

NEWS ANALYSIS

A Report About a Novelist's Identity Exposes Cultural Differences

By RACHEL DONADIO

PARIS — The apparent unmasking of an Italian translator as the pseudonymous best-selling novelist Elena Ferrante has sparked a trans-Atlantic backlash against the publication of the findings earlier this month. But the responses to those findings also reveal a telling divide over what inspires that anger.

In the United States and Britain, the investigation into Ms. Ferrante's true identity has been viewed by a vocal contingent through the lens of gender. Critics have accused the journalist who conducted it and the publications where his findings appeared of sexism. But in continental Europe, the criticisms have focused on invasion of privacy issues.

"In much of Europe they care intensely about privacy; they don't think that you forfeit your right to privacy by making art," said Lorin Stein, editor of *The Paris Review*, which published a long interview with Ms. Ferrante last year, conducted by her publishers. "Meanwhile, in the States, we're especially attuned to the problems facing women writers in particular."

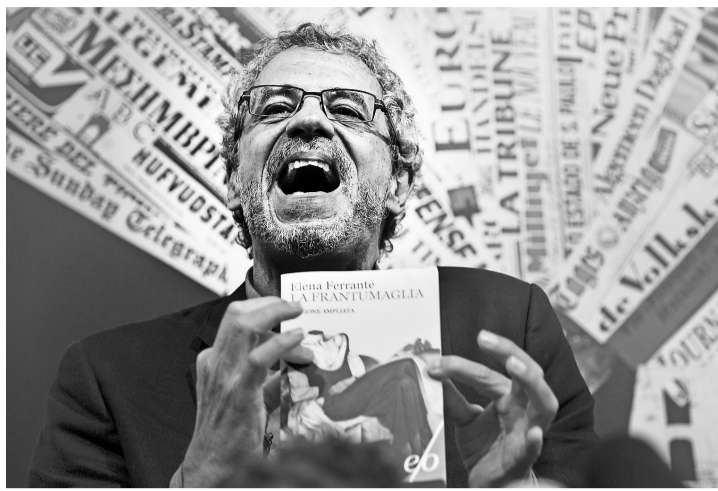
Ms. Ferrante's series of four Neapolitan novels, which trace the complex friendship of two women against the backdrop of Italian postwar history, came out in Italian and English from 2012 to 2015 and has resonated deeply with readers, especially women. There are 2.6 million copies in print in English, and the books have been published in 40 countries.

In a report published simultaneously on Oct. 2 on *The New York Review of Books* website, as well as in French, German and Italian publications, Claudio Gatti, an investigative reporter for the Italian financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore*, said financial and real estate records led him to conclude that Anita Raja, a recently retired public librarian, literary translator and consultant at Ms. Ferrante's Rome-based publishing house, Edizioni E/O, was actually Ms. Ferrante. Particularly convincing for him: Payments from the publishing house to Ms. Raja rose sharply in 2014 and 2015, when the Neapolitan novels became international best sellers.

Though there have been a number of defenses of Mr. Gatti's work, the outcry against it in the United States and Britain dominated the news cycle. In *The New Republic*, Charlotte Shane wrote a critique titled "The Sexist Big Reveal." Others compared it to sexual assault.

The American novelist Jennifer Weiner, a vocal critic of what she sees as bias against women in publishing, wrote on Twitter: "Q's about work/life balance. Profiles with descriptions of her looks or clothes. What else did Elena Ferrante dodge by remaining anonymous?"

Later last week, the British novelist Jeanette Winterson contributed a column to *The Guardian* inveighing against the report's "malice and sexism." "At the bottom of this so-called investigation into Ferrante's identity is an obsessional outrage at the success of a writer — female —



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The Italian journalist Claudio Gatti contends that the novelist Elena Ferrante is actually Anita Raja, a literary translator.

who decided to write, publish and promote her books on her own terms," she wrote.

But in continental Europe the response less often invoked feminism and focused on privacy, a sensitive issue for many Europeans, personally and politically. Europe's highest court has ruled that Google had to allow people to erase links they found compromising and regulators have also questioned Facebook's privacy policy.

In France, revealing Ms. Ferrante's identity was generally seen as rude, not sexist.

"It's a bit as if a GoPro camera had been installed in Salinger's garden at his house in Cornish, New Hampshire, to show us the recluse while he watered his geraniums," the French daily *Libération* wrote of that reclusive

novelist. In France, where two of the four Neapolitan novels have been released since last year and became best sellers, people are strong believers in the idea of a "jardin secret" (a secret garden), or private lives.

"It would be interesting if it were somebody very well known who was hiding behind Elena Ferrante, but if it's an unknown person like Anita Raja, so what?" said Florence Noiville, the editor of foreign fiction for *Le Monde des Livres*, the book supplement of the French daily *Le Monde*.

(Ms. Noiville said that Mr. Gatti had approached *Le Monde* with his report, but editors there declined to publish it. The *New York Times* also declined to publish the report, which would have involved coordinating with multiple journalistic partners.)

The responses were also about privacy in Italy, where Ms. Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, although best sellers, have had a mixed critical reception, and where Ms. Raja's name has been mentioned for years as possibly being behind Ms. Ferrante.

"I am already nostalgic for the unnamed Elena Ferrante," the commentator Michele Serra wrote in *La Repubblica*.

The *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino partly attributes the outcry to readers' investment in Ms. Ferrante's anonymity, which seems a political act against a culture obsessed with image.

"The response to Gatti's report was more heated in the States, where feminist media is mainstream and developed, celebrity narratives are politicized to a fever pitch in order to excuse our obsession with them, and the clamor of the election has served as a constant, excruciating reminder of the persistence of sexism — that even the worst man is allowed to do a thousand things that a decent woman can't," she wrote in an email.

Sarah Churchwell, a literature professor at the School of Advanced Study at the University of London, said the question of whether women were held to a double standard was "very live" in Anglo-American culture. "It's on people's minds, for very good reason, and they're primed to interpret hostile actions against women in gendered terms," she said in an email.

"The question is whether a man would have been treated to the same malice, and for myself I

think that's an open question," she added.

Some critics, including women, defended Mr. Gatti's reporting on a newsworthy topic that had been frequently discussed in the Italian news media. In *New York Magazine*, Noreen Malone wrote that leaping from Mr. Gatti's report to a conversation on "the general terribleness" of men "seems to me both an almost-insulting underestimation of the fortitude of the author, and a severe overestimation of the harm that might be done by connecting universally praised work to its actual creator."

Others noted that Ms. Raja was of Polish Jewish descent and said that if she were indeed the author of the Neapolitan novels, it was a testament to the power of the literary imagination. Some said that the debates about whether Ms. Raja's privacy had been violated were being conflated with debates about the validity of research into authors' lives. "The result has been a theoretically incoherent attack on biographical criticism as such, informed by a defective understanding of the role that authorship plays in structuring the experience of reading novels," Merve Emre and Len Gutkin wrote in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*.

In an interview, Mr. Gatti said he was an investigative journalist, not a misogynist, and had wanted to solve one of the biggest literary mysteries in the world. "It turned out that she was a woman," he said. "It could have easily turned out that it was a man."

A Cultural Time Capsule When Sparks Flew

If Tim Lawrence had wanted his third book, "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983," to go pop, he would have titled it "The World That Made Madonna," picked a different cover, and added a chapter or two focusing on her. He wouldn't need to do much more.

The years covered in his book were the crucial early ones of Madonna's musical and cultural development, when she was seeing the same shows, perusing the same galleries and dancing on the same floors as everyone from CBGB's punks to the Bronx rappers making their way downtown to perform with increasing frequency.

But Madonna is not the focus here because everything surrounding her is the focus. Using a single character as a lens would have worked against Mr. Lawrence's thesis: that the New York party culture of the early '80s is

time showing that intermingling in action.

The focus here is clearly music. Mr. Lawrence even includes some D.J. playlists for the listener to investigate. But "Life and Death" is more expansive than that — it takes you deep into a time and place, the good-old-bad-old-days of pre-Rudolph Giuliani New York, which many have valorized for some time now. If the 1970s have been thoroughly examined, the early '80s have been left relatively unexplored, and while Mr. Lawrence provides a lot of minutiae, he also delivers a story with some sweep.

Once again, Mr. Lawrence's heroes are the night crawlers of '70s and '80s New York dance clubs. His first two books focus on a pair of men whose cultural reach far outweighs their personal fortunes: David Mancuso, proprietor of the foundational disco the Loft in SoHo (its first party was on Valentine's Day 1970) in "Love Saves the Day" (2004); and the mercurial, wildly eclectic Arthur Russell in "Hold On to Your Dreams" (2009). Obscure in his day, Mr. Russell, a cellist with a still-improbable résumé that includes chamber compositions, plangent pop songs and a handful of extraordinarily creative disco 12-inches, is now the locus of a thriving cult following fed by a series of reissues.

Those two men also make appearances in "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor," but as part of an ensemble cast that's hardly short on star power. Others includes the artists Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy (Fred Braithwaite) and David Wojnarowicz; the D.J.s Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa and Jellybean Benitez; the young Run-D.M.C., Melle Mel and Russell Simmons; Blondie's Deborah Harry and Chris Stein; and, yes, Madonna, who finally arrives on Page 248, appearing live at Danceteria, where, by her third show, her fee will outstrip the promoter's budget.

They, along with scores of others, were hitting clubs in this era, and Mr. Lawrence makes a tight-knit case for the sociocultural value of clubs as meeting places for artists of different disciplines, particularly in New York, where property values were still low after the city's near-bankruptcy in the mid-70s. Though perhaps this was already beginning to change. As Mr. Lawrence notes, "After a long slump, the real estate business was in 'high gear,' reported architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable in the summer of 1980."

By 1981, Steve Mass, founder of the Mudd Club, says: "There was this explosion of 20-odd clubs. Everyone was starting a club based on the fact that it cost no money. One of my bartenders went down the block and started doing nights in a strip club."

Mr. Mass's spot, which opened in TriBeCa in 1978, was the first of what would be called "rock discos" at the turn of the '80s. Live bands played alongside

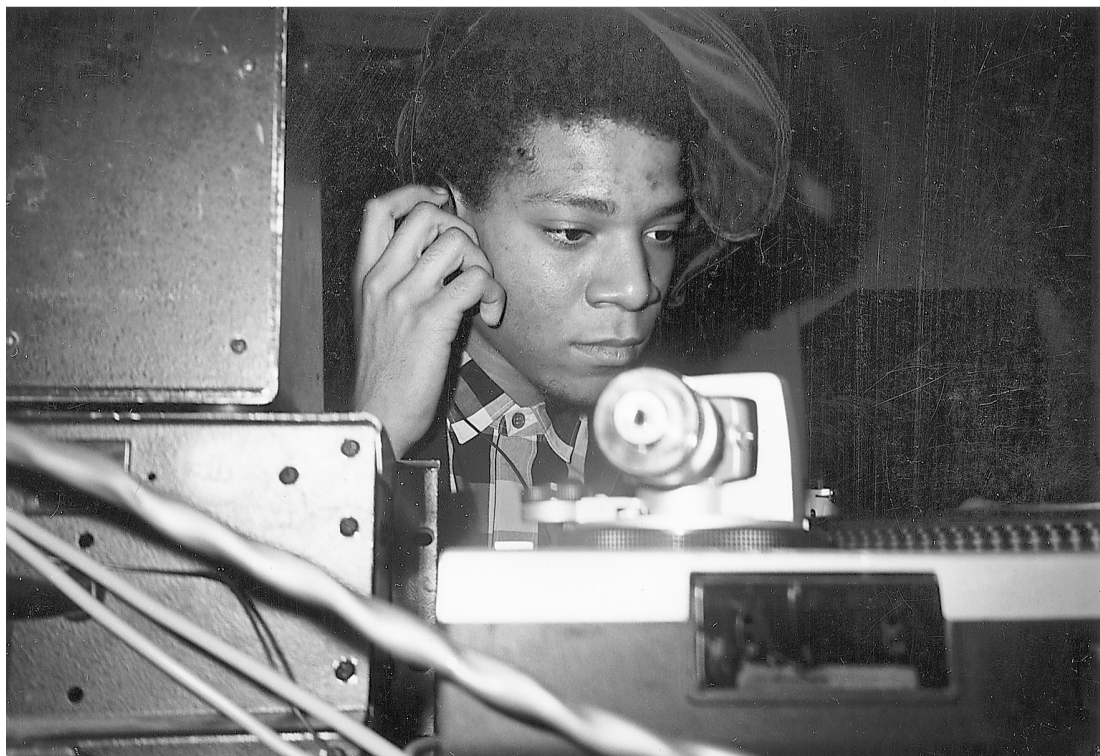


SCOTT MORGAN



BOBBY GROSSMAN

Intermingling cultures in action: above, Anita Sarko D.J.-ing at the Mudd Club, circa 1980; left, Fred Braithwaite, a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy, in 1980; below, Jean-Michel Basquiat as D.J. in the lounge at Area.



JOHNNY DYNELL

D.J.s, and the D.J.s tended to refuse to play straight-up disco, though many kept things danceable, even before beat-matching became standard among club jocks. But Mudd Club also helped shift New York clubbers' concept

of cool away from the hauteur of Studio 54 in Midtown, with its infamous velvet rope. Mischievously, Mr. Mass had a blacksmith create an industrial chain and stanchion for the Mudd Club's entry, boasting: "The

velvet rope was designed to keep the people lacking taste, the underclass, away. But I took the velvet rope and devalued it."

The art world gets special notice here, in particular the trajectories of Haring — gay,

sharp, friendly, and dead of complications from AIDS by 1990 — and Basquiat, a magnetic presence who in addition to becoming a world-famous artist also dabbled in music. (He would die of a heroin overdose in 1988.) Basquiat played in the experimental quartet Gray and produced K-Rob vs. Rammellzee's still stunning hip-hop 12-inch "Beat Bop," issued by Profile Records, whose executive Cory Robbins turned down Basquiat's offer to make artwork for the sleeve because "he would make more money if he stuck with the standard Profile jacket." (The earlier original, Basquiat-designed cover, pressed in small numbers on a tiny label, now fetches as much as \$1,500.)

Basquiat even occasionally spun his own, decidedly undisco mix of records in clubs, insisting to Johnny Dynell, a Mudd Club and Danceteria D.J., that "Anyone who can't dance to John Coltrane can't dance."

As the mid-1980s approached, downtown wasn't so carefree anymore. When 1983 came to a close, Dow Jones was up more than 200 points over a year earlier, bringing silly money to an area unused to it. "An era shaped by deepening inequality, accelerating commodity consumption and an obsession with surface image was making its presence felt," Mr. Lawrence writes.

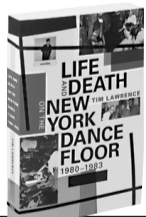
He quotes Michael Zilkha, founder of the "mutant disco" label ZE Records. "A lot of it had to do with the Reagan ethos," Mr. Zilkha says, when everything "started to revolve around money. The more you retained your leftist ideals the more alienated you became."

Ann Magnuson, the actress and 1980s party promoter, sensibly says near the book's end, "Don't romanticize having no money!" Then she adds: "But would I rather be a 22-year-old now or back then? Back then, absolutely."



Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983

By Tim Lawrence
Illustrated. 578 pages.
Duke University Press. \$27.95.



of interest because it allowed the intersection of a wide array of subcultures, which sent sparks flying. Gallery owners and graffiti artists, punk bands and hip-hop D.J.s, performance artists and budding entrepreneurs all commingled — and, as "Life and Death" amply demonstrates, left defining footprints not only on one another's work, but sometimes on the forms themselves.

Mr. Lawrence, a professor of cultural studies at the University of East London, provides a lot to chew on, sometimes too much. Occasionally his paragraphs are weighted down with alphabetical lists of, say, every notable band that played at a particular club in a given year — like a garnish that overwhelms the dish. And he restates his thesis a few too many times, particularly unnecessary since he spends so much

Michaelangelo Matos is the author of "The Underground Is Massive: How Electronic Dance Music Conquered America."