

“Europe is like life: it has its flaws, but it is better to have it”

An interview by Giuseppe Fantasia with Alain Elkann whose book “Anita” is arriving in bookstores

He has been writing since he was a student. Writing was a passion before it became a profession, and his books—about forty so far—are usually short regardless of whether they are short-story collections or novels. All together, they create a single work made up of many segments that, in turn, are part of something larger, representing what he’s feeling, thinking, experiencing, or whatever is inspiring him at a specific time in his life. He was born in 1950, in New York, but he made Italy’s Piedmont region and the city of Rome his home. A citizen of the world, a *grand viveur*, and a man of class, **Alain Elkann** always writes his books by hand; books that deal in unique stories with fundamental themes like love, death, and family. “They describe the journey of the human soul,” he says looking at me with those eyes in a shade of robin-egg blue, which goes perfectly with the setting of our interview, the Hotel Locarno in Rome. This is a place that Elkann has a deep attachment to considering he lived here for ten years, and actually ended up writing a novel named after the hotel. Michael, the protagonist, stayed there. He was looking for love, which was something that was “more important than anything, than war, than politics, or money.” His latest book, “Anita,” which came out today and was also published by long-time publisher Bompiani, speaks about many things, but it all starts with Milan – whom everyone calls Misha in honour of his dead brother—and his love for the woman for which the book is named. He wishes that relationship had been different, for it not to have begun at age sixty. He wishes it had begun when they were young, in the hopes of sharing a life together. “Love at age sixty has its difficulties,” explains the author, dressed in a blue suit, blue sneakers, and his signature all-black tie. “But it can also be wonderful and the only means of escape.” “Anita” is a novel full of wit and tender memories. It also speaks about death and what happens afterward as well as how we make decisions beforehand. There is conflict between Anita, who believes in cremation and ashes (“they are anonymous, more simple and rational”), and Misha, who believes in traditional burial. Page after page of events, of different objects, homes, things, and cities. “Life,” writes the author, repeating these words in person, “is a mystery.”

What stands out about the female character, Anita, “a woman with a face like something out of a Flemish painting,” is how free she is. Do you feel free, and how so?

“Anita is a woman who has her own philosophy, her friends, her loved ones, and her beliefs, including her ideas on whether ashes should be kept at home or scattered. She’s a really beautiful woman, but she’s not an easy person. You are right—she is free. For me, freedom is fundamental, and I believe that, beyond health, it is the one main need we all have. If one is able to live as freely as possible, it is much better. Freedom doesn’t mean doing anything you want, but it means being free to choose.

Does this go for love as well?

“You can choose in love as well, but it isn’t easy when there are two of you. In love, there’s an initial spark that make people connect profoundly. But then the relationship develops, and it doesn’t always work. At a certain point, things break.”

Have you been able to maintain good relationships with your exes?

“Freedom is also being able to fully experience what happens. When a romantic relationship ends, it is like a death. It is always a failure, something that breaks that doesn’t just involve the two now ex lovers, but also everything around them, and certainly their lives. There’s a void there, and the unknown again: will I be alone, will I meet someone else, how and where, who will this new person be? On one hand, you are free but, on the other, you feel a loss. It is a complex sentiment.”

This story centres on love as well as death. Do you agree with the idea that the problem is usually for those who are left behind?

"Death is inevitable. One of my grandsons asked me one day, 'granddad, when are you going to die?' [he smiles]. The concept of death exists for children as well, and some are scared of it. They don't understand why it happens. What happens after death is one of the biggest questions that has been asked and that we all ask, all philosophies and religions, and people have imagined all different kinds of scenarios. In my book, Anita knows how to deal with it, and she's determined to be cremated like her parents. Because, for her, the woman that existed will no longer be here, and her soul will probably transmigrate somewhere else. It is the spirit. It is part of the body, but what is it exactly? Do you want to know what I think?"

Absolutely.

"That, in reality, death is not a mystery. Human beings are born and die. There is no mystery in this. Life is the mystery. Who are we? Are we actors playing a part in a script or are there different scripts that are human interaction?"

You say you aren't thinking about death, but, at the same time, as you write in this book, you hope you don't die soon because you "want to see your grandchildren grow up?"

"My life has never changed. I was a young writer, and now I'm an old writer. Obviously, as one approaches old age, it is inevitable that those who are old are closer to death, but I'm happy all the same to have been able to have played many roles in life. I had children, now I have grandchildren."

Is it more difficult being a father or a grandfather?

"These are complementary roles, depending on your age. I really liked being a father when I was at the age to do so. Now, I'm the father of adults who have children. Some people say to me, "You don't let them call you 'granddad,' do you?" Yet, I like being the granddad. Why is that? I will explain. A writer is a storyteller, a person who tells different stories. I prefer fiction to journalism because, with the latter, you are obligated to give precise information, while with the former, you can invent what you want, from the characters to the story. You are free to write what you want. It is like painting, these are the themes of life. Having grandchildren means having children who ask you, "Granddad, will you tell us a story?" When you do it, and you see that they listen to you despite having a computer, a mobile phone, and all of the modern toys that exist, it is a great pleasure. Children like to be told stories. In my case, as a storyteller, I like that they ask me to do it."

Being a grandparent is wonderful, so says Alain Elkann.

[He smiles]. "With children, we are directly responsible for them. With grandchildren, their parents have the responsibility so it is truly a luxury to have them and spend time with them, but it is still a responsibility because, in the end, it is the grandparents who tell about the family's history. Grandparents represent it. Today, I am no longer a son or a father, but I am a grandfather and this is the age I'm at in life. There is nothing wrong with growing older because there are many wonderful things even in old age. You are weaker in some things and stronger in others. Before, you had certain pleasures, now you have others, just like with responsibilities. Life is an art if one manages it well. It is like a book or a trip, you need to know how to craft and plan it."

At one point in the book, you speak about Alberto Moravia, someone you respected a great deal and with whom you had a profound friendship. Is that story about the shirt and tie at his funeral true?

"Yes. It is something that really struck me. Moravia was half Jewish, and he had a very unique relationship with Judaism. Jews are usually buried in a shroud, but, in an ironic twist, the workers at the funeral home chose to dress him in a shirt and tie that I'd given him. That is something that bonded us much more than the book ("Life of Moravia," Bompiani), a shirt and tie he wanted from me."

What do you mean?

"I always wear a black tie. He always wore colourful ties. During one of my trips to the United States, I found a shocking pink tie, and I gave it to him. Then he left for Yemen and forgot it in a hotel. He returned to Rome, and not long after, the hotel sent it back to him, and it ended up with the many ties he had. Why did the worker at the funeral home choose that one for him to wear forever? It is a mystery. I do know he liked it a lot, along with that red striped shirt I bought in London when I was thirty-five. I felt mature. I wanted to be less serious, buying something colourful that I wouldn't usually wear. Moravia saw me in it. He told me that he liked it a lot, and I gave it to him.

Your bond was so strong that, as you write, "it became a memory".

"That episode led to a really strong friendship. An indelible memory, I went with him in a certain way, we are together. Life is a journey, and we don't know its irony or destiny. People who influence our lives in different ways, when they are gone, they stay with us. Moravia has been dead for many years, but there is rarely a day that goes by that I don't think of him. These were wonderful episodes, even the story of his death because he was a paradoxical person."

What would Moravia have said about the current social and political situation?

"Moravia was not a prophet of gloom and doom. He lived in the Prati neighbourhood of Rome, but despite what one might think, his novels were never about Rome."

In "The Time of Indifference," Rome was the backdrop, and this was the same in the other novels as well.

"Exactly. He offered a glimpse of it like a set in a theatre piece. He took part in political debate. He was a novelist, a traveller, he told of his travels and the places he saw. He loved the cinema, and he was also a film critic, and he was involved in what was happening in society. He was interested in things like the atomic bomb, a mass weapon of destruction invented by man himself. He was interested in the big issues concerning men and humanity. He would have also certainly complained about the potholes in Rome, and how it is not well maintained, just as normal citizens do."

How would he have been different?

"In his curiosity. He was very curious. Italy today is inevitably in flux, there's a change in generations, in politicians as well as parties. Moravia would have been driven by curiosity. Why? Because a writer is a witness, an observer, and he says this in "The Time of Indifference," which you mentioned. An intellectual is an observer but not a man of action. His was a critical and intelligent curiosity."

What was his strength?

"Always being contemporary. "The Time of Indifference" is an anti-Fascist book because it focuses on middle-class society in that period, but he didn't say he was part of that society. He was a writer. He used writing to tell about a situation. He lived through Fascism, the war, racial persecution, the resistance, neo-realism, the Cold War, Europe, he became a member of the European parliament...he was always a contemporary. I don't think he would have embraced any current political faction passionately, but he would have observed what is happening with great interest."

Do you like to observe, criticise, or both?

"These things complement one another. There are many things I disapprove of in terms of what is happening, but I approve of many other things, for example, the desire for change due to the fact that many people in the world are terribly dissatisfied with how they are living. It is something I understand very well. I am a fan of neither populist movements nor dictatorships. Freedom and democracy are things we need to hold on to strongly, without falling into the temptation for totalitarian or non-parliamentary regimes."

What do you think about this Europe that Moravia held so dear?

"Like him, I think it is fundamental. We criticise it, but today, if there weren't Brexit—an aberration that I'm against—young Europeans could work everywhere, travel without a passport, and pay with the same currency. There haven't been any wars for seventy years between European countries precisely because Europe exists. It is like life: it has its flaws but it is better to have it. It is better to live than to die. It isn't perfect, there are certainly things that don't work, but those who want to destroy this to return to the closed nation states and the selfishness, this is really distant from who I am and how I think. It is a strong continent, united like others like China and the United States. If it were to dissolve in internal fighting and to break up, it would be an enormous failure. The existence of Europe itself is a fantastical utopia that came true."

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