

"Chiara" by Dacia Maraini. From One Woman to Another

Letizia Airos (March 20, 2014)



At the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimó I listen to director Stefano Albertini introduce one of the greatest contemporary writers, Dacia Maraini. Maraini is launching her latest book, "Chiara from Assisi: Praise of Disobedience." During the presentation, she is accompanied by NYU Professor Jane Tylus, author of "Reclaiming Catherine of Siena."

Maraini's new novel is rife with messages for today's society, especially women. After the launch, I got a chance to interview her for our television program and dig deeper into some of the book's themes.

Maraini retains a simplicity like few women of her stature. Her eyes convey her intelligence, composure, and deep curiosity as she gently scrutinizes her interlocutors.

The generous way Maraini embraces any and all has never ceased to amaze me. Her easygoing spirit comes across even when she commands a stage. Her enormous gift for storytelling, both as an



author and an academic, is leavened by her remarkable genuineness. One more thing about her has always impressed me: her intense and eternal femininity.

Author, critic, playwright, and newspaper columnist, Dacia Maraini is one of the most widely translated Italian writers. Never one to cower, she has devoted her time and energy to social causes for decades now, continuously fighting for women's rights.

In “Chiara from Assisi: Praise of Disobedience,” Maraini tells the story of one woman's journey toward sanctity, as she follows—barefoot—

Saint Francis from Assisi to live a life of poverty. But over the course of the novel, you begin to realize that this girl is stepping into our own world, where she exists to this day.

“We can look at her choice to live in poverty with modern eyes,” says Maraini. “What she used to call the ‘privilege of poverty’ is a very important step. Owning nothing. It's a profound way of seeing possession as a limitation. A person with nothing is free. She sets a good example for today's world, where if you don't possess things you're apparently worth nothing.”

The novel follows its own fascinating path, rich with human and historic curiosities. Its approach is intellectual but warm. From one woman to another.

Maraini's laic spiritual fervor is apparent. Her descriptions and introspections stir in us a need to transcend ourselves, to find our own way towards religious meaning. Whether we believe or not.

“We can't not define ourselves Christians,” said Maraini, quoting Benedetto Croce. Indeed, Maraini's interest in Christianity and the Medieval Church has led her to respect the institution.

“I have been studying mystics for many years,” she tells me, “and I gained access to to them through their literature. There are extraordinary facts to be known that are unfortunately closed behind monastery doors. Through literature I reached the actual people. One of them is Chiara, a strong, energetic, and intelligent woman, but above all a model of idealism.

“[Chiara] has great dignity,” continues Maraini. “She was the first woman to write a law. She opposed the hierarchical structure of the convent, which was not unlike the society around her. She fought against hierarchies to ensure all sisters were treated the same. She performed the most humble jobs. The Church back then was rich and powerful, a real empire.”

Thus Chiara 's disobedience should be seen as a journey toward consciousness.

“Chiara evokes an Italy we know little about,” says Maraini, “self-reliant and mysterious, respectful of the religious order.” Like Francis, Chiara wanted to be disobedient and innovative, but still remain inside the Church.

“Her disobedience is not selfish, it's ethical. Remember Antigone: ‘Disobey human law to respect a higher law, the law of our own conscience.’”

For the saint, poverty becomes the means to purchase freedom.

So why this book? And how much does Maraini relate to the democratic saint committed to her ideals till the end?

Says Maraini: “...I believe that people who have pursued their ideals unconditionally should be better acknowledged.”

The conversation at Casa Zerilli-Marimò ranges from mysticism to Chiara to Dacia Maraini's own life, including her internment in a concentration camp when she was a young girl. She also commented the mafia and Judge Falcone, and expressed her hope for Italy, a country full of resources, despite its problems. And, of course, the new Pope came up.



“I have found a lot of Pope Francis in this story. The new Pontiff reconnects with the tradition of the true word of Christ. It’s not about war, hate, or violence. It’s about love and dialogue. I believe this Pontiff is doing it the right way. And this is an important message for everyone, including non-believers.”

And thanks to my intense (I admit nocturnal) reading of the novel, I can add a couple more observations.

Women still have to strive harder than men to be taken seriously. The legacy of the tenacious Saint from Assisi is beneficial. Only by fighting determinedly yet not aggressively can we enact real change. Only by being ourselves, without resorting to violence or self-exploitation, can we ensure that no one will take advantage of us.

This, too, I read between the lines of Dacia Maraini’s latest work.

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