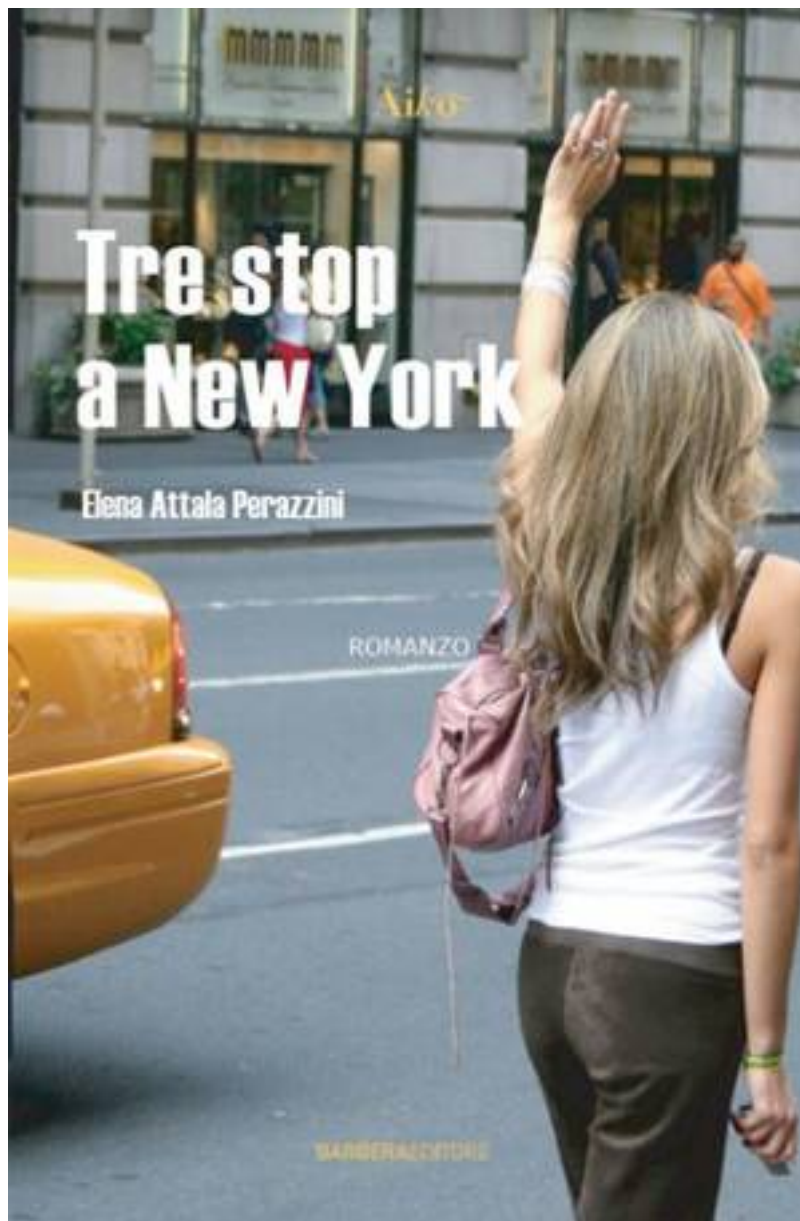


Stop! Let's Talk With Elena

Letizia Airos Soria (August 25, 2009)



Three stories in search of something. An extraordinary confidant at a restaurant in downtown Manhattan, collects them, elaborates on them, re-thinks them, and presents them in a novel. And New York is described once again with its certainties and uncertainties, both before and after September 11. Interview with Elena Attala Perazzini, author of “Three Stops in New York,” recently



released in Italy (Edizioni Barbera)

East Side. Stories told at the bar in a restaurant in downtown Manhattan. Three lives side-by-side. Unique and singular, yet emblematic in their own way. Experiences that on the one hand seem to taunt the city that hosts them, on the other they move through the city without disrupting its flow.

They are stories told to a young Italian woman who chose to live in the metropolis that has inhabited the collective imagination of many for decades.

And we got to know Elena Attala Perazzini from Rimini from behind the bar, as well. It was years ago when perhaps no one had thought that she would later recount all that she saw and heard.

Her presence stood out in the restaurant's softly lit atmosphere. Slender, large and attentive eyes, stylish. Under her long hair, a long gaze, the attention of someone who knows how to put anyone at ease - and not just with a plate of excellent food.

She is hospitable, accompanying her clients as the true lady of the house. She wasn't an ordinary manager of a restaurant in Manhattan. And her guests soon realized this as they talked at length with her; sometimes they even vented and shared. They were almost confessing, and they usually returned to find her. In a city that absorbs all the time you have, a city that makes you run and leave you little time to think, for many Elena takes on the role of a confidant, a quasi psychologist.

This young woman, returning from work, day after day, usually at night, reports the stories that left a deep impression on her writing. These are the stories that today have become a novel.

For this interview, we try to tell the story behind "Three Stops in New York." We do this almost from behind the scenes. What was going on in Elena's head while her customers were talking? And who was Elena?

She arrives in New York for a three-month dance program. She still has thirteen years of training during which she is put to the test with different jobs.

"I was infatuated with the city and I wanted to stay at any cost. I worked with RAI as a producer, at Rizzoli as an assistant to Oriana Fallaci, in PR for Cipriani's Rainbow Room, and I finally decided to open a place of my own. Meanwhile I continued to write for myself, doing mostly Italian theater reviews as a freelancer."

We begin with her experience at Rizzoli. Her eyes brighten. The myth of Oriana Fallaci still remains intact. "I had been warned that she was a difficult person, that on average people with her 'lasted' three weeks. Hired and fired. I was 29 years old. I began as her secretary. I passed on information, transferred calls. I was a filter. Then I became her personal assistant. It was a brief experience, but I intensely remember the only day I went to her house. She was in a good mood. We spent an afternoon talking. She told me a lot about herself. She told me about her illness, her experiences as a journalist. I saw this tough woman up-close, seemingly a little relentless. She had always fascinated me as a journalist, but above all as a writer. And I discovered her soft side, her humanity. That was one of those times when I said to myself: I must write."

But the birth of Elena's first novel was a long process. "I was then overwhelmed by other experiences. I managed public relations at the Rainbow Room and I opened my own restaurant. I took it over in May of 2001, opened in July, but then there was September 11. An intense, difficult experience on many different levels. I think we survived during a difficult period due to word of mouth. This experience gave me a lot and I always continued to write."

She shares this: "Writing was my way of understanding what I was doing, where I was going. Once the restaurant closed I could not restrain my desire to describe what I had experienced, what I had gathered in a series of notes I took over the years.

I reread what I had written and I still found them interesting. Then I lived through September 11 and I wanted to share my own point of view."



The rhythm of Elena's prose is suspenseful, cinematic. The desire to continue reading grows proportionally to the reader's curiosity. "I worked hard on this aspect. I wrote thinking about what I'd like to read. My first sources of inspiration are the minimalist American writers of the '80s. Raymond Carver, Bret Easton Ellis, Jay MacInerney. And of course Fitzgerald and Hemingway. I am fascinated by style more than content."

"Even in the movies I like it when you are taken by the hand, with ups and downs. With emotions that reach a peak and then subside. In these cases, the writer decides to nearly bore the reader and then build tension again.... All of this goes on while maintaining a great deal of detachment."

But let's get to the plot of the book. Three stories with three very different characters. How did you choose them? How did you create them? What do they have in common? You have met so many people....

"Everything was born out of my incomprehension of how to deal with a culture that is so different from my own. I come from a small town.... I chose the people I was curious about, but with whom I identified with at the same time."

At the end I realized that I saw a part of myself in each of them. What I want to become or even what I know I could never do. It's been self-reflective; the book is certainly not autobiographical but has a lot of me in it...."

I remember, for example, how much I was struck as a gay man told me that he had decided to have a child without a life partner. For him it was normal to want another child by himself, to save money and to change jobs for this.... He was an eclectic person, perhaps a little crazy looking for a family.... Weird to me. But I would slowly realize that all of this is very New York."

I was amazed by people who didn't have a definite plan in life, able to continuously reinvent themselves. I felt like a white fly.... Then through all three characters, so to speak, I became forcibly involved in their lives...."

Elena's stories unfold and then touch on the dramatic events of September 11. She tells us what surprised her about the reactions of New Yorkers.

"Yes, they were days that made us think, we Italians. The reaction to this tragic event was practical and pragmatic. Solidarity and organization could be seen immediately. Even then, the pain did not allow us to forget how communication should be guided by appearance in order to have the desired effect.... It was necessary to intervene immediately while looking to the future. I am re-learning this way of dealing with problems, even in different situations like the economic crisis. Buying clubs, families who are organizing, advertising...."

And one of the book's messages is really hidden between the lines of what she has said before: it is important to look ahead with optimism.

"Yes, I hope this message gets out. My characters' lives are based on insecurity and risk. But it is important to test yourself, not to give up. All three have this kind of drive. And New York teaches us this way of life, of feeling. Don't ever give up, never. Continue to believe in yourself. Then things will happen...."

While Elena was working in her restaurant, a television series set in New York City grew to cult status almost immediately: *Sex and the City*. "Yes, I think that in many ways the story of Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte has been a real and accurate portrait of frenetic life in Manhattan, even though it mostly focuses on light romantic comedy."

"The stories in my book, even if they are very different, lend themselves, I think, to becoming a television show. Think about the fact that the novel is set in a place where so many people come together, a place that everyone recognizes. There are characters inspired by real people.... For this reason I began to reduce the number of short stories in order to pitch them as a script.... We'll see...."



And how important was it that Elena was Italian as she approached her clients and friends? And being in a restaurant serving food from Emilia Romagna?

"They would not have revealed themselves in the same way. I think. They were also very trusting because I was Italian. Italians of our generation are seen positively, especially in certain fields such as food and fashion. We are looked at with admiration. When they get to know you, they are happy to become friends and get to know your culture."

What would Elena like her stories to inspire? "The courage to change, to take off old clothes. To put your own story aside and live in a different culture where you become something new in the eyes of someone who already knows you. The courage to take risks, to find yourself somewhere else. The power to strip yourself of the many prejudices that are rooted in our history.... Then I think my book will remain imprinted on a thoroughly New York modus vivendi."

"It's a city where many people don't have families. For this reason, many strong human relationships are created. I don't value relationships based on how long ago they started. For me, a relationship that only began a few months ago can be very important if two people really grow. It's about giving and receiving something in return. Time is short and you need to be nourished. Therefore you tend to give more to those people who really interest you. People with whom I'm still friends...there have been intense, deep moments of truth."

At the table for the book's launch in Italy, Elena admits that she already has an idea for another book. "I hope to continue writing. It's what I would like to do for the rest of my life. I feel more secure than ever, I like it, I'm passionate about it."

We flash back to the memory of her at the bar, where years ago on several occasions we saw Elena at work. While others told their stories, Elena stood in silence listening and without directly planning to, she began to lay the foundation for telling her stories with her own personal style, full of heart, character, and determination. It was the best way to tell the stories of others with the breath of a city like New York.

"Tre stop a New York"

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(Translated by Giulia Prestia)

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