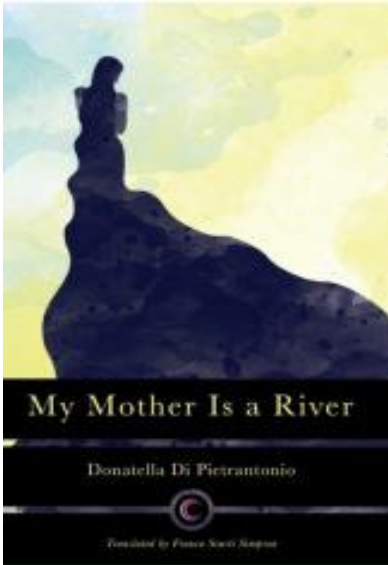


My Mother Is A River by Donatella Di Pietrantonio

Translated by Franca Scurti Simpson: Calisi Press, 4 November 2015

A moving exploration of the complex relationship between a daughter and her mother in the shadow of dementia

My Mother Is a River is a story of love, relationships and identity lost and found. It explores an only daughter's response to her mother's descent into the grip of a cruel disease which causes the gradual loss of someone who remains physically present.



The unnamed daughter takes on the role of narrator. She pieces together the life story of her mother, Esperina, who was born in a remote village in Italy during the Second World War into a poor family whose traditions had lasted for centuries. The story provides a glimpse of a nation at a key point in its history as it develops into a modern, united country. We discover how events of the past shaped Esperina's identity and by telling her story, the daughter gives her a voice and reveals her to be a strong, robust woman who worked hard and provided for her family against the odds.

It is unique in the memoir genre because it is up to the daughter to tell us about the mother's life as Esperina is no longer able to do so. The daughter's re-telling of her mother's story, intertwined with her own, reveals Esperina's transformation from a fiercely independent woman into a fragile shadow of her former self.

The challenges faced by a working mother resonate in the modern world. Guilt and misplaced priorities are revealed as the daughter recalls how Esperina would toil in the fields by day and be busy with housework in the evening, resentment emerging as she recalls her mother being 'too accustomed to sacrifice to allow herself the pleasure of spending time with her baby.' The daughter herself is forced to adapt to a shifting role as she becomes the parent figure, escorting her mother to appointments and providing reassurance.

As the story unfolds, time is depicted as a precious and precarious commodity with both nurturing and destructive powers. We learn the cruel way in which dementia prevents any sense of resolution to conflict. With age, the daughter herself has a clearer understanding of her mother's choices and wishes she could resolve her anger. Her early experiences shaped her character and deep down she still feels like a neglected child longing for her mother's time.

'I was still planning to settle my score with her when she escaped from me into her illness.'

The daughter states directly that she does not care, but her love is obvious in the kind way she speaks to her as she attempts to help her manage the chaos of her mind, placing labels on drawers and buying her a dishwasher. These little tokens provide a poignant insight into her desire to help her mother maintain her routine for as long as possible. The truth of her love is expressed not in words but through actions and in the seemingly mundane details of everyday life. She chooses her words carefully and uses them to help her mother make sense of her actions.

Old routines of rural village life which have died out mirror Esperina's disappearing memories. There are rich descriptions of food and festivities and beautiful details paint a vivid picture of Italy in the past. Italian culture

and tradition are richly depicted and the importance of food permeates almost every page. Esperina continues to cook but mistakes caused by memory loss and confusion become increasingly serious, resulting in a meal 'even the pigs won't eat.' She eventually leaves a pan in the fridge containing nothing but broken glass.

My Mother Is a River is a challenging read which truly showcases the innovation and risk-taking that characterises the contemporary small press scene. It is a searingly honest account of the complex range of feelings experienced when caring for a loved one with dementia. Guilt, grief, frustration and anger; protectiveness, love, nostalgia and regret. The reader is invited into the chaos which the narrator is attempting to put into order through words as she goes along. The narrator shifts frequently between past and present, recounting shared experiences directly with her mother and making private observations about her current state. Harrowing topics such as sexual abuse and childhood disfigurement are described in an almost fairy-tale-like way with references to ogres and young farm maidens in distress. The novel subtly depicts the therapeutic power of storytelling to help make sense of the world as the daughter observes: 'I dispense my own story to her, and a...tablet every twelve hours, in the mild hope that it will slow down the degeneration of her neurons.'

'Her memory is now a manuscript traced with invisible ink; I leaf through it page by page and hold it to the flame to reveal its secret.'

About the publisher

This was the author's first novel and won two prestigious literary prizes. It was published by Calisi Press, an independent publisher committed to promoting Italian women writers in the English speaking world. It was founded specifically to publish this novel, such was the enthusiasm of the founder for its unique quality and message. The author's second book, *Bella Mia*, was published in Italy in 2014 by Elliot Edizioni, a publishing house promoting up and coming writers with a unique voice.

About the reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader and creative writer who recently spent two years living in Rome. Her own mother has recently been diagnosed with early onset dementia. Follow Becky on Twitter: @BeckyD123