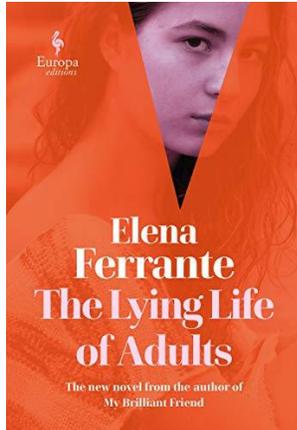


February 3, 2021

Dear Dallas Institute Book Group members,



Greetings and Happy New Year 2021, such as it is. I've missed you since December and been counting the days until we meet again— alas, still on Zoom for the immediate future at least. I do hope you and your family have been untouched by this vicious and persistent disease.

We ended 2020 with Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, about which we were mixed in our estimations of its virtues. Coming as it did in the wake of Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*, it was at a competitive disadvantage, but I grew to admire Bennett's control of her subject matter, which entered her imagination not as tragedy but as comedy; hers is a troubled, purgatorial story of the obstacles to the "pursuit of happiness" America's racist history has bequeathed to African Americans to this day. As W.E.B. Du Bois put it in the opening paragraph of *The Souls of Black Folks*, "...the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." Du Bois' classic was published in 1903; what he stated as the problem of his century is, arguably, the problem of ours, or at least it crouches in the heart of our present cultural schism.

Our readings this semester will be noticeably different from those in the Fall, beginning with *The Lying Life of Adults*. Many if not most of you avid readers are ahead of me in coming to the work of Elena Ferrante, whose four "Neapolitan Novels" have been praised since the first of the quartet appeared in 2012. Her writing has been described as "ferocious" and "explosive," and she herself as one of the greatest novelists of our time. As for my selection, Ferrante's most recent, I can hardly believe how completely I've been caught up in Giovanna's dramatic description of the shocks of her early teenage years. Didn't I myself live through them, and aren't they all filled with the same traumas and crises that, once survived, one doesn't want to revisit? And yet, Ferrante's art is captivating, as if, yes, these may bear the signs of common adolescent trauma, but in the hands of such a master storyteller they register as unique and uniquely powerful. Such anguish may be the universal stuff of teenage experience and therefore dismissible by us adults, but this presentation illuminates the depths of youthful "soul-making," to use poet John Keats' phrase. How can we as "lying adults" not understand that we play key roles in that daily drama?

I'm agitated by this book for reasons I don't quite understand, at least not yet, and I look forward to talking with you about it on Tuesday the 9<sup>th</sup> or Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Warmest regards,

Larry