

Chapter Two

THE MARKETING STRATEGY BEHIND FERRANTE'S SUCCESS

Introduction:

This chapter will analyze *My Brilliant Friend* under a marketing perspective, exploring the different marketing tools and the marketing strategy adopted to promote the novel. The author of the Neapolitan Quartet writes under the pseudonym of Elena Ferrante which has created a lure of mystery around her persona. The first section will examine the different motives behind the use of pseudonyms and anonymity by Ferrante and other authors. The role of these fictional instruments and of the term “debut” in the overall marketing strategy of Ferrante’s publishing company will also be explored. The second section will analyze another marketing tactic that has contributed to the success of the Neapolitan novels, the selling of an authentic Neapolitan experience. The last section will compare the book covers of *My Brilliant Friend* from different parts of the world, reflecting on the design and elements that catch the reader’s eye and that serve the overall purpose of promoting the authenticity of the novel.

Anonymity and the Use of Pseudonyms: Analyzing Literary Artifices

In the era of social media, everyone is exposed and many people aspire to be in the center of attention. To find out about the origins, hobbies, work and family of an individual a detective is superfluous, you can simply go look at their Facebook or Instagram accounts. The choice of an

author to remain anonymous appears extremely bizarre in this world of self-promotion and egocentrism. This is the case of the author of the Neapolitan Quartet who has decided to write under the pseudonym of Elena Ferrante, hoping to conceal her true identity. Using a pseudonym has created an aura of mystery around the figure of this writer, giving her popularity and inspiring people to consider her fictional mask an enigma to solve. Anonymity give wings to the human imagination: some people think that the writer is a man, others believe that the author is an old woman from Naples. The truth is that nobody really knows except Ferrante herself. On this controversial debate about her identity, Ferrante commented:

“Elena Ferrante is the author of several novels. There is nothing mysterious about her, given how she manifests herself – perhaps even too much – in her own writing, the place where her creative life transpires in absolute fullness. What I mean is that the author is the sum of the expressive strategies that shape an invented world, a concrete world that is populated with people and events. The rest is ordinary private life.”(Deborah Orr, “Elena Ferrante: 'Anonymity lets me concentrate exclusively on writing”, The Guardian)

With this brilliant comment, Ferrante points out that the soul of the writer is manifested through the words of his/her book and, therefore, a flesh and blood author is of secondary importance.

The main reason that pushed Ferrante to deprive the public sphere of her physical presence is to give to her writing a central position. In this way, the titles of the novels have become better known than the author's name and this is exactly what Ferrante wanted to achieve. While most people think that writers decide to remain anonymous to protect their private life, for Ferrante it is a matter of protecting her writing. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, she confessed:

“I simply decided once and for all, over 20 years ago, to liberate myself from the anxiety of notoriety and the urge to be a part of that circle of successful people, those who believe they have won who-knows-what. This was an important step for me. Today I feel, thanks to this decision, that I have gained a space of my own, a space that is free, where I feel active and present. To relinquish it would be very painful.” (Elissa Schappell, “Elena Ferrante Explains Why, for the Last Time, You Don’t Need to Know Her Name”, Vanity Fair)

Among the motives that inspire writers to use a “nom de plume” is the opportunity to write in more than one genre.

This is the case of the famous writer J.K Rowling. Her original name is Joanne Rowling and she is known worldwide for the Harry Potter’s book series. When she first published in June 1997, her publisher told her to use the name J.K. Rowling, adding the letter “K” which stands for Kathleen, her paternal grandmother’s name. The reason for this addition derives from the fact that, since Harry was little magician and her target audience was young boys, a book written by a female author might have not been appealing. In 2013, J.K. Rowling decided to use the pseudonym of Robert Galbraith to delve into another genre and publish her first crime novel *The Cuckoo’s Calling* (“J.K Rowling biography”).

Why did she do it? Some critics think that she wanted to be free from carrying the weight of expectations of a bestselling author. Others believed she needed to distinguish herself from the Harry Potter saga and, in order to be taken seriously in a new literary world, she adopted a different name. Many question her choice to hide her true identity just as they are doing with Ferrante.

The use of pseudonyms is not a new invention, but it has been a common practice in the world of literature for centuries. During the 19th century, in order to get their works published, many female writers had to adopt male pseudonyms to protect their literary freedom and to escape the severe European laws which prohibited women to receive compensation without the permission of their husband. This is the case of Amandine Aurore Lucile Dupin de Francueil (known under the name of George Sand), Mary Anne Evans (who wrote using the pseudonym George Eliot) and the Brontë sisters Anne, Charlotte and Emily (who used the male names Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell). Even today it is still common for female authors to resort to anonymity and pseudonyms to find space into traditionally male dominated literary fields. This is the case of Phyllis Dorothy James English, crime writer, who used just the initials of her name (P.D. James) to establish a serious reputation for herself in the crime novels world. For other writers using a pen name was a matter of life and death. The German author Erich Kästner, for example, was forced to use the pseudonyms Berthold Bürger, Melchior Kurtz and Robert Neuner to publish his work in order to avoid persecution during the Nazi era (Holger Ehling, “What’s in a name? Why authors use pseudonyms”, DW). Other notorious examples of stage names include: Durante Alighieri (Dante), Thomas Jefferson (Oliver Fairplay), Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell) (Mary B.W. Tabor, “MEDIA: PUBLISHING; With a campaign tell-all, an anonymous author takes a page out of history. And the resulting obsession turns into a publicist's dream”, The New York Times)

Ferrante has decided to adopt a pen name for reasons different of those mentioned above, but how has this choice impacted the readers? In the article “I Am Not Elena Ferrante”, the author argues that there is a “two ways street between author and text which means not only that we construct the author from the text, but that biographical facts about the author shape how we

receive the text (The Implied Author, “I Am Not Elena Ferrante”, The Anonymity Newcastle University Conference). With Ferrante the only way to create her profile is to construct it from the story and the words she uses in her books. From this observation arises a consequential thought: how does the pseudonym of the author affect the readers? Do they perceive the text in a different way? Do they have some expectations of mystery derived from the unidentified nature of the author? The biography appearing in the back of the book describes Ferrante as an author born in Naples and that’s it. I honestly do not care much about the private life of the writer, but this lack of precise information has stimulated my curiosity. Once I found out that Ferrante was a pseudonym I personally experienced the so-called “pseudonym-effect”: “the combination of mystery, desire and authorial representation formed in the public mind once the use of a pseudonym has been revealed” (Bassett, 149).

Many scholars have tried to unmask Elena Ferrante by studying the characteristics and nature of her writing. In the study “Measuring Differentiability: Unmasking Pseudonymous Authors” by Moshe Koppel, Jonathan Schler and Elisheva Bonchek-Dokow, the authors point out that the authorship verification problem is “complicate by the fact that a single author may consciously vary his or her style from text to text for many reasons or may unconsciously drift stylistically over time”(Koppel et al,1261). The researches, therefore, have the challenging task to discern superficial from deep differences in the author’s style. The analysis starts by selecting consistent features used by a single author in a variety of writings such as function words (Mosteller and Wallace 1964), syntactic structures (Baayen at al.,1998; De Vel et al., 2002) and syntactic and orthographic idiosyncrasies (Koppel and Schler 2003). In the case of Ferrante, we would need to choose those stylistic and grammatical characteristics typical of the writing and compare them with those of various authors. This is a long and consuming work that requires

great amount of time and specific technical competences. Therefore, even if many have attempted to uncover Ferrante following this way, the real identity of the writer was not found by exploring and analyzing her text, but, as I will discuss in the next chapter, by following the money trail of her Italian publishing company.

Anonymity, Pseudonyms and Debut as Marketing Tools

In the previous section, the personal reason of the author of the Neapolitan novels for choosing a pseudonym were explored. Now this choice is analyzed as part of a broader marketing strategy, ideated by the publishing company. In the editorial world, where every writer is screaming for publicity and self-promotion, going against the tide and using anonymity and pseudonyms might be the best way to stand out from the crowd.

Anonymity is an effective marketing tool with the power to capture the attention of the reader and to appeal to the emotional side of the public. Publishers says that once an author's identity is made public, the mystique can fades, and with it, the sales. The book, however, needs also to be a good novel to sell, otherwise the anonymity allure is not enough to do the job (Mary B.W. Tabor, "MEDIA: PUBLISHING; with a campaign tell-all, an anonymous author takes a page out of history. And the resulting obsession turns into a publicist's dream", The New York Times). This concept perfectly applies to the Ferrante phenomenon: although it is true that the mystery around the identity of the author has contributed to the popularity of the novels, it is also the vividness of the language and the intriguing story that won the readers' hearts.

A similar case to the one of the Neapolitan quartet is represented by the bestseller *Primary Colors*, an insider account of Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign written by

Anonymous. The publisher of Random House, Harold M. Evans reveals that the novel has become so famous mainly due to the aura of mystery surrounding the author which has attracted the media attention. "That's what got it going, because it became piquant for people to know who wrote the book," he says. "With a name like Fred Schmuck on the cover, I think 'Primary Colors' would have been a success, but it would have moved more slowly, maybe in the range of 100,000 copies by this point."(Paul D. Coldford, "Anonymous' Book Is As Good As The Marketing Strategy", Los Angeles Times). Some of the scenes involving Governor Clinton and his campaign confidants are so detailed, that many people started thinking that the author was someone inside the system who knew the politicians intimately. Therefore a fierce hunt began to find out the identity of Anonymous. Many periodicals such as *Newsweek* and *Time* covered the heated investigation, connecting it to everyday debates. According to *The Washington Post*, Larry King conducted a show completely dedicated to discover the name behind Anonymous, interviewing locals and travelling as far as South Africa. Some suspects included Suspects, *Doonesbury's* Garry Trudeau, the political novelist Christopher Buckley and the politician and journalist Stephanopoulos who all denied. As Alex McLevy points out: "That masterful inflammation of the popular imagination by the book's publicity campaign, along with its anonymous-author hook, created a blockbuster" (Alex McLevy, "The most talked-about political mystery of 1996 involving Bill Clinton wasn't Whitewater", The A.V. Club).

I believe the same thing happened for *My Brilliant Friend*. In fact the pseudonym triggers a so-called "puff-mysterious" effect (Bassett, 150).The reader gets two stories for the price of one: the actual plot of the novel and the mystery of the book's authorship created by the pseudonym effect.

Due to the huge success of this marketing strategy for both Ferrante and Anonymous, one might wonder why other writers are not utilizing it. Choosing to remain anonymous is not as easy as it seems. On one side humans are by nature egocentric, therefore most of the writers aspire to be recognized for their work and seek glory and fame. On the other side it is a tough challenge for the publishers because they need to find a way to publish and promote an author that wants to remain faceless and nameless. In the article “The Advent of a Bestseller”, Kent Carroll, publisher at the Europa Editions, talking about Ferrante, affirms that “publishing an author you’ve never met and whose previous work has performed below expectations in the U.S. is a challenge”. While now we are in the middle of the Ferrante Fever, when the first novel of the Neapolitan quartet came out in the U.S. market, in 2012, it did not provoke much reaction from the public. It’s only when the New York editors Henry Finder, Leo Carey, and James Wood wrote reviews about the books that sales started rising. Then women belonging to book groups began buying copies and spreading the word, generating “a word-of-mouth critical mass” (Kent Carroll, “The Advent of a Bestseller”, Publishers Weekly) which is the main factor that contributed to the rise of the “Ferrante Fever”, the crazy wave of enthusiasm “for Elena Ferrante’s novels which runs so high that it has been described in epidemiological terms”(Alexandra Alter, “Ferrante Fever’ Continues to Spread”, The New York Times).

The Neapolitan has achieved a phenomenal international success: it sold 5.5 million copies worldwide and was translated in more than 40 languages, according to Europa Editions. In North America it sold 2.5 million copies (Julie Kosin, “My Brilliant Friend’ Misses a Huge Opportunity By Hiring a Male Director,” Harper's BAZAAR), 900,000 copies in Italy (Marco Verdura, “I Libri Più Venduti Delle Case Editrici Italiane,” Il Post) and more than 820,000 copies in France(Giorgia Mecca, “Lo straordinario successo di Elena Ferrante nel mondo,la

parola agli editori”, Futura News). On October 25, 2015 *My Brilliant Friend* ranked n.6 in the Paperback Trade Fiction Books Best Sellers list on the New York Times. In 2015, *The Story of the Lost Child* was selected as a candidate for the *Premio Strega*, the most prestigious Italian literary award.

Another successful marketing tool used in the promotion of the Neapolitan quartet is the use of the elusive tag “debut”. Although Elena Ferrante wrote three books before *My Brilliant Friend*, the press still considers the Neapolitan novel to be her true debut. This term allures reviews and the media attention, so it is another element of the marketing strategy that the publishing company of Ferrante could have ideated to further promote her books. In the article “Debunking the Debut”, Rachel Deahl has discovered that a suspicious “way of fashioning veteran authors as debut novelists”(6) adopted by the publishing group Doubleday which has announced the debuts of two brand new pseudonymous authors who, in reality, have already published other novels under their real names. This is not the case of Elena Ferrante since she has always published using the same pseudonym. However it is undeniable that presenting the Neapolitan quarter as a “debut” significantly boosted the novels’ sales, capturing the media and press’ attention.

The Art of Selling “Neapolitaness or Italianness”: the Ultimate Marketing Strategy

In these past 10 to 15 years, the HSBC and the Bureau of Economic analysis have registered a growing tendency in the market: Americans tend to value and spend more money on experiences than products(Jeremy Quittner,” Why Americans Are Spending More on

Experiences vs Buying Stuff”, *Fortune*). Knowing so, the publishing company of Elena Ferrante presents the novels as the readers’ only chance to get the real Neapolitan experience and a taste of Italy without moving from their couch. The description of Naples, the personality, the names of the characters and the entire storyline are perfectly orchestrated to transmit to the audience a sense of *italianità*, which most of them have never experienced before. Even the pseudonym chose by the author, Ferrante sounds like a typical Italian last name. The publishing company is, therefore, not only selling the story of Lenù and Lila, but it is also implicitly selling the intrinsic essence of the book, a complete, authentic immersion into the Italian culture, in particular the Neapolitan culture.

Ann Mah, *New York Times* travel writer and avid Ferrante fan, decided to go to Naples in search of the places described in the book, *My Brilliant Friend*. During her visit, she soon realized that “to view the Naples of Ms. Ferrante is to view Naples like a native” (Ann Mah, “Naples, Then and Now”, *The New York Times*). With the help of a Naples native, the journalist was able to identify the neighborhood of Lila and Lenù as Rione Luzzati, situated between the central train station and Poggioreale, a prison. This neighborhood is tarnished by a dangerous and dirty reputation, therefore after hiring a local guide, Mah started exploring different sites mentioned in the book: the “Rettifilo,” a shopping street where Lila finds her wedding gown; Piazza Municipio, where Elena’s father works as a porter; Liceo Classico Garibaldi, Elena’s high school. The local guide points out that Ferrante portrays Naples not just as a “postcard, but as “a mosaic of strong, disruptive emotions”, revealing “all the opportunities lost by every single generation in the south of Italy” (Ann Mah, “Naples, Then and Now”, *The New York Times*).

Although the bar/*pasticceria* Solara and the shoe maker shop Cerullo were missing, Rione Luzzatti clustered by grey, dirty buildings with “narrow windows curtained by laundry”

from which you could hear heated conversation in Neapolitan dialect, seems to fit the Rione described in the Ferrante's novels. The chic shopping district Chiaia, situated close to the Rione, is a slap in the face of the misery and poverty of the Neapolitan neighborhood. Lenù and Lila are impressed by the elegance of the women walking down the street who seemed to "have breathed another air", Ferrante writes.

Later in her visit, the journalist meets Ms. Palermo, a professor at the University of Naples who although of bourgeois origin, strongly identifies with the novels of the Neapolitan quartet: "There is a Neapolitaness that cuts through social levels. She communicates this very well. These novels go deep into our souls."

How did she do that? How was Ferrante able to touch her readers' soul? By giving them a real, authentic story that overcomes any linguistic or cultural barriers and speaks to the heart. Readers are emotionally invested in those stories that capture slices of true life.

Book Covers around the World: Selling Authenticity in Different Cultures

They say, "Never judge a book by its cover", but we all inevitably form our initial judgment by looking at the cover, which is the essential element of a book that first catches the reader's attention. Marketers and art directors carefully study and plan the design of a cover since it plays such a powerful role in creating a first impression of the novel in the reader's mind. In the case of *My Brilliant Friend*, the covers change significantly around the world in order to fit the specific market of the country and to attract readers coming from different cultures.

“Different sales channels have different sensibilities. It’s a cultural thing, as taste-driven as different countries eating different things for breakfast” says Julian Humphries, head cover design at Fourth Estate. Nathan Burton, a British designer who created the cover for Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* explains that book covers differ also due to non-business related reasons: "What you are trying to get across on a cover is the essence of a book, quite an ambiguous thing. Designers in different countries read and interpret the fiction in different ways." (Tom Lamont, “Design: Don’t judge a book by its cover, particularly in France”, *The Guardian*)



English and Italian editions

The covers in Italy and America look exactly the same: three little girls in pink ceremony dresses are following a newlywed couple who is walking toward the Neapolitan coast. Is this still part of the marketing strategy of Europa Editions which aims to sell a true Neapolitan

experience? Probably. By keeping the Italian cover, the publishing company wants to reinforce the idea of authenticity.

In an interview, Sandra Ozzola, co-art director for Europa Editions and Edizioni E/O, explains that they chose to represent in the cover the most crucial moment in the book, the “very vulgar Neapolitan wedding” of Lila which marks the divergence of fates for the two long time best friends. (Miriam Krule, “‘Dressing a Refined Story With a Touch of Vulgarity’: An Interview With Elena Ferrante’s Art Director”, Slate).

This cover evokes a bittersweet feeling of hope and nostalgia, typical of weddings in which the spouses start a new adventure together while leaving people and things behind. The image also transmits a sense of strong traditionalism since, in the South, the Catholic religion is a vital part of the Southern tradition and weddings are considered an important milestone in an individual’s life.

The bride, Lila, is the central focus of this image showing that the story mainly revolves around her. The fact that she is walking towards Naples, probably going back to the Rione, suggests metaphorically that Lila’s life belongs there and she will never be able to escape from it.



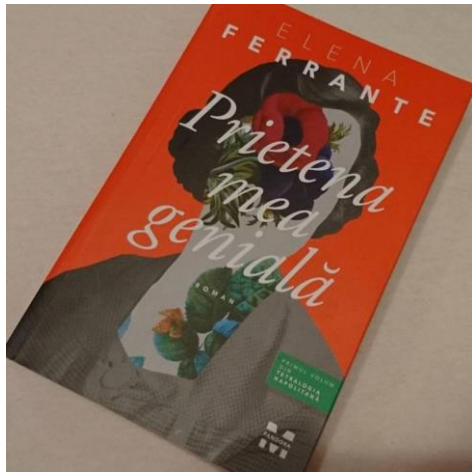
Norwegian and Spanish editions

This cover used in Norway and Spain depicts a stunning bride who stares at the reader with an intense, enigmatic look. The woman's intriguing eyes are piercing the reader's soul and they seem to hide many deep secrets. The fact that the cover is in black and white gives a vintage touch and suggests that the story happened in the past. The dark hair and eyes fit the stereotypical beauty of an Italian southern women and accurately depicts Lila's captivating beauty and rebellious personality. Overall the cover transmits mystery and passion appealing to both the curious spirit of the Norwegian readers and the ardent personalities of the Spanish ones.



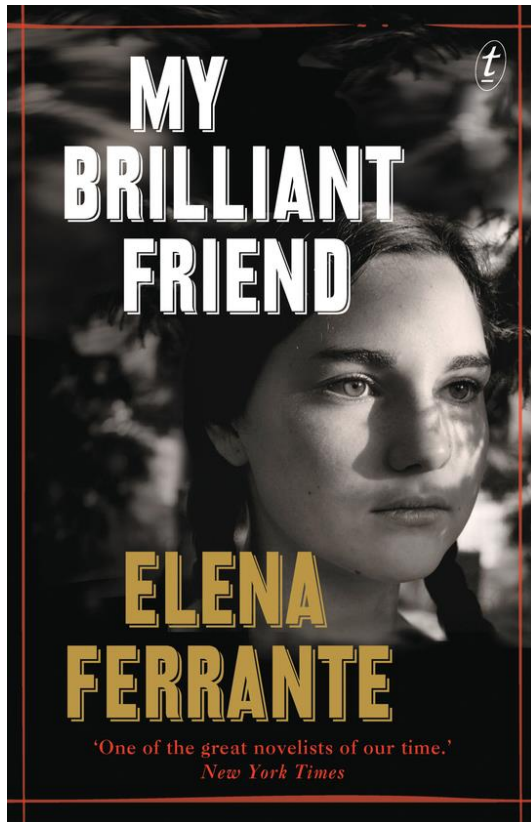
Dutch edition

While the previous covers unambiguously portray Lila, the Dutch edition leaves the identity of the smiling little girl of the cover up to the reader's imagination. The girl could be either Lila or Elena. From the mischievous smile, I personally believe that Lila is the protagonist of the cover, but the neatly tied braid and nice clothes could also lead to consider Elena. Regardless of the girl's identity, the fact that she is holding someone's hand hints that the story is going to rotate around the theme of childhood friendship. The faded black and white colors also transmit a feeling of nostalgia and show that the story belongs to the past. This melancholic yearning for the old times and the reminiscence of childhood are the two elements that this cover uses to sell the authenticity of the novel to the Dutch readers.



Romanian edition

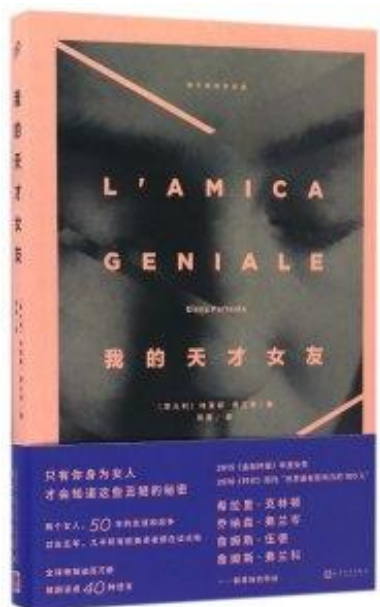
This is the only cover not focused on the protagonists of the story, Elena and Lila, but on the author herself Elena Ferrante. Although we can distinguish the traits of a woman, her face is hidden by colorful flowers which symbolize the mysterious identity of the writer. This cover transmits an aura of mystery and the vivid color evokes excitement, capturing the attention of the Romanian readers. Perhaps the designer wants to remind the reader that the beauty and talent of writers do not lie in their external appearance, but in the stories that their mind creates.



Australian edition

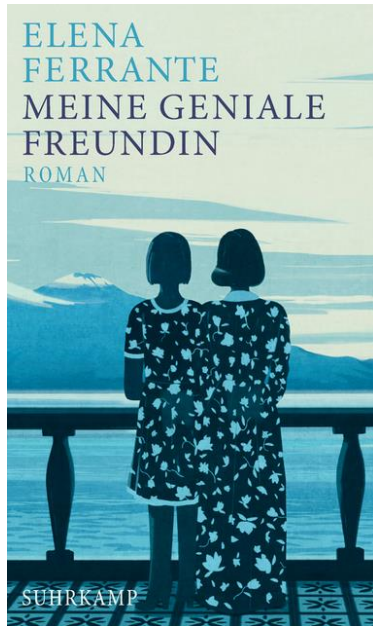
This cover represents the black and white portrayal of an adolescent girl who is looking intensely at a point past the reader. She has a fierce yet naïve look and the alternation of light and shadow on her face adds a dramatic tone to the scene. Her eyes appear focused and transmit wittiness and determination. This girl could be either Elena or Lila and she seems to be waiting for something to happen. The cover overall inspires a sense of expectation and suspense. The design director for the cover of the Australian edition reveals that the design was inspired by the “Italian art films – the cinematic, emotional appeal of Visconti, Fellini and Bertolucci. The typography was created in homage to the commercial signage of mid-century Italy. In our version, vulgarity was replaced with a sophisticated aesthetic, one that we thought far more

likely to attract the readership for an extremely refined story” (WH Chong, “Isn’t it un-ironic? Why Australia has better covers for Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan series”, The Guardian).



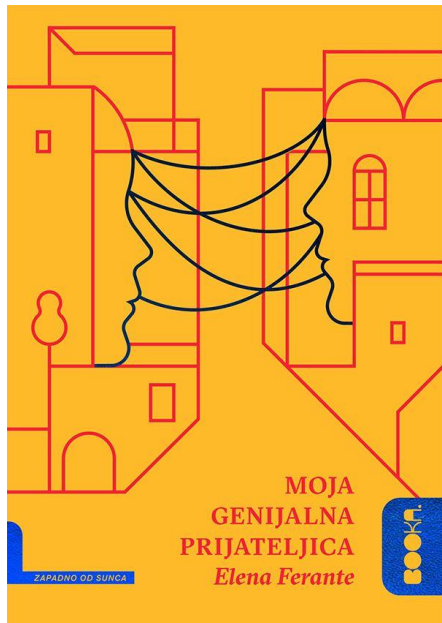
Chinese edition

The Chinese cover is dominated by a light pink color hinting that this novel mainly addresses a female audience. The face of the woman portrayed in the cover seems to have oriental features and the practice of tracing black lines on the eye lid appears to be more typical of the Chinese culture than the Italian one. It seems that the Chinese designers reinvented the cover to adhere to the beauty standards of the country and to facilitate the identification of the Chinese readers in the characters of the novel.



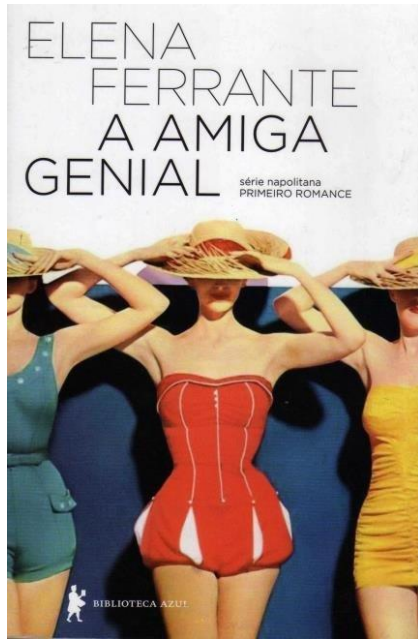
German edition

The German cover portrays two friends hugging each other and looking from a balcony at the Neapolitan sea horizon. They are so close that the identical patterns of their dresses meld them into a single person. This intimate hug and the blend of the external boundaries of their figures symbolize the strength and intimacy of their friendship. “A single soul dwelling in two bodies” as Aristotle would say. The blue light of the cover contributes to create an atmosphere of tranquility and intimacy. I believe this cover fits the German market since Germans seem to not display openly their emotions, but they show affection with discretion just like it is portrayed in this cover. This cover also aims to promote the Italianness of the novel by painting an image that fits the Italian stereotypes: two girls wearing what are thought to be the traditional 1950s century clothes, admiring the Vesuvio.



Croatian edition

This cover perfectly captures the complicity and harmony of minds between Lila and Elena, the protagonists of the story. The strings that connect the two heads of the buildings symbolize the special connection and unique bond shared by the two friends. The background dominated by a dark yellow also evokes the concept of brilliant mind. With this cover, the designer was able to successfully immortalize in one image the true essence of the book. Although this cover does not necessarily help sell the authenticity of the novel, its bright color and the suggestive design easily capture the attention of the reader.



Brazilian edition

Compared to all the other covers, the Brazilian edition is the only one in which the vulgar and provocative character of the novel fully emerges. The brilliant color of the bathing suits of the three half naked girls, posing sensually in the cover, catches the reader's eyes. The big hay hats which cover the girls' faces give them a mysterious charm, while their attire shows they have a rebellious soul because they have dared to challenge the society's expectations and rules by wearing scandalous swimsuits. The fact that they hide their identity with their hats could also refer to Ferrante's literary mask. This cover is well-designed for the Brazilian market because the vivid colors and the familiar summer attire are appealing to the Brazilian readers.

Elena Ferrante
L'amie prodigieuse



French edition

This cover portraying two little girls playing on the street conveys the lightheartedness and innocence which characterize the age of childhood. Lila can be recognized in the skinny dark haired girl laughing with malice and Lenù in the girl spinning her hula hoop and following with her eyes every step that her friend makes. This white and black photography also evokes the telling of memories which is how the first book actually starts. I think that this cover fits the French market since it appeals to the cheerful spirit of the French children and it also sells a feeling of authenticity evoking old times and the secular traditions of the Italian culture.

Conclusion:

In conclusion each cover is adapted to match the cultural taste of the readers. The cover is part of a more complex marketing strategy adopted by the publishing company in which the pseudonym of the author and the story itself contribute to promote the idea of an authentic Neapolitan experience. The mystery around the identity of the author further fuels the excitement and popularity of the book and it proved to be an efficient marketing tool as well.

