

Beyond Dante: Contemporary Italian Novels in English Translation

BY JESSICA TEISCH



DANTE ALIGHIERI ACHIEVED FAME for *The Divine Comedy*; Petrarch for his sonnets; Giovanni Boccaccio for his risqué stories; and Niccolò Machiavelli for his political theory. Then, a half millennium later, Italian literature once again found an international audience with writers such as Primo Levi, Italo Calvino, and Umberto Eco.

Below we highlight both prominent and up-and-coming contemporary Italian novelists whose works have been translated into English. We divide our selections into 20th-century classics, more recent voices, and writers working in the thriller/crime genres. Many of Italy's best known writers have still not been widely translated, but we've tried to present a sampling of Italy's finest.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSICS

The Leopard

By Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958)
Di Lampedusa (1896–1957), the last Prince of Lampedusa, set his only novel in his native Sicily during the Risorgimento, when the Kingdom of Italy took shape in the 1860s. As Sicilian nobleman Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina and lover of astronomy and women, navigates the Risorgimento, he faces the regrettable decline of the Sicilian aristocracy. “If we want things to stay as they are,” Don Fabrizio’s favorite nephew tells his uncle, “things will have to change.” One of the best-selling Italian novels of the 20th century, *The Leopard* recounts the changing fortunes of the feudal family as a known society vanishes. Contemporary novelist David



Mitchell wrote in the *Guardian*, “Its major theme—the workings of mortality—is explored with an intelligence and poignancy rarely equalled and never, to my knowledge, surpassed.”

If Not Now, When?

Primo Levi (1982)

♦ PREMIO CAMPIELLO AND PREMIO VIAREGGIO PRIZES

Levi (1919–1987), an Italian Jewish writer and chemist, chronicled his personal horrors at Auschwitz in Nazi-occupied Poland in many of his best-known books, including the memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958) and the autobiographical short story collection *The Periodic Table* (1975).

If Not Now, When?, one of Levi’s only novels, follows a motley group of Jewish partisans and resistance fighters in the final days of World War II as they make their way from Russia to Italy on their way to Palestine. Though they sabotage the Nazis along the way and endure terrible hardships, *If Not Now, When?* is, above all, a story of human spirit and solidarity.



Invisible Cities

By Italo Calvino (1972; 1974)

Calvino (1923–1985), born in Cuba and raised in Italy, defies classification in his merging of the fantastic, the realistic, and the postmodern. Here, aging 13th-century Mongolian emperor Kublai Khan summons Venetian explorer Marco Polo to regale him with his adventures. Polo describes 55 magical cities, conjured from memory and desire: Hypatia, a city of alluring blue lagoons filled with vicious crabs; Laudomia, the city of the unborn; Octavia, where residents live suspended over an abyss. The cities rely on ideas and the relationship of the physical structures to society and history. A short but philosophical novel, this cautionary tale asks questions about faith, morality, and human nature. See also *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979; 1981), about the craft of reading and writing.



The Silent Duchess

By Dacia Maraini (1990)

♦ PREMIO CAMPIELLO PRIZE; MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FINALIST

Maraini (1936–), the daughter of a Sicilian princess and a Florentine ethnologist, spent three years in a Japanese prison camp when her parents fled Fascist Italy for Japan. An award-winning novelist, poet, journalist, and direc-

tor of stage and screen, she explores women’s experiences against patriarchal cultures. In *The Silent Duchess*, an international best seller, an 18th-century free-spirited, deaf, and mute Sicilian duchess, Marianna, navigates a traditional womanhood—a forced marriage to her childhood abuser and endless pregnancies—while she uses her silence to defy society’s suppression of women. “*The Silent Duchess* will, probably, remain her masterpiece, her *Jane Eyre*, replete with the added perfumes, flavours and smells of Gattopardoesque Sicily,” noted a *Guardian* critic. See also *Woman at War* (1975; 1984) and *Darkness: Fiction* (1999; 2002; ♦ PREMIO STREGA).



Agostino

By Alberto Moravia (1944; 2014)

“The nakedness of skin, the revealing look of wet bathing suits, the rocking motions of small boats—every page feels sunbeaten, overheated, sexualized,” commented a *Washington Post* critic about this distinctly European novel. Agostino, 13, and his attractive, beloved widowed mother are on holiday in an Italian seaside town when a handsome stranger invites his mother on a boat ride. As his mother is courted, Agostino must deal with feelings of loss and betrayal. Moravia (1907–1990) remains largely forgotten today, and *Agostino* is not among his most famous works. Yet few novels rival this powerful exploration of class and sexual consciousness and existential, adolescent agony. See also *Contempt* (1954; 1963), *Boredom* (1960), and *The Conformist* (1947; 1951).



The Garden of the Finzi-Continis

By Giorgio Bassani (1962; 2007)

♦ PREMIO VIAREGGIO

Raised in a prosperous Jewish family in Ferrara, Bassani (1916–2000) fictionalized his upbringing and involvement in the anti-Fascist resistance during World War II in his detailed novels of a region and its people. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is part of a series of six novels that collectively documents the Jewish Italian community under Fascism. In prewar Italy, Giorgio, a young middle-class Jewish young man, becomes enamored with the Finzi-Continis, an aristocratic Jewish family, and their daughter.

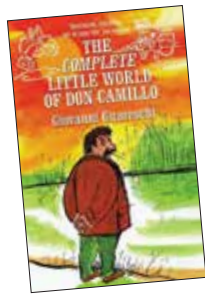


Behind their walled estate, Giorgio finds longing and heartbreak, as well as a refuge from the Fascists' racial laws. The *New York Times* called the novel a "haunting, elegiac portrait of ... wealthy, aristocratic Jews who tried to seclude themselves from the Fascist menace of the 1930's behind a walled estate and their own delusions of invulnerability." See also *Five Stories of Ferrara* (1971; ♦ PREMIO STREGA PRIZE), *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* (1958), and *Behind the Door* (1972).

The Little World of Don Camillo

By Giovanni Guareschi (1948; 1950)

Guareschi's (1908–1968) *Don Camillo* saga is not only a classic of Italian literature but also of French-Italian film. The novels, which were originally written as 347 short stories, are now contained in eight books. In the first, *Don Camillo*, the hotheaded parish priest of Brescello, a small village in northern Italy's Po lowlands, continu-



ally spars with his friendly adversary, Peppone, the town's Communist mayor. Humorous set pieces include Don Camillo's close relationship with his church's crucifix, through which he hears the voice of Christ. Set against post-World War II Italy, the novel shows that although ideologies might differ, the community's well-being always comes first. Next in the series: *Don Camillo and the Prodigal Son* (1952).

The Name of the Rose

By Umberto Eco (1980; 1983)

♦ PRIX MEDICI

Eco (1932–2016)—the famed Italian semiotician, philosopher, literary critic, and novelist—fills his historical novels with dizzying, conspiratorial plots and dense, encyclopedic references to literature, religion, and history. His first novel, an intellectual murder mystery that takes place in a 14th-century abbey, can "be regarded as a philosophical novel masked as a detective story, or as a detective story masked as a historical novel, or even



THRILLER AND CRIME NOVELISTS

ANDREA CAMILLERI (1925–)

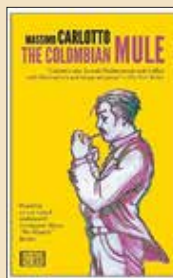
has created one of Italy's most beloved series and commentaries on our times with the witty, suspenseful, and award-winning Inspector Salvo Montalbano novels. Start with *Death in Sicily* (1994), a *New York Times* best seller that collects the first three installments of Montalbano's saga: *The Shape of Water*, in which Montalbano, the most respected detective in the fictional town of Vigàta, investigates the death of a big shot politician in a seedy part of town; *The Terra-Cotta Dog*, involving the Mafioso and the long-time death of two young lovers; and *The Snack Thief*, about a trawler shooting, a stabbing, a Tunisian prostitute, and many levels of corruption. Fifteen more volumes—dominated by the cranky, endearing, and food-loving inspector—have been translated into English.



Born in Kiev and transplanted to Rome at an early age, **GIORGIO SCERBANENCO (1911–1969)** is considered the father of Italian noir. He is most famous for *The Milano Quartet*, featuring antihero Dr. Duca Lamberti, a stoic, cynical doctor-turned-detective in Milan. In the first of the quartet, *A Private Venus* (1966), Lamberti, who lost his medical license for committing euthanasia, is released from prison in 1966. He accepts a job helping a wealthy, self-destructive young man—which soon leads to inquiries into a prostitute's suicide, a white slavery ring, and the Mafia. *Traitors to All* (1966), *The Boys of the Massacre* (1968), and *The Milanese Kill on Saturdays* (1969) follow. Together,

these noir classics delve into the dark, desperate Milan hidden beneath the city's fashionable facade. “Scerbanenco's lasting achievement,” commented an *NPR* critic, “... does for that city some of what James Ellroy does for L.A.”

MASSIMO CARLOTTO (1957–), once arrested for a murder he didn't commit (he was tried and retried 11 times in a case that dragged on for 18 years before he was pardoned in 1993), turned to hard-boiled noir fiction as a free man and became an important figure in the Mediterranean Noir movement. His most famous creation is ex-con blues singer and bar owner Marco Buratti, better known as “the Alligator,” who, in the Alligator series, becomes a private eye in search of truth and justice. In *The Colombian Mule* (#4; 2001), the Alligator sets out to defend an art smuggler from drug charges; a kidnapped, sadomasochistic woman in *The Master of Knots* (#5; 2002) leads the Alligator to other disappearing women during the G8 summit meeting in Genoa. See also *Bandit Love* (#6; 2009), *The Gang of Lovers* (#7; 2015), and the first in Carlotto's Giorgio Pellegrini series, *The Goodbye Kiss* (2006), featuring a sociopathic womanizer wanted in Italy for some unsavory crimes.



MAURIZIO DE GIOVANNI (1958–), who lives in Naples, began writing his popular Commissario Ricciardi series after winning a short story competition that introduced the main character. The first book, *I Will Have Vengeance: The Winter of Commissario Ricciardi* (2013), takes place in Naples in winter

1931, during the early rule of Mussolini, in a city of stark economic contrasts. When one of the world's greatest (but reviled) tenors is found brutally murdered in his dressing room at the theater, Ricciardi—haughty, enigmatic, and cursed with the ability to see and hear the final moments of people who have suffered violent deaths—steps in to investigate. See also *Blood Curse: The Springtime of Commissario Ricciardi*, *Everyone in Their Place: The Summer of Commissario Ricciardi*, *The Day of the Dead: The Autumn of Commissario Ricciardi*, and *By My Hand*.



Further Reading

- I KILL** | GIORGIO FALETTI (2002; 2008)
- INVOLUNTARY WITNESS: GUIDO GURERIERI #1** | GIANRICO CAROFIGLIO (2002; 2005)
- THE DE LUCA TRILOGY** | CARLO LUCARELLI (1990–1996)
- THE INSPECTOR GRAZIA NEGRO SERIES** | CARLO LUCARELLI (1997–2000)
- DARKNESS: FICTION** | MARTHA KING (1999; 2002; ♦ PREMIO STREGA)
- CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS OVER AN ELEVATOR IN PIAZZA VITTORIO** | AMARA LAKHOUS (2008)
- JUDGES** | ANDREA CAMILLERI, CARLO LUCARELLI, GIANCARLO DE CATALDO (2015)
- CRIMINI: THE BITTER LEMON BOOK OF ITALIAN CRIME FICTION** | GIANCARLO DE CATALDO, ED. (2008)
- TO EACH HIS OWN** | LEONARDO SCIASCIA (1989)
- A FLORENTINE DEATH: MICHELE FERRARA, BOOK 1** | MICHELE GUITTARI (2011) ■

better as a blend of all three” (*New York Review of Books*). When Franciscan friar William of Baskerville is called to a Benedictine monastery in northern Italy to resolve a dispute, the body count begins to pile up. See also *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), perhaps Eco's most complex novel, and *Numero Zero* (2015), his final.

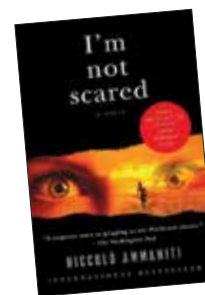
Silk

By Alessandro Baricco (1996; 1997)
Baricco (1958–), one of Italy's most popular writers, directors, performers, and music critics, captivates with *Silk*, a 90-page novella about the silk industry, mid-19th century politics, the changing relationships between East and West, and missed opportunities. After an epidemic wipes out

European and African silkworms, married French silkworm merchant and soldier Hervé Joncour travels to a closed, exotic Japan to obtain new sources. Once there, he meets a powerful nobleman and his alluring concubine; both his obsession with her and growing political turmoil have lasting consequences. What is most powerful about this magical story is what remains unsaid. “*Silk*,” commented the *Los Angeles Times*, “has the brilliant colors, the compressed life and the enchantment of a miniature.” See also *Ocean Sea* (1993), a postmodern tale of love and revenge.



changes when, while exploring an abandoned house in the summer of 1978, he discovers an emaciated boy chained to a well. Despite his first impression, Michele learns that the boy has become victim to a harrowing kidnapping and ransom—a crime implicating every adult in his tiny village. *I'm Not Scared*, Ammaniti's (1966–) American debut, explores what happens when alliances shift and the carefree but courageous world of children collides with a tragic adult world. The novel was adapted into a movie in 2003. See also *As God Commands* (2006; ♦ PREMIO STREGA) and *Me and You* (2010), both also adapted into films. (★★★★ May/June 2003)



The Other Language

Stories

By Francesca Marciano (2014)

In her fourth book (written in her adopted tongue, English), Marciano (1955–) explores the far-flung Italian diaspora. Each story features a woman with imminent change or broken relationships at the forefront; locations range from India to Kenya to New York to southern Italy, all places where the author has lived. In the title story, a motherless girl from Rome travels to Greece for a summer holiday, where two alluring English boys precipitate her coming-of-age. In “An Indian Soirée,” a couple attempting a second honeymoon in India instead come apart. And in “Chanel,” a magical green dress embodies a young woman's hopes and dreams. “[Marciano's] voice is confident and lucid,” notes the *Toronto Star*, “and she shines when presenting both the subtle and overt differences in culture and age. This is a book full of vivid imagery and scenes.”

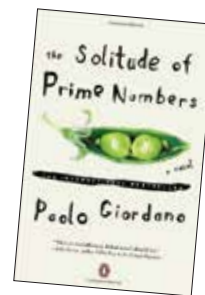


The Solitude of Prime Numbers

By Paolo Giordano (2008)

♦ PREMIO STREGA PRIZE; PREMIO CAMPIELLO

Giordano (1982–) holds a PhD in theoretical particle physics, so perhaps it's no surprise that he combines the scientific and the literary in his first novel. Translated into 30 languages, the book isolates two painful childhood traumas in the lives of friends and misfits (“primes,” or the odd ones out), Alice and Mattia, and then explores them in detail as Giordano takes these troubled children through adolescence and adulthood. Can these scarred, delicate lives ever come together—or will they remain, as Mattia questions, “twin primes, alone and lost, close but not close enough to really touch each other”? Set in Turin, the novel examines loneliness and love in an affluent society. “The fact that this literary debut has sold more than a million copies ... hints both at the extraordinary magnetism of Giordano's voice and at the human interest lurking behind the left-brain mathiness of his title” (*New York Times*). See also *The Human Body* (2012) and *Like Family* (2014).



Further Reading

ARTURO'S ISLAND | ELSA MORANTE (1957)

VOICES | DACIA MARAINI (1994; 1997)

GOGOL'S WIFE: AND OTHER STORIES | TOMMASO LANDOLFI (1963)

GOD'S MOUNTAIN | ERRI DE LUCA (2002; ♦ FÉMINA ÉTRANGER)

THE ALMOND PICKER | SIMONETTA AGNELLO HORNBY (2006)

MARGHERITA DOLCE VITA | STEFANO BENNI (2005)

THE NEWER VOICES

I'm Not Scared

Niccolò Ammaniti (2001; 2003)

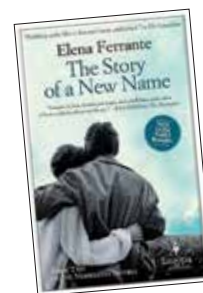
♦ PREMIO VIAREGGIO PRIZE

In a rural hamlet in Southern Italy, nine-year-old Michele Amitrano lives a simple existence. His life hopelessly

Neapolitan Quartet (2012–2015)

By Elena Ferrante (1943–)

Named as one of the 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine in 2016, Ferrante's identity was a well-guarded secret until just recently. Though she's written a handful of novels, she is best known for the Neapolitan quartet: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2015). Elena Greco and Lila



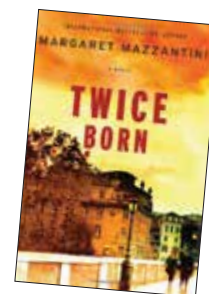
Cerullo, incited and inspired by their friendship, grow up in a poor neighborhood in post–World War II Naples. Over six decades, as their backstories come to light and their paths diverge and reunite, they fight for education, class, and respect; become wives, mothers, and lovers; and adhere to and break conventions. Their volatile bond over the years proves to be both enlivening and disastrous. “Her four-novel Neapolitan story is an epic masterpiece, a *Künstlerroman* of sustained passion and fury,” a *Time* critic wrote. “Fer-rante is a subtle subversive; the domestic, in her brilliant books, is a time bomb that ticks too loudly to ignore.”

Twice Born

By Margaret Mazzantini (2008)

Mazzantini (1961–) is a writer and an actress whose best-selling second novel to be translated into English (after *Don't Move*, 2004) achieved widespread acclaim. Gemma, an engaged graduate student, leaves her native Rome for Sarajevo (in 1984, then still part of Yugoslavia), where she falls in love with Diego, an impassioned, bohemian photographer with a criminal past. Many years later, Gemma leaves her husband and her comfortable life in Rome to re-

turn to war-scarred Sarajevo with her 16-year-old son to show him the city of his birth and the father he never knew. Along the way, she uncovers some painful truths. A multilayered story about love, loss, and brutality, and the desperate desire for motherhood during wartime, the 2004 movie version stars Penélope Cruz.



Further Reading

THE SENSE OF AN ELEPHANT | MARCO MISSIROLI (2015)

I HADN'T UNDERSTOOD | DIEGO DE SILVA (2012; ♦ NAPLES PRIZE FOR FICTION)

IN THE SEA THERE ARE CROCODILES | FABIO GEDA (2011)

VITA | MELANIA G. MAZZUCCO (2002; 2006; ♦ PREMIO STREGA)

NOT ALL BASTARDS ARE FROM VIENNA | ANDREA MOLESINI (2011; ♦ CAMPIELLO PRIZE)

DON'T MOVE | MARGARET MAZZANTINI (2004)

GOOD GIRLS DON'T WEAR TROUSERS | LARA CARDELLA (1994)

AFTER THE WAR: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION BY POSTWAR

ITALIAN WOMEN | MARGARET MAZZANTINI AND CLARA SERENI (2009)

FOR GRACE RECEIVED | VALERIA PARRELLA (2005) ■

