

ROMBO

Esther Kinsky

Analysis by Silvy Boccaletti

Eco-Fiction, Social Novel

Esther Kinsky's novel *Rombo* (2022) deals with the 1976 earthquake that devastated the Italian region of Friuli. The novel examines themes of memory, loss and resilience, intertwining personal and collective stories through the perspectives of seven characters who attempt to reconstruct and overcome their traumatic experiences. The destruction caused by the earthquake also afflicts the Karst landscape, portrayed as a silent witness to the abrupt transformations brought about by the disaster.

Year of Publication	2022
Publication Place	Berlin, Germany
Editor	Suhrkamp Verlag
Entity	1976 Friuli earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1976 Friuli earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	1976
Location	Friuli Venezia Giulia Italy
Coordinates	46.251811, 13.115187
Impacted Areas	Around 5700 square kilometres. In particular, towns and villages were destroyed. These include, for example Gemona, Artergna, Venzone, Forgaria nel Friuli, Buia, Pinzano al Tagliamento, Monteperta, Osoppo, Udine, Pordenone.
Seismic Fault	Motion of Adriatic microplate northward and under the European microplate (periadriatic fault)
Magnitude	6.4 Richter magnitude
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Houses

"Almost 75,000 homes damaged, over 18,000 destroyed" (Francescutti 105)

Facilities

"It remained destructive 2,000 km of sewerage, over 4,000 km of aqueducts, 500 classrooms, a hospital (Gemona), 5 retirement homes" (Francescutti 105)

Cultural Heritage Sites

"Urban centers of exceptional historical and artistic value, such as Venzone or Gemona, were almost completely destroyed by the earthquake" (Francescutti 105)

Public Buildings And Sites

"More than 300 public buildings, churches, castles, villas and palaces suffered serious damage, as did property mobile" (Francescutti 105)

Company Premises

"Out of 5,900 artisanal businesses, 2,800 were seriously affected damaged, 450 destroyed" (Francescutti 105)

Factories

"200 industries have ceased at least temporarily the activity and there will be a loss of 18,000 jobs" (Francescutti 105)

Social Impacts

Deaths

"The overall effects of the earthquake, reduced to cold numbers, counted 989 dead" (Baiutti 27)

Injuries

"The overall effects of the earthquake, reduced to cold numbers, counted (...) 2,607 injured" (Baiutti 27)

Destruction Of Dwellings

"Almost 75,000 homes damaged, over 18,000 destroyed" (Francescutti 105)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"It remained destructive 2,000 km of sewerage, over 4,000 km of aqueducts, 500 classrooms, a hospital (Gemona), 5 retirement homes" (Francescutti 105)

Social Disruption

"Out of 5,900 artisanal businesses, 2,800 were seriously affected damaged, 450 destroyed; 200 industries have ceased at least temporarily the activity and there will be a loss of 18,000 jobs" (Francescutti 105)

Earthquake 1976 Friuli earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1976
Location	Friuli Venezia Giulia Italy

Impacted Areas	Cities, villages, physical landscapes
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Houses Public Buildings Religious Buildings And Sites
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes Soil Changes Soil Degradation
Social Impacts	Deaths Injuries Destruction Of Goods/Commodities Destruction Of Dwellings Destruction Of Public Buildings Relocation Forced Relocation

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Adelmo
Age	Young Man
Gender	Male
Native Place	Germany
Nationality	German
Reactions	Discomfort

Name	Toni
Age	Adult
Gender	Child
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Distress

Name	Gigi
Age	Young Man
Gender	Male
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Discomfort

Name	Olga
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy

Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Apprehension
Name	Silvia
Age	Child
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Malaise
Name	Mara
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Unease
Name	Lina
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Unease
Reactions	
Name	Adelmo
Age	Young Man
Gender	Male
Native Place	Germany
Nationality	German
Reactions	Intervention Fight For Survival
Name	Toni
Age	Child
Gender	Male
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Immobility

Name	Gigi
Age	Young Man
Gender	Male
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Intervention Escape

Name	Olga
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Escape

Name	Silvia
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Immobility Paralysis

Name	Mara
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Intervention Cooperation

Name	Lina
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Intervention

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Fight For Survival Cooperation
Name	The army
Reactions	Intervention
Group Attitudes	
Name	Humans
Reactions	Scepticism
Name	Nonhuman beings
Reactions	Awareness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Metaphors	"A day of three suns" (Kinsky 26) "Zone of disruption" (Kinsky 26)
Similes	"Beautiful words that you can hold in your hand like small foreign petrified life forms" (Kinsky 26)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Superstition Cruel Nature
Syntax	Parataxis, Hypotaxis, Complex Verbal Phrases, Complex Noun Phrases, Unconventional Position, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	High Frequency Passive Forms, High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms

Rombo (2022) by Esther Kinsky is a social novel that explores memory, trauma, and the relationship between people and their environment. Set in a small village in northeastern Italy, the story unfolds through the voices of seven villagers as they recount their lives before, during, and after the devastating earthquake of Friuli Venezia Giulia in 1976.

The novel presents a polyphonic exploration of the seismic catastrophe that struck Friuli Venezia Giulia on May 6, 1976, with subsequent tremors on September 11 and 15. With 137 municipalities affected and over 70% of the territory damaged, the disaster was not limited to a single area, it was a regional catastrophe that disrupted the lives of nearly half the population. The figures, nearly a thousand dead, over 2,600 injured, 100,000 homeless, are stark and unsettling, reducing human suffering to statistical terms, yet still conveying the magnitude of loss (Baiutti 27).

In the novel *Rombo*, the narrative unfolds through the recollections of seven protagonists – three men and four women – who, as children or young adults at the time of the disaster, experienced its traumatic impact firsthand: Anselmo, Olga, Mara, Lina, Gigi, Toni, and Silvia.

The earthquake engendered a profound rupture in their lives, delineating a clear demarcation between a "before" and an "after". Now adults, and in some cases elderly, the protagonists retrospectively reconstruct their memories of the disaster and its enduring repercussions. Central to the novel is the notion of collective memory and the processes through which individuals and communities narrate and reinterpret past catastrophes. As the protagonists attempt to retrieve and reconstruct the moment of the disaster, they simultaneously engage in a broader reflection on the mechanisms of memory formation, acknowledging the plurality of meanings such recollections acquire depending on each witness's perspective.

Beyond its exploration of memory, the novel meticulously delineates the geographical landscape of the valley east of the Sella River, situated in the northeastern region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, near the Slovenian border. The text is enriched by detailed topographical references to towns, rivers, roads, and trails, as well as geological and ecological descriptions concerning the terrain, flora, and fauna. Particular emphasis is placed on the symbolic resonance of natural elements, especially the mountains, which are frequently anthropomorphized.

Monte Canin, for instance, is depicted as possessing an almost sentient temperament, "a moody one, that Canin" (Kinsky 14), its presence deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the local inhabitants.

Similarly, Monte San Simeone is associated with the figure of Orcolat, a mythical creature of regional folklore, imprisoned within the mountains of Carnia. According to legend, the movement of the Orcolat provokes tremors, and it is held responsible for the 1976 earthquake.

The landscape thus serves as a protagonist in the novel, equally as significant as the human characters. During the earthquake, it too "risked its skin," and the traces of this event remain visible.

The novel emphasizes that "the earthquake is everywhere" (11), the landscape is no longer recognizable, "the earthquake subverted this accessibility and dashed all certainty about the paths. Fallen rocks, mudslides, diverted waterways, dammed lakes and ravaged forests disrupted the paths, changing their courses, even their destinations" (40), and even those intimately familiar with these places feel like strangers when confronted with the transformed scenery.

The collective and partial memory of the event includes not only human perspectives but also the limestone, the flowers, and the animals of this land. Although they cannot speak with a human voice, they make themselves known through encyclopedic fragments or through the observations of those who attend to them.

In addition to its evocation of the physical environment, the novel places significant emphasis on the animals that inhabit the valley, such as the coal-black grass snakes that all the locals know and can locate depending on the time of year, "a snake, a carbon, the kind you usually find down below along the river, and not up in the village" (15), and the birds such as the cuckoo that "was calling ceaselessly, already in the morning" (15). These animals occupy an important part of the narrative and, through their unusual behaviors, embody the premonitory signs of the earthquake.

The novel also foregrounds an anthropological dimension, emphasizing the cultural heterogeneity of the valley, shaped by both Italian and Slovenian influences. This cultural hybridity manifests in traditions such as the bile *maškire* masks worn during Carnival, as well as in distinctive local music and dances. Additionally, regional folklore attributes seismic and hydrological disasters to legendary figures such as Orcolat, "a mythical creature whose traces can never be erased" (28), and Riba Faronika, "the mermaid who started the earthquake with her cloven fishtail" (121).

Through a nuanced examination of the anthropological and cultural fabric of the valley, the novel underscores the inhabitants' pre-earthquake perception of seismic risk as a largely abstract or superstitious concern rather than an imminent reality. As the author notes, the earthquake was not inscribed in memory except as an event to be kept at bay through rituals and omens. Consequently,

local dwellings and infrastructure were not constructed with seismic resilience in mind. Prior to May 6, 1976, earthquakes were regarded more as geological curiosities entangled with folklore than as tangible threats. Despite centuries of minor tremors in the region, such occurrences had failed to integrate into the collective consciousness as genuine risks and were instead relegated to the domain of magical thinking.

Nevertheless, in the hours preceding the earthquake, an intuitive sense of an impending anomaly—though not yet explicitly linked to seismic activity—begins to manifest among the inhabitants. Many of the protagonists report perceptible atmospheric and environmental changes: an unseasonal alternation of cold mountain winds and anomalous warmth, an unusual hue to the sky and light. For instance, one of the protagonists, Silvia, reported: "I think it suddenly became very cold outside. I felt a bit strange from sitting on the moped, my legs like rubber, and as I went into the house the ground beneath me moved" (88).

As pointed out before, faunal behaviors also deviate from the norm—black serpents, typically confined to riverbanks, are spotted slithering into villages; goats display agitation; dogs bark incessantly; birds emit frenzied calls. These disturbances suggest that animals, more attuned to subterranean vibrations, registered the seismic precursors before human awareness could conceptualize them as harbingers of disaster.

A few minutes before the tremor, the most universally recalled phenomenon is auditory: a deep, reverberating sound, described variously as a "the rumble of a rombo" (9), "an ongoing rage that no human ear could have endured" (9), emanating from beneath the earth's surface. This ominous acoustic phenomenon precedes the ground's upheaval and serves as a sensory threshold between normalcy and catastrophe.

The novel meticulously reconstructs the immediate responses of individuals at the moment of impact. Some protagonists instinctively flee their homes, while others are momentarily paralyzed by shock, unable to react beyond emitting cries of distress. Others still prioritize assisting family members and neighbors in evacuating. At the communal level, fear and turmoil dominate the emotional landscape.

The narrative also devotes considerable attention to the earthquake's impact on both human settlements and the natural environment. The disaster profoundly reshapes the landscape, rendering previously accessible terrain treacherous and unpredictable. Public infrastructure – including schools, factories, and churches – sustains severe damage, exacerbating the societal dislocation caused by the disaster. In particular the villages not protected by cliffs "fell victim to the earthquake almost entirely. Ruins here, overly meticulous lines of white town houses there, angular interlopers in a region smoothed by wind and water and stone against stone. Outside the housing developments are disinterred stones, moraines, collected material resistance to the movement" (71).

The second section of the novel shifts focus to the community's response and the influx of external aid in the earthquake's aftermath. It chronicles the arrival of the Alpini and military personnel, who establish emergency encampments and communal kitchens for the displaced population: "the soldiers pitched tents and built a kitchen, and later they also helped clear away the rubble, but not until they could bring in the backhoes" (127). Simultaneously, local inhabitants begin the arduous process of reconstruction, demonstrating resilience and solidarity in the face of devastation: "people whose houses had major damages helped one another for as long as they could, or until there was an argument. There was always an argument eventually" (128). Journalists and humanitarian aid soon follow, with relief packages distributed among the affected communities.

However, this initial phase of post-disaster recovery is abruptly interrupted in September when additional tremors once again destabilize the region. The recurrence of seismic activity alters both communal and institutional responses. Following the second earthquake, the government initiates the large-scale evacuation of residents, prioritizing the relocation of women and children to safer areas.

From a linguistic perspective, the style adopted by the author creates a dreamy, evocative atmosphere. The frequent use of commas generates a breathless, flowing quality, creating lists and imparting a sense of urgency: "in the open air, squeezed into the family Fiat, buried beneath rubble, among the

dead" (12). Nevertheless, there are moments where the absence of paragraph breaks renders the text dense and continuous.

The author employs a descriptive, meditative tone, favoring nouns and abstract terms to underscore themes of natural forces and human vulnerability. Passive constructions, such as "it is said" (26) and "it can be measured" (26) reinforce a sense of detachment and inevitability, aligning with the overarching theme of disaster and human insignificance.

The language feels textured and echoing, much like the landscape and memories it describes – scarred, reverberating, and unending. For instance, there are onomatopoeias such as "listening out for further rumblings" (12) that suggest a deep, resonant sound, vividly reinforcing the earthquake motif. There are also alliterations such as "collapsed houses" (12), "crookedness of reconstructed cathedrals" (12). These initial hard consonants emphasize destruction and disorder.

Ultimately, *Rombo* presents a profound meditation on memory, cultural identity, and humanity's fragile coexistence with the natural world, offering readers a compelling narrative that transcends the boundaries of time and place.

Bibliography

Kinsky, Esther. *Rombo*. Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022.

Baiutti, Giorgio, editor. *Friuli 1976-2016, 40: dalla ricostruzione a un nuovo modello di sviluppo*. Forum, 2016.

Carulli, Giovanni Battista, and Dario Slejko. "The 1976 Friuli (NE Italy) earthquake." *Giornale di Geologia Applicata*, 1, 2005, pp. 147–156. doi: 10.1474/GGA.2005-01.0-15.0015. Accessed 12 Mar. 2025.

Francescutti, Elisabetta. "La ricostruzione in Friuli dopo il terremoto del 1976. Quarant'anni di interventi e di gestione in continua evoluzione critica." *E vulnere ubertas. Paesaggi feriti nelle Terre di Benedetto*, edited by Giordana Mariani Canova et al., Padova University Press, 2020, pp. 103–116.