



TLC SHOWCASE

ANNA LUCIA

Introduction to the Manuscript	2
Extract from <i>Broken Madonna</i>	4
About the Writer	8

Introduction to *Broken Madonna* by Anna Lucia

Broken Madonna is a thought-provoking epic set in post-war Italy, where the mysterious visions of a fragile girl lead to a reckoning with the haunting secrets of the past.

Italy 1949

At an orphanage in the poverty-stricken Apennine Mountains, 15-year-old Adelina has only one younger friend - enigmatic, fragile Elisabetta.

When Elisabetta claims to see the Madonna by the river, Adelina has doubts. But after Elisabetta appears to heal Giulio, an injured and traumatised young soldier, crowds flock to witness the mystery of Elisabetta's miracles.

Adelina can no longer contain her misgivings and seeks out scheming priest, Padre Bosco. As the secrets of the past begin to unravel, Adelina, Elisabetta and Giulio each have to confront who or what to believe.

Soon they face a terrible reckoning which will cause deep ripples in all their lives, reaching across the years to 1990s England.

My own story is one of persistence and resilience.

In 2015 I received a TLC Free Read for winning a competition with New Writing South. That novel, *The Lives We Leave Behind*, had several full manuscript requests and an offer from a small publisher, but remains on my laptop.

My energy went into my next novel, *Broken Madonna*. I built my craft, set up a writing group which has been going strong since 2017, co-coordinated a local Society of Authors group and immersed myself in writing. I kept in touch with TLC and attended events, valuing TLC's integrity and realism.

At the end of 2023, I found myself in a similar position with *Broken Madonna* as my first novel: several full manuscript requests but no takers, and no real sense of how to get my novel over the line. I booked in with Aki Schilz for a Power Hour.

During the session, we focused on tightening the pitch, but my enthusiasm for one last round of agents was ebbing away. Aki and I returned to first principles: I'd written a book I was proud of, reader feedback was excellent, and I wanted others to be able to read it. We talked about the alternatives. Self-publishing became viable, especially when I did my research. When I joined Aki's vision board session for writers in January

2024, the pictures I created were bold and under my control. My vision board was calling me to make a step change.

It is now the end of 2024. *Broken Madonna* launched last month to an audience of 150 people at the Duke of Yorks cinema, Brighton on my 60th birthday, with an interview and screening of the iconic Cinema Paradiso, like *Broken Madonna*, set in post-WW2 Italy.

In terms of physical product, editing and cover design, *Broken Madonna* matches the professional standards of a traditionally published novel.

Broken Madonna is a No.1 Amazon Hot New Release on Kindle in Religious Mysteries and has hit no.9 in the Amazon Spiritual Mystery paperback chart. The reviews from my book blog tour and early readers have been very positive indeed.

I start 2025 excited and hold onto my dream of *Broken Madonna* the film!

For more: www.annalucia.co.uk

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Extract from *Broken Madonna*

Each daybreak for a week, we crept out of our dark basement, towards the magic of the river. In my excitement to follow Elisabetta, I barely slept.

‘You look like a fish with your mouth open like that,’ barked Signora Rossi, exasperated by my constant yawning in class. The other children took to following me, pretending to swim with pouting mouths. For once, their taunting didn’t sting. After being called dumb for my many embarrassing mistakes, and *giraffa*, on account of my never-ending legs and long neck, ‘*pesce*’ seemed mild.

‘Ignore them,’ said Elisabetta, linking her arm in mine. They soon shied away when Elisabetta was around, not knowing how to be around the little girl with her otherworldly air, beloved of Sister Beatrice, and Signora Rossi’s star pupil. She was the only person ever with me.

The beautiful woman was our special secret. Those early mornings at the river were my escape from the routine of prayers, lessons, and meagre meals of polenta and minestra. I’d already been kept longer at the orphanage than most, probably on account of not passing my leaving certificate at school, but it was never explained why I was still there. I never asked, fearful of life without Elisabetta.

That morning, Elisabetta skipped ahead of me towards the river. I let her go. She was happier than I’d ever seen her and hadn’t had a nightmare or wet the bed in a week. The air carried the delicate scent of the violet *giaggiolo* which had appeared, and I brushed my fingertip across their little beards of downy white hair. Swinging my boots by their laces, I jumped in and out of the icy water of little streams and dropped twigs into the water, watching as they floated away.

When I approached Elisabetta, she was in her usual spot, eyes closed.

‘You can sit with me,’ she said, pointing to the pebbles on her left.

‘You looked like you wanted to be quiet.’

‘I’m making sure...’

‘Making sure of what?’

‘Where she wants me to be.’

‘Who?’

I looked around, as if someone might emerge from the trees on either side of the bank. Nearby leaves fluttered, rustling on a light breeze.

‘She comes to me when I’m sleeping. And she comes to me here. She’s telling me I’ve found the right place.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I was building a small tower of pebbles beside me, but the last dark grey one was too heavy, and my wobbly construction collapsed.

‘Oh, Lina, she’s so graceful, with long, dark hair. You can only see some of it because she has her head covered. It’s like she’s in a pool of light.’ Elisabetta circled her hands around her face.

I squinted at her, the sun shimmering on the river, but there was nothing there, except for a grey heron that had captured its prize and was taking off.

‘Her eyes are so blue, so gentle. When she looks at me, I feel like I’m the only person who matters to her. She was here with me, just now.’

Elisabetta turned to her right, smiling, and held out her hand as if she were placing it into another.

Beside her was only an empty stretch of pebbles sloping down to the river.

‘Why can’t I see her?’ My voice had the same spiteful tone that the bullies at the orphanage so often turned on me.

‘It’s me she wants to be with...’

With her downcast eyes, Elisabetta gave me a look that reminded me of the photo of Santa Teresa in the book of saints. She reached out to me, but I shrugged her off.

‘I don’t know what’s happening, but since your fit, you’re not yourself. You’re imagining things.’

‘Please, Lina. Don’t be jealous. I need you with me.’

‘What for?’ I scuffed the pebbles with the toe of my boot, startling the little grebes who shook their red necks and glided away.

Elisabetta turned to me, her face paler than usual.

‘When she’s with me, I feel so special, like she wants me to know all about her. But I feel

sad too, like it's not going to last.'

I turned away from her. 'It's time to go back,' I said, sweeping the pebble dust off my nightdress.

The pebbles under my feet were slippery with moss but I hurried away in the direction of the orphanage. I wasn't going to let her see how she'd upset me.

'Please, don't be angry with me!' Elisabetta cried.

I pretended I hadn't heard her.

'Her name is Maria,' Elisabetta called out, her voice shaky.

A shiver ran through my body, stopping me in my tracks.

Alone, her arms holding her knees to her chest, Elisabetta looked tiny against the river and the mountains with their snowy white caps. She was crying, but I stayed where I was.

But then her body started to jerk. I rushed towards her, turning my ankle on the greasy pebbles as I went.

'Elisabetta! No!'

I knelt and gathered her writhing body into my arms.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' I cried as she flailed and struggled. Her elbow caught me on the chin but my hold on her was firm. My heart was pounding fast.

Her head resting in my lap, I stroked her hair, lifting loose strands from her damp forehead. With the hem of my nightdress, I wiped the froth and drool from the corners of her mouth. Gradually she grew quiet.

Although my ankle had swollen, I was able to lift her up, she was light and barely weighed anything at all. Holding her close to my body, I hobbled as quickly as I could back towards the orphanage, stopping once every so often to rest, my ankle throbbing.

As we got closer, the sound of children chatting and playing on their way to school reached me. I swallowed hard. Our absence would have been reported to Sister Beatrice by now.

The orphanage loomed into sight. Elisabetta's limp arm dangled in front of us, pointing at the ground.

Sister Beatrice was standing at the open window to our room, her arms folded across her chest. As she caught sight of us, she ran to meet us, one hand trying to keep her bouncing coif in place, the other hitching up her long skirt.

‘What happened?’ She took sleeping Elisabetta by the shoulders, while I held the lower part of her body. ‘Same as last time?’

I nodded, eyes on my feet, stomach lurching.

About the Writer

Born in England to older Italian immigrant parents, Anna Lucia spent long, hot summers in the Apennine mountain village they had left behind to escape poverty and lack of opportunity. In the local dialect, she listened to the stories of elderly relatives about a time, place and way of life that was far, far removed from 1970s and 1980s suburbia.

Those voices, particularly of strong women who led tough lives, never went away, neither did the echoes of Catholicism.

Anna has been awarded support for her writing from Arts Council England, and also writes short stories, flash fiction and poetry. She is Chair of Trustees of literature development agency, New Writing South.

When not writing, Anna is likely to be found gardening, walking in nature, reading or dancing the Charleston. She has broad interests in spirituality and dream analysis and reads tarot and astrology charts. She lives in Brighton.

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