Talking Books with Dacia Maraini

Natasha Lardera (February 26, 2016)



This past week one of Italy's leading intellectuals, writer Dacia Maraini, visited for the third time NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò not just to present her latest book, La Bambina e il Sognatore, but to “talk books” in a lively conversation. Led by the questions of Michelangelo La Luna (University of Rhode Island), Rebecca Falkoff (NYU) and Sole Anatrone (UC Berkeley), Maraini eagerly discussed her entire career, which started in the 1960s, and her body of work, which includes novels, plays, essays, articles and poetry.

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Although her debut novel, La Vacanza, translated by Stuart Hood as The Holiday: a Novel, was written between 1960 and 1961, Maraini was a true storyteller even before official publication. She learned that from her parents whom she referred to as “Libri Parlanti,” Talking Books. When she was only 7 years old, Maraini and her family, her parents and her two sisters, were interned in a concentration camp in Japan. “There were no books, but coming from a family of intellectuals we found a way,” Maraini explained. “Our parents were trying to teach us something. And like the characters of Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, who, in order to keep literature alive, had to memorize their favorite books, they'd become talking books and tells us stories. This not only helped with literature but also with the Italian language which we did not want to lose.”

The art of storytelling thrived in the household, before Maraini herself her grandmother and her father had been writers, along with the ability to observe the world with wide open eyes. “We were not a rich family and the only richness we owned were books,” Maraini added when recalling some of the family memories that shaped her and her art, “They were always there, even when everything else was lacking.”

And just like a member of her family, Nani Sapienza, the teacher who happens to be the Sognatore (dreamer) of La Bambina e il Sognatore, is a storyteller whose method of teaching is based on tales and stories that stimulate the children's imagination and make them reason just like adults. Sapienza, a father whose daughter was taken away by a cruel disease, becomes obsessed with the disappearance of a little girl and enlists not only his classroom but the whole town in her search.

“Reading the news everyday I learned that a lot of children disappear every year,” Maraini explained, “and Sapienza just like Orpheus goes down in the world of shadows looking for Lucia but on his path he meets other little girls. Girls who have voices.”

Most of Maraini's work has been classified as feminist as the most reoccurring themes in her writing deal with women issues such as women breaking free of traditional gender roles or the discrimination against women in society. La Bambina e il Sognatore, is Maraini's first novel written in a male point of view but that doesn't make it any different from her body of work. The role of the father is carefully observed and Maraini brings to the surface the desire of fatherhood that many men now have but that in the past was either absent or hidden. “The separation of family roles is not so automatic,” Maraini clarified, “In the past mothers were reduced to function instead of being seen as a person. But conventions change. Take incest for example, there was a time when it was accepted. You can't stop changes but you can guide them. Men's desire of being with their children is one of these changes.”

La Bambina e il Sognatore is a giallo, a thriller, where the search for a little girl becomes an interior search, that would force the teacher to redefine the past without it being forgotten.

Find more pics of the event on i-Italy Facebook page >> [5]

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