monotonous tale. According to the back cover, Oscar Wilde considered it “il capolavoro dell’orrido”. Il capolavoro della noia would be more like it.