

BELLA MIA (MY DARLING)

Donatella Di Pietrantonio

Analysis by Silvy Boccaletti

Social Novel

Bella mia (My Darling) is a novel by Donatella Di Pietrantonio published in 2018. Set in L’Aquila, the novel tells the story of Caterina, a woman who loses her twin sister Olivia in the earthquake of April 6, 2009. By portraying characters who struggle to reconstruct their identities and community, the novel examines the themes of grief, the fragility of familial bonds, and resilience in the face of devastation.

Year of Publication	2014
Publication Place	Turin
Editor	Einaudi
Entity	2009 Aquila’s earthquake (Italy)

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 2009 Aquila’s earthquake (Italy)

REAL EVENT

Time	2009
Location	Abruzzo Italy
Coordinates	42.341861, 13.350449
Impacted Areas	Aquila, Tempera, San Gregorio, Demetrio, Villa Sant’ Angelo, Bazzano, Casentino, Tussillo, Poggio di Roio, Colle di Roio, Santa Rufina e Roio Piano
Seismic Fault	Paganica fault
Magnitude	6.3 Richter magnitude
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities
	"In the historic center of L’Aquila alone, 2,495 buildings—about two-thirds of the total—were severely damaged, with a devastating impact on the overall territorial structure" (Frisch 4)
Social Impacts	Deaths
	"308 lost their lives, around 1,500 were injured and 67,459 were displaced" (Musmeci 221)

Injuries

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Destruction Of Dwellings

"In the historic center of L'Aquila alone, 2,495 buildings—about two-thirds of the total—were severely damaged, with a devastating impact on the overall territorial structure" (Frisch 4)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"The most evident destruction can be seen in the real estate assets—both public and private—as well as among the cultural and architectural-monumental heritage, and in road infrastructure and essential network services" (Frisch 4)

Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

"The most evident destruction can be seen in the real estate assets—both public and private—as well as among the cultural and architectural-monumental heritage, and in road infrastructure and essential network services" (Frisch 4)

Relocation

"As of late January 2010, the situation is as follows: 12,059 residents of L'Aquila are housed in the accommodations provided by the C.A.S.E. Project; 2,366 have been assigned temporary housing modules (MAP); and 10,325 people are still staying in hotels on the coast or in the Guardia di Finanza barracks in L'Aquila" (Frisch 4)

Social Disruption

"Equally significant, however, is the damage to the economic system and the social cohesion of the community" (Frisch 4)

Earthquake 2009 L'Aquila earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	2009
Location	Abruzzo Italy
Impacted Areas	Cities, villages etc.
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	HousesReligious Buildings And Sites
Social Impacts	Destruction Of DwellingsDestruction Of Public BuildingsForced RelocationDestruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Caterina
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian

Reactions	Awareness	Fear	Anxiety	Discomfort	Distress
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Name	Olivia	
Age	Adult	
Gender	Female	
Native Place	Italy	
Nationality	Italian	
Reactions	Caution	Trust In Authorities

Name	Marco
Age	Adolescent
Gender	Male
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Avoidance

Name	Mother
Age	Old Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Calm

Reactions

Name	Caterina		
Age	Adult		
Gender	Female		
Native Place	Italy		
Nationality	Italian		
Reactions	Escape	Intervention	Survival Instinct

Name	Olivia		
Age	Adult		
Gender	Female		
Native Place	Italy		
Nationality	Italian		
Reactions	Fight For Survival	Intervention	Survival Instinct

Name	Marco
Age	Adolescent
Gender	Male
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans
Reactions	Fear Anxiety Discomfort

Group Attitudes

Name	Nonhuman beings
Reactions	Awareness Caution

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Metaphors	"Qualcuno aveva diminuito la velocità del frullatore matto che ci conteneva" 'Someone had turned down the speed of the mad blender that contained us' (Di Pietrantonio 107; my trans.) "Il suo nome non veniva ricevuto, sotto tutto quel peso" 'Her name could not be received, under all that weight' (Di Pietrantonio 110; my trans.) "Il nostro mondo ferito a morte" 'Our world mortally wounded' (Di Pietrantonio 110; my trans.) "Una calma paradossale è scesa per qualche momento" 'A paradoxical calm descended for a few moments' (Di Pietrantonio 110; my trans.)
Similes	"Sembrava proprio un'insegnante intenta a dirigere la prova di evacuazione" 'She really looked like a teacher overseeing an evacuation drill' (Di Pietrantonio 108; my trans.) "Un rumore discontinuo di corda tesa fin quasi allo strappo" 'An irregular sound, like a taut rope about to snap' (Di Pietrantonio 108; my trans.)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Cruel Nature Death
Syntax	Parataxis, Hypotaxis
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Bella mia (2014) by Donatella Di Pietrantonio is a poignant novel set in the aftermath of the devastating 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila, Italy. The story follows Caterina, a woman grappling with the sudden loss of her twin sister, Olivia, who died in the disaster. As Caterina takes on the responsibility of caring for her teenage nephew, Marco, she must also navigate her own grief and emotional isolation. Through a raw and lyrical narrative, the novel explores themes of mourning, resilience, and the complexities of familial bonds, ultimately offering a moving meditation on how to rebuild not only homes, but also fractured lives and identities.

On the night of April 6 the city of L'Aquila was shaken by a powerful earthquake that left a profound mark on both the landscape and the people who called it home. The tremor, a magnitude 6.3 quake, struck in the early hours, tearing through the city and surrounding villages, forever altering the lives of those caught in its grip. L'Aquila, renowned for its medieval charm and historic architecture, became a shell of its former self. The Aquila Cathedral, a stunning 13th-century treasure, was left severely damaged, as were countless other churches, universities, and homes that had stood for centuries. The streets, once filled with life and laughter, were now a maze of rubble and dust, the echoes of the quake's devastation still ringing in the air. The earthquake claimed 309 lives, and over 1,500

people were injured, many critically (Musmeci 221). Families were torn apart, and the devastation extended far beyond just the physical destruction of buildings—it affected the very heart of the community. In the aftermath, nearly 80,000 people were left homeless, forced to seek shelter in temporary camps, unsure of what would come next (Frisch 4).

By setting her novel in the months following the Aquila earthquake, the writer Pietrantonio focuses particularly on themes related to grief, motherhood, and survival, mirroring the emotional fractures of the characters with the physical devastation left behind by the disaster. The protagonist, Caterina, a ceramics artist, has lost her twin sister Olivia in the earthquake. She now lives in a temporary housing unit with her elderly mother and Olivia's teenage son, Marco, whom she is helping to raise. The novel follows Caterina's inner journey as she struggles to process her grief, support Marco in his trauma, and navigate life in a city that remains both physically and emotionally shattered. While the earthquake serves as the triggering event, the narrative is largely internal, exploring the psychological consequences of loss and the difficulty of rebuilding a life in a world that has been irrevocably altered. The complex and often fraught bond between sisters – especially twins – is central to this emotional landscape. Grief in *Bella Mia* is portrayed not as a linear process but as a chaotic, lingering presence. Caterina is haunted by absence, survivor's guilt, and persistent memories. The narrative captures the slow erosion of everyday life under the weight of trauma. One striking metaphor encapsulates this idea: "Il terremoto non guariva, era un'epilessia profonda della terra" 'Even the earthquake didn't heal; it was a deep epilepsy of the earth' (Di Pietrantonio 92; my trans.). On a symbolic level, the tremor is portrayed as an unpredictable illness, whose chronic nature reflects how psychological wounds endure long after the immediate crisis.

Among the novel's central themes are motherhood and substitution. Caterina becomes an unwilling yet devoted surrogate mother to Marco, stepping into Olivia's role with hesitation but growing commitment. This imposed motherhood raises questions about identity, duty, and emotional inheritance, and reveals how loss can transform relationships – often against our will.

Another key motif is that of ruins and rebuilding. The destruction wrought by the earthquake reflects the emotional collapse of the characters. The city of L'Aquila becomes a symbol of brokenness and inertia. Yet the novel also traces a slow, tentative process of reconstruction – not only of buildings, but of hope, connection, and purpose.

The characters' attitudes to seismic risk at the time of the earthquake are only briefly described in the novel. Marco, Caterina's son, appears calm and unaware of the looming danger. On the night of the earthquake, he goes out as usual and then sleeps peacefully at his mother's house: "È rientrato due minuti prima di te e si è messo subito a letto. Non ha paura di niente, questo figlio" 'He came back two minutes before you and immediately went to bed. He's not afraid of anything, this son of ours' (95; my trans.). Caterina is very afraid and anxious the day of the earthquake: "Avevo già paura la sera del 5 aprile. Mia madre la sentiva nel telefono, ha detto: vieni a dormire qui, al paese" 'I was already scared on the evening of April 5th. My mother could hear it in my voice over the phone, and she said: come sleep here, in the village' (92; my trans.). As she reported she has been struggling to fall asleep for days, she felt that her house was "abitata da tensioni invisibili, scricchiolii, improvvisi sfarinamenti tra i mattoni delle volte a crociera" 'inhabited by invisible tensions, creaks, sudden crumbling between the bricks of the vaulted ceilings' (92; my trans.). Olivia remains composed, embodying a protective and nurturing stance toward her family. Indeed, she adopted precautionary measures, organizing her home so she could escape as quickly as possible in case of a tremor. Moreover, she invited Caterina to sleep at her place: "Se è proprio necessario, siamo pronti a scappare. Ci ripariamo lì sotto e quando smette prendiamo quelle poche cose e via. Calmati, hai sentito l'ingegnere che ci ha controllato le case, hanno resistito bene agli altri terremoti" 'If it's really necessary, we're ready to run. We'll take shelter down there, and when it stops, we'll grab those few things and leave. Calm down, did you hear the engineer who checked our houses? They withstood the other earthquakes well' (95, my trans.). Caterina and Olivia's mother, belonging to a generation that has already lived through many misfortunes and survived other tragedies, remains calm and does not perceive the earthquake as a real threat: "No, lei no, fino a quando non le hanno tolto la figlia, era disposta a inserire il terremoto nel catalogo delle tante avversità databili della sua vita, come la neve del '56 che li aveva lasciati senza pane, o la polmonite dell'82, che non passava mai" 'No, not her – until they took her daughter from her, she was willing to file the earthquake among the many dateable hardships of her life, like the snowstorm of '56 that left them without bread, or the pneumonia in '82 that never seemed to end' (92; my trans.).

The text contains no references to the community's perception of earthquake risk; however, there are mentions of animal behavior – the only ones who seem to have sensed the earthquake's arrival and tried to give warning through their calls. The novel places greater emphasis on the arrival of the earthquake, which affects the main characters in different ways. Olivia is immediately reactive to the tremor and prepares everything needed to escape and ensure the safety of her sister and son: "È stata la prima a uscire dal riparo. Ha trovato, tastando intorno, la torcia caduta e con il fascio di luce la coperta che ha messo sulle spalle di Marco, lo zaino e le chiavi, che ha affidato a me. A ripensarla, sembrava proprio un'insegnante intenta a dirigere la prova di evacuazione, con una gravità superiore alla norma" 'She was the first to come out of the shelter. Feeling around, she found the fallen flashlight, and with its beam she located the blanket, which she placed on Marco's shoulders, the backpack, and the keys, which she handed to me. Looking back on it, she really seemed like a teacher overseeing an evacuation drill,

with a seriousness beyond the ordinary' (108; my trans.). However, it will be her who gets buried under the rubble and loses her life. Caterina immediately tries to escape, and when she realizes that her sister is no longer coming out of the house, she begins searching for her, digging through the rubble. Regarding Marco, once he gets out of the house, he desperately searches for his mother, calling her out loud and trying to move objects to find her.

Caterina and her mother, after an initial period spent living in emergency tents, "Nel campo eravamo deportati di lusso, venivano cuochi famosi a cucinare per il nostro scarso appetito e i politici a visitarci, con i vestiti sportivi adatti alla circostanza e le facce atteggiate da solidarietà" 'In the camp, we were luxury deportees – famous chefs came to cook for our faint appetite, and politicians came to visit us, dressed in sportswear suited to the occasion and wearing expressions of solidarity' (118; my trans.), move into the C.A.S.E, the new earthquake-resistant buildings built for the earthquake survivors. While they begin to live a new life in these places, Marco joins them, as he struggles to get along with his father, who lives in Rome.

More narrative weight is given to how the protagonists cope with the aftermath of the disaster, each adopting distinct psychological and social strategies to face shared trauma. Caterina adopts a resilient and maternal approach. Though initially reluctant, she assumes responsibility for Marco, and through caring for him begins to rebuild a sense of meaning. Her resilience is not heroic but quiet and hard-won, rooted in daily gestures of survival and love. Marco, now a young orphan, responds with anger and emotional withdrawal. His detachment and rebellious behavior underscore the challenges adolescents face in processing grief and rebuilding identity amid disorientation and loss. Caterina's elderly mother offers a counterpoint: a figure of continuity and tradition. Her coping strategy lies in routine and remembrance. She visits the cemetery daily, cooks, cleans, and tends to her daughter and grandson – small gestures that provide emotional stability and highlight the importance of cultural and familial roots in the healing process. Even in death, Olivia remains a central presence in the story. She is evoked through memories, objects, and the emotional imprint she left behind. Her lingering influence illustrates how love and attachment can outlive physical presence, offering both solace and motivation to those left behind.

The novel is rich in evocative and poetic imagery, transforming the earthquake event into an emotionally intense narrative. Metaphors make the chaos tangible, personifications bring objects to life, and similes help the reader to visualize and feel the actions and emotions of the characters more vividly. Di Pietrantonio's language is precise and emotionally resonant, yet never sentimental. She employs metaphors and a rich sensory imagery (dust, silence, tremors) and at times fragmented syntax that mimics the disorientation of trauma. The earthquake is portrayed as a chronic, uncontrollable convulsion of the earth, emphasizing its violence and persistence: "Il terremoto non guariva, era un'epilessia profonda della terra" 'The earthquake wasn't healing; it was a deep epilepsy of the earth' (92; my trans.) or as a chronic, uncontrollable convulsion of the earth, emphasizing as a crazed blender, highlighting the chaos, disorientation, and physical violence of the moment: "Qualcuno aveva diminuito la velocità del frullatore matto che ci conteneva" 'Someone had turned down the speed of the mad blender that contained us' (107; my trans.).

Different symbolic elements are used by the author to describe the devastating event, depicted as "lamento nello spessore dei muri" 'lament in the thickness of the walls' (92; my trans.), or a "sciame sismico" 'seismic swarm' (93; my trans.).

The punctuation style is fluid and narrative, with extensive use of commas, to indicate rapid sequences of actions or sensations. Periods are used frequently to create rhythm and break up the narrative, generating a sense of urgency or emotional exhaustion. Colons and quotation marks, used to introduce direct speech. Semicolons are absent, reinforcing a style that is more emotional than logically structured or formal. The voice is intimate and personal – almost confessional – offering insight into the vulnerability of her characters.

Bella Mia also functions as a social novel, giving voice to the often invisible pain of survivors – not only those physically displaced but also those left psychologically adrift. It reflects the real-life consequences of the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, including delayed reconstruction, the disintegration of social fabric, and the erosion of community identity. *Bella Mia* is a powerful exploration of loss, memory, and resilience. Through Caterina's personal journey, Di Pietrantonio offers a reflection on how grief reshapes identity and how love endures in the face of absence. With poetic language and emotional honesty, she captures the quiet devastation of trauma – and the fragile, persistent hope of recovery. In conclusion, *Bella Mia* portrays the multifaceted human response to seismic risk and natural disaster. The characters' strategies – which range from assuming responsibility to preserving memory and sustaining emotional bonds – reveal the psychological and social complexities of surviving a collective catastrophe. Through their stories, the novel offers a deeply human understanding of trauma, loss, and the will to endure.

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