Laura A. Salsini. *Addressing the Letter: Italian Women Writers' Epistolary Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Pp. 190. ISBN 978-1-4426-4165-5 (hardbound). \$ 55.

*"The letter—perhaps the most intimate manifestation of
our humanity for millennia."*

Ivar Ivask

The practice of letter writing is as ancient as the act of writing itself. Yet, letter writing has been long associated with a 'female' genre—a practice that began "as an intimate and often anti-literary expression of self requiring no particular or specialized education" (7). In Salsini's fascinating new book, *Addressing the Letter*, the contribution of epistolary writing in Italian literature by women writers is turned on its head. In this compelling, well-argued literary analysis of epistolary fiction over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Salsini deftly shows how Italian women authors like Sibilla Aleramo, Matilde Serao, Natalia Ginzburg, Oriana Fallaci, Dacia Maraini, and others "deployed the letter text to rigorously critique the assumptions—literary or social—governing female behaviours" (3). In this absorbing analysis, Salsini shows the multiple ways in which Italian women writers challenged social and literary conventions "to find a voice, a sense of identity, and to create an alternative to the male-constructed national canon" (7). This is the first study to systematically analyse the crossroads of genre and content of this cohort of Italian women writers.

In employing a theoretical framework grounded in feminist literary criticism, this book underscores the links between feminism and epistolarity with an emphasis on self-expression, dialogue and collaboration among women. In its focus away from a traditional narrative's presentation of women, this book explores women writers and their fictional female protagonists as both intra- and extra-textually woven in a narrative shift in which these actors metamorphose from object to subject (8). Salsini, moreover, convincingly draws the argument that the letter novel was strategically employed by these Italian women writers to "redefine both literary and social expectations of female experiences" over the *longue durée* of Italian history—from the Risorgimento to post-feminism.

The book is sectioned in five chapters followed by a postscript. The Introduction chapter begins with a brief overview of some of the more prominent works in epistolary fiction. Here Salsini underscores the salience in examining this typical " 'female' genre" (6) through a feminist critical lens. She concludes the chapter with a synopsis on traditional characteristics of the letter novel, such as the prevalence of the use of the present tense, the awareness of time and self as part of a self-creating process, and the notions of isolation and separation that enveloped the writers' and protagonists' lives.

Chapter One focuses on the first female writers of the modern epistolary novel in Italy with an emphasis on the romantic love plot and the women whose lives were embedded in them. In examining the novels of four authors: Orintia Romagnuoli Sacratì, Matilde Serao, the Marchesa Colombi and Sibilla Aleramo's

1914 novel *Trasfigurazione*, Salsini argues that the epistolary genre in these works served to question social, cultural and literary expectations about female behaviour, especially in the domestic, the sentimental, and the familial. Through a sharp analytical lens, Salsini demonstrates how these authors “addressed through their acute social criticism the circumscribed roles and opportunities proscribed to women” (44), whether by reworking the romantic plot or by creating an antithesis of the romantic heroine, to name a few. In doing so, these authors succeeded in challenging the stylistic and thematic traditions of the epistolary novel of their time.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four explore the ways in which modern works “analyse the changing socio-cultural landscape of post-Second World War Italy” (45). Drawing from the novels of Sibilla Aleramo, Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, and Gianna Manzini in Chapter Two, Salsini looks at the dialogue engaged between the epistolary genre and literary movements—such as the Futurist movement—and, at the same time, challenges literary models—all the while questioning the prescribed and proscribed socio-cultural roles of women.

Chapter Three explores the ways in which the epistolary novels of Natalia Ginzburg and Alba de Céspedes were deployed to “counter what they saw as a culture of widespread and debilitating personal and social alienation” (9). In Salsini’s analysis, we observe how the “letter text becomes a therapeutic site for self-discovery and a means of fostering authenticity” (71). These authors specifically employed the epistolary structure to address the modern world’s social and moral failures, the hypocritical and the corrupt, while rejecting social expectations tied in with patriarchal forces.

Chapter Four examines several overtly feminist epistolary texts written during the height of the women’s movement. In this chapter, Salsini examines the works authored by Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti, Oriana Fallaci, and Dacia Maraini. The focus of the texts analysed here is the examination of women’s experiences, the social expectations and cultural practices which inhabit the core of the narrative, dissimilarly from earlier novels where these issues were often relegated to the background or subtext (97). As Salsini suggests, by using the epistolary text these authors purposely bring the private directly into the public sphere and its public readership. Moreover, in underscoring issues related to women’s history, female sexuality, women’s changing roles, female authorship, and the reconstruction of the canon, these authors are not merely making the personal, political – as per the feminist slogan – but also, as Salsini ascertains, the political, the literary and the historical (97). What is further remarkable in these works is that via the seemingly innocuous genre of the letter, the reader is invited “to meditate on social expectations, to ponder the potential in all of us, but, most of all, we are called to transform the literary into reality” (141).

Advancing communication technologies have not obliterated the practice of letter writing, nor have they diminished its interest and appreciation. As Laura Salsini rightly argues, “The letter text is not dead; it has not succumbed to a world powered by technology-driven modes of communication. Instead, we can still find in it a means to discover ourselves, to challenge the world and its expectations, to question literary expectations concerning both gender and genre, and, finally, to

connect with others" (146). Indeed, in fiction and non-fiction, the epistle continues to inspire readers and writers. Beautifully written, and accessible, this book can be appreciated by specialists and non-specialists interested in literary and epistolary studies, women's fiction, and Italian studies.

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Maria Rosa Cutrufelli. *Reasonable Doubt (Complice il dubbio)*. Translated by Giuliana Sanguinetti-Katz and Anna Urbancic. Willard, ON: Soleil, 2007. Pp. 181. ISBN 978-1-894935-29-6. n.p.

Complice il dubbio is the second novel of Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, a well-known Italian feminist journalist, editor, critic and author of 5 widely translated novels. Cutrufelli's first novel, *La Briganta*, a fictional memoir of a female brigand cast in the historical novel genre, appeared in 1990. In this long-overdue English translation of *Complice il dubbio*, originally published in 1992 and adapted for the Italian screen in 1998, Cutrufelli plays with another genre dear to postmodern and feminist writers, the detective/crime novel. Introducing the translation are two excellent critical essays, "Explorations in Female Sexuality" (Sanguinetti-Katz) and "Reading Reasonable Doubt: The Spaces of the Imagination" (Anne Urbancic), which outline well several critical issues for debate.

Complice il dubbio begins with a mysterious death. Anna, a thirty-five year old female medical doctor who has separated from her husband to avoid becoming a "prisoner of her marriage." (80), is running through the empty streets of Rome in August to get back to her apartment the morning after an arranged evening sexual encounter with an architect about the same age. The man, recently separated from his wife, was already quite drunk and obviously depressed on her arrival but she decided to spend the night. In the morning, after pinning her down on the bed, the deranged man committed suicide and Anna flees home in order to ponder when and how she could go to the police.

As the reader learns more about Anna's carefully controlled and respectable life, this calculated tryst begins to appear less a deviation from her normal behaviour than an extension of her mania to control spaces, both physical and imaginary. As Anne Urbancic notes in her critical essay, Cutrufelli's representations of space and utilization of the literary trope of chiasmus show that Anna, orphaned at age four and raised by her grandmother in a ground floor apartment where she could and still does hide from others, consistently reproduces spaces in which she can "cocoon" safely or present an emotionless exterior. Feeling exceptionally alone in a deserted Rome, she had decided to create another impermeable space for a casual sexual life, one she assumed she could keep secret and, of course, control as she examined her emotional side.

Yet, spaces in this narrative are not impermeable, thanks to the most prominent character in the novel, Doubt. That same morning, Anna offers assistance to