

Bella Mia by Donatella Di Pietrantonio

Translated by Franca Scurti Simpson: Calisi Press, 2015

Rebuilding shattered lives after seismic loss.

Lips tremor with grief, hands tremor with age, voices tremor with anger. Central Italy has been wracked by earthquakes in recent years causing widespread devastation and loss of life. 'Bella Mia' explores the aftermath of one such true event in the historic city of L'Aquila in the early hours of the sixth of April 2009.

At the heart of the story is a fictional family surviving in temporary shelter. Caterina has lost her twin sister Olivia in the disaster, who was mother to a teenaged boy. A single woman and artist in her thirties, Caterina struggles to come to terms with her loss, making sacrifices to look after her newly bereaved nephew, Marco, while comforting her mother in her grief at the death of a child. They live in the 'C.A.S.E.', provisional accommodation in an artificial suburb lacking in essential services.

'I voluntarily return to the place that killed my sister.'



The nephew makes forbidden visits to the Red Zone, the historic town centre that now stands deserted. Eerie details reveal a place frozen in time as dusty posters outside the cinema promote films showing the day before the earthquake. One building has lost its façade entirely, its contents exposed to the world with clothes hanging in an open wardrobe and pasta on the kitchen shelves. Marco sneaks in to his cordoned-off house, a trespasser in his own home desperate to feel close to his late mother whose favourite snack, a jar of anchovies, sits half eaten on the worktop.

This is a beautifully detailed account of life in extraordinary circumstances providing a realistic insight into the nature of sudden bereavement. Memories of two birthday cakes filling the fridge and the twins' annual midnight toast in their shared childhood bedroom contrast with heartbreakingly intimate moments such as the cleansing of Olivia's body by her sister and mother in preparation for the funeral. At the local cemetery, a friendship develops between two grieving mothers, one of whom has lost her six-year-old daughter and worries for all the children at rest there as the weather grows cold.

Bella Mia is a prizewinning book with an important message about the real-life response to the disaster. The author reveals how, prior to the earthquake and after months of warning tremors, the Orwellian sounding Italian National Commission for the Forecast and Prevention of Major Risks had declared it safe for residents to stay in their homes when in reality, laws regarding construction of earthquake-proof buildings had not been properly enforced. Poorly built houses were subsequently unable to withstand the impact.

The earthquake is described in harrowing detail as birds fall silent and dogs bark frantically in the early hours of the morning. A desperate search for survivors in the rubble ensues. The main tremor only lasted twenty seconds but its consequences persist to this day. Over three hundred people were killed including children

and young students. One thousand five hundred were injured and around sixty-five thousand made homeless from the town and nearby villages.

Caterina's family endures a state funeral with rows of coffins lined up on a red carpet in the glare of photographers and television crews, followed by weeks living in shared tents.

'We were privileged refugees at the camp. Famous chefs would come and cook for our meagre appetites.'

After recent events in Italy, this story powerfully resonates. Caterina's reassurance that they only get one earthquake 'every 300 years' has already been sadly disproved. This year alone, earthquakes have affected the regions of Umbria, Le Marche, Lazio and Abruzzo, killing over two hundred people and highlighting the continuing state of limbo experienced by the survivors of 2009.

Today, L'Aquila's centre remains unfinished amidst allegations that corruption has hindered progress. Part building site, part ghost town, many of its former residents are still languishing in temporary accommodation, their lives suspended as they wait, forced to come to terms with the likelihood that their old homes may have to be demolished and rebuilt.

'The bureaucracy is mind-blowing, it slows the process down, every time we're nearly there something else comes up.'

But *Bella Mia* is ultimately a story of human resilience. As time goes on, hearts that were already fractured before the earthquake and almost destroyed by it gradually begin to heal. The nephew tentatively restores his shattered relationship with his father, Caterina opens herself up to love, and a stray dog joins the family. The key message is one of fragile hope as lives are re-built and the Italian sense of community and tradition survives in adversity.

'L'Aquila bella mia, my beloved, I want to see you again.'

About the publisher

Calisi Press is an independent publisher committed to promoting unique and high-quality work by Italian women writers in translation. It was originally set up to promote Donatella Di Pietrantonio's other great novel, 'My Mother is a River.'

About the reviewer

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