

Donatella Di Pietrantonio, *The Brittle Age*

In the mountainous rural region of Abruzzo, a local community is blighted by an event of brutal savagery. Thirty years later, its effects are still being felt by the inhabitants. Two intertwined narratives, separated by decades, form the basis of this evocative novel, the winner of the most recent Strega Prize, Italy's equivalent of the Booker.

Lucia, the first-person narrator, is a physiotherapist, estranged from her banker husband who works in distant Turin. As the Covid pandemic surges, their student daughter Amanda returns from Milan to her mother. Amanda is now the same age as her mother was at the time of the tragedy, and this perhaps sends Lucia's thoughts back to those events, based by the author on a real-life case of double murder by an itinerant shepherd in the same region in 1997. While the older narrative follows in its outline the details of that case (the "Morrone crime"), the near-contemporary timeline examines the disruption provoked by the return of the daughter to the family home, and the mother's fraught relationship with her.

Donatella Di Pietrantonio writes in brief, intense chapters, shifting the focus constantly, so that the reader is obliged to make the connections between the narrator's young adulthood, shadowed by the shattering nature of the crime, and her present, middle-aged self, coping with the vagaries of her aging father and her sulky, reticent daughter. The author is a native of the region, and her descriptions of the little Appenine mountain community ring true. Lucia and her childhood friend, Doralice spend much of their time as young women at the campsite run by Doralice's parents at the Dente del Lupo, the teeth of the wolf, the rock spur that dominates the valley. It's there that the tragedy unfolds, and there that Lucia needs to deal with her memories and with the changed circumstances of the present.

What impressed me about this novel was its unflinching honesty. The characters are flawed, and their lives often lack direction and purpose. The novel's title emphasises the delicate nature of the human condition, perhaps more so in the original Italian: "L'età fragile" translates obviously as "the fragile age" and fragility in all its senses certainly resonates through this novel. It's probably worth mentioning the translation here. Ann Goldstein, who also translates the novels of Elena Ferrante, is on record as saying that she is "literal minded" in her approach to translation. This sometimes, to my mind, surfaces in rather clunky expression, which, though accurately rendering the Italian, is perhaps too literal. A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate the point. Doralice doesn't know if she can attend Lucia's wedding reception: "It was difficult. I shouldn't count her for the restaurant." When Lucia goes back to Amanda's student flat to collect her things: "I find the apartment silent, no-one's there in this period." In both cases, a very minor change would have produced a more natural English expression, while losing nothing of the meaning in the original. Another rather odd word choice, perhaps forced on the translator, is the nickname for Doralice's mother: the sheriff. It seems to be her husband's jokey reference to her dominant role in the marriage, and certainly in the Italian text, the author uses *sceriffa* throughout. She isn't a sheriff, of course – she runs the kitchen at the campsite. I suppose this minor quibble sums up the perils of literary translation.

*The Brittle Age* is haunting and memorable. Di Pietrantonio deftly immerses the reader in small-town Italian life, and the continuing sense of unease that animates the characters. The brooding atmosphere of the Maiella mountains, the resistance to change, the echoes of the past, all combine to create a deeply satisfying and compelling experience for the reader.

Rob Spence's home on the web is at [robspence.org.uk](http://robspence.org.uk)

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