

The Literary and Human Legacy of Clara Sereni

Edited by

Giulia Po DeLisle

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and

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Series in Literary Studies



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In memory of Clara Sereni, whose legacy continues

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Introduction

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The impetus for this volume on Clara Sereni came in the wake of several conferences held at the American Association of Italian Studies (2019), The Graduate Center of The City University of New York (2019), and the Modern Language Association (2020) that were organized in her honor. Clara Sereni (1946-2018) was one of the most important and extraordinary writers of contemporary Italian literature; over the span of her career, she was an important figure in literature, political life, and Italian culture in a period of great change. Despite the many and constant demands on her schedule, Clara Sereni always remained unerringly generous with the time she so freely gave to writers and scholars who were eager to study some facet of her work, whether it was her social engagement or her thoughts on feminism, or her Jewish identity. Many scholars became mentees and lifelong friends, but even a single conversation with her was enough for interlocutors to feel her genuine caring, the passion of her beliefs, her humor, in short, her profound humanity. Hence, part of the title of this collection, many of whose contributors were fortunate enough to have known her.

Clara Sereni was born into a family deeply committed to political activism: her Jewish father, Emilio Sereni, was one of the leaders of the anti-fascist movement and the Communist Party, a parliamentarian and a historian; her mother, Xenia Silberberg, was the daughter of Russian revolutionaries, a writer and translator; her uncle, Enzo Sereni, was one of the first Zionists from Italy; and her aunt, Ada Sereni (Enzo's wife), led the illegal immigration of Italian Jews to Palestine during Fascism. The legacy and influence of her family profoundly shaped Clara Sereni's life, whose story, identity, and writing were marked by passionate engagement and intellectualism, but also by her maternal experience as the mother of a child with mental illness. Her numerous fictional and non-fictional writings bear witness to crucial times in Italian history,

spanning Fascism, the post-war years, the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s and the Berlusconi era. At the same time, Sereni explores the intimate struggle for personal independence and self-affirmation through multi-faceted female characters in their roles as daughters, mothers and “handicapped” mothers, workers, activists, politicians, and Jews.

This volume collects essays that reflect upon both the richness of Clara Sereni’s literary production and the relevance of her human legacy. The chapters engage with generational ties and conflicts as well as gender, history, and politics while also delving into the examination of Sereni’s narrative dialogical space that merges the private and the public in a constant attempt to give voice to the underserved, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

The first part of the book presents contributions written by Chiara Ingrao and Puma Valentina Scricciolo, women belonging to two different generations but close to Clara Sereni emotionally and intellectually. They met Sereni in two very different stages of the writer’s life. The lifelong bond between Clara Sereni and Chiara Ingrao was first formed through political connections when they were both very young; Sereni and Scricciolo, on the other hand, met during the last phase of the author’s life, when her health was deteriorating, and she had decided to live in a retirement community.

Daughter of Pietro Ingrao and Laura Lombardo Radice, antifascists who participated in the Italian Resistance and important members of the Italian Communist Party,¹ Chiara Ingrao lived in the same neighborhood where Sereni’s family resided for many years before moving to Monteverde in 1977. The two of them participated in common activities organized by the Italian Communist Party, and the political background and mutual friendships established in their youth forged a strong connection whose emotional story surfaces from the text by Chiara Ingrao that opens this book.²

Puma Valentina Scricciolo encountered Sereni while completing her doctoral research focused on Clara Sereni’s life and literary work in 2011. Their professional relationship developed into a friendship that, as with everything in Sereni’s world, blended the margins, in this case, between work and leisure

¹ Pietro Ingrao (1915-2015) was a senior member of the PCI, journalist and writer. Laura Lombardo Radice (1913-2003) was an active member of the PCI and UDI (Union of Italian Women), a teacher, an intellectual, and a pacifist.

² The text was written to honor the author after her passing in 2018.

time.³ While Chiara Ingrao's text shares intimate memories as well as moments of public history that saw both protagonists of social change, Scricciolo's essay offers a reconstruction of Sereni's life and work with personal anecdotes intertwining with scholarly research. Ingrao's and Scricciolo's texts respond to our wish to show the multigenerational legacy left behind by Sereni: two women of different ages and backgrounds whose voices bore witness to the person, the woman, and the writer that Clara Sereni was. Their desire to contribute to this collection is yet another extension of the threads that Clara weaved throughout her whole life, in her tireless efforts to build new networks of women and a better community.

"Legacies" also includes an interview conducted with Ginetto Campanini, a film director from Bologna, who worked with Sereni to make a film adaptation of "Karaoke," one of the author's short stories from the collection *Eppure*. Campanini and Sereni wrote the script together and collaborated during several stages of filming. The interview sheds light on new aspects of Sereni's human and social engagement, highlighting her efforts to raise awareness about issues related to physical and mental health as well as the importance of the role of the mother, family, and society in advocating for the inclusion of underserved populations.

The second part of the volume is a section dedicated to academic essays and opens with "*Cuore e ragione*, Heart and Reason: The Political and Ethical Poetics of Clara Sereni's Literary Engagement," where Giovanna Miceli Jeffries draws a roadmap for navigating through Sereni's work. Touching upon both her writing and her ethical engagement with the world that is driven from a perspective of "otherness," the scholar underscores how these different writings – from themes to formal linguistic and stylistic operations and solutions, to a re-definition of literature and poetics – constitute narratives traversing layers of invention, passion, memory, commitment, and a singular "positional" hope. Miceli Jeffries situates Sereni's literary engagement in the broader context of writers and works in the interface between literature and politics, probing the capacity of literature to participate in the democratic process of generating awareness and attention, and advocating for political, social justice, freedom, and human dignity.

³ See for example the story of "Arsenico e merletti" by Puma Valentino Scricciolo in *Clara Sereni*, edited by Francesca Silvestri and Puma Valentina Scricciolo, and published by ali&no in 2019.

Sereni's youth and early writing are at the center of Giulia Po DeLisle's essay, "Musical and Literary Interactions in Clara Sereni's Life and Writing." Drawing on concepts from cultural studies as well as literary and music theory, the article explores the significance that folk and protest music held in Sereni's life. The contribution offers an examination of some of Sereni's unpublished personal notebooks preserved at the Archivio Contemporaneo Alessandro Bonsanti of the Gabinetto G. P. Vieusseux in Florence, which reveal the author's love for music and singing. It continues with a close analysis of the significance of musical references in autobiographical accounts that recall Sereni's personal life in the late 1960s and 1970s (*Sigma Epsilon*, *Casalinghitudine*, and *Via Ripetta 155*). While Sereni's singing career did not take off as she had wished, music became one of her extra-verbal languages, one of the literary instruments she adopted to spread messages of social justice, as well as to mirror political commitment, sentiment, relationships, and character identity.

Scott Lerner's essay on "Playing the Realms: Clara Sereni's Jewish Family Saga of the Twentieth Century" examines Sereni's largest and perhaps most ambitious work, *Il gioco dei regni*. Combining personal family memoirs with the most important historical moment of the twentieth century in Italy, Sereni demonstrates her literary versatility and her historical knowledge. Lerner discusses the "realms" of the title as both concrete and conceptual places, or places in which concepts, ideas, and especially ideologies are contained: where ideologies reign. Although a literary work, the novel would appear to have several aims. It relates an extraordinary family saga whose real historical characters had a significant impact on twentieth-century history. It examines these histories – from the Liberal state, to Fascism, Zionism and Communism, from Europe to Palestine and the United Nations – through the lens of these historical actors who, from the same starting place, and with so much in common and so much love to bind them, took radically different, even adversarial, paths. It reveals how this history unfolds as a consequence of specific *family* dynamics and rivalries.

Further insights into *Il gioco dei regni* are offered in the contribution by Margherita Losacco, "The Earliest Reception of *Il gioco dei regni* in Clara Sereni's Correspondence: Silvia Vegetti Finzi, Cesare Segre, and Bruno Visentini as Readers and Critics." Losacco accessed the Gabinetto Vieusseux and examined letters that important Italian figures exchanged with Clara Sereni with regard to the publication of *Il gioco dei regni*. The essay explores Sereni's feelings about the publication of her historical novel, and her fears to be facing criticism during book presentations, as well as the intimate sentiments of those influential

persons. The letter written by psychologist and writer Silvia Vegetti Finzi shows the deep admiration and appreciation that Vegetti Finzi has toward Sereni and her writing, especially from a feminist perspective. The correspondence with Cesare Segre displays the profound respect that the philologist has towards the story that Sereni was able to recount, a story that is too painful and emotional for him to present publicly, but that he considers brilliantly constructed and whose narration discloses the work and ideas of some of the most exemplary figures of Jewish history. The letters between politician Bruno Visentini and Sereni reflect on the accuracy of Sereni's research prior to writing the text, and the importance of recognizing this work as a historical novel. The letters from and to Visentini also offer new details to the mysterious story of Emilio Sereni's escape from Rome to Paris in December 1935 during the fascist regime.

It is perhaps not widely known outside of Italy that a term first coined by Clara Sereni was officially entered into the Italian language: the word is "casalinghitudine." The word represents one of the most constant themes in Sereni's writing, and one that begins with her 1987 book by the same name, an autobiographical novel where recipes are the powerful trigger for memory and family. In "*Casalinghitudine* and the Revival of Women's Venues," Simonetta Milli Konewko revisits this most significant work, focusing on the interplay between memory, food, and space that is at the heart of *Casalinghitudine*, and the ways in which Sereni employs the element of food to underline the significance of a space where women's culture thrived in the past and could be reinvented in the present. Milli Konewko explores how homemaking and cooking can be an opportunity for contemporary women to flourish in a space often discredited in the present time, but that could contribute to exalting a re-validated identity.

The analysis of *Casalinghitudine* continues with Nicole Paronzini's essay, "Clara Sereni and Susanna Tamaro in the Kitchen and the Production of Food: A Woman's Role Between Tradition and Emancipation." The contribution offers a comparative analysis of Sereni's text of recipes and memories and Susanna Tamaro's novel *Va' dove ti porta il cuore*, examining the different narrative approaches that each author adopts toward the domestic space and women's identity. Paronzini demonstrates how Tamaro's female character remains confined in the traditional role of the housewife, while Sereni portrays a woman of innovative views able to overcome the rules established by the patriarchal system and transform the house and the kitchen into spaces of female agency.

In "Final Chapters: Self, Humor, and Irony in Clara Sereni's Last Three Works," Mirna Cicioni's approach to Sereni's writing is to view it as an intriguing autobiographical macrotext, with works linked to one another by numerous

cross-references that occasionally offer different versions of specific memories by situating them in different contexts. On this premise, the scholar considers a strong but often-overlooked element as she examines humor and irony interwoven throughout Sereni's work. These elements, Cicioni theorizes, are based on the coexistence of different, often incompatible, interpretations of reality, and foreground the increasing fragmentation and fragility of society. Sereni's irony – verbal and situational – exposes gaps between expectations and reality; it often takes the form of self-deprecating hindsight, where the narrating self, with apparent detachment, shows how, on past occasions, the narrated self “should have known better.”

In “Motherhood and Disability in Clara Sereni's Work,” Susan Briziarelli looks at the evolution of Sereni's views on motherhood as she balances the conflicting priorities of private and professional life. At the time of her son Matteo's birth in 1978, being the mother of a disabled child was a topic not generally much discussed outside the family; Sereni's work breaks new ground in creating an emerging public discourse on the experience of mothering a disabled child. The year 1978 also marked the enactment of the controversial and revolutionary Basaglia reform, which put into motion the closing, over time, of all psychiatric hospitals and the integration of mentally disabled individuals into society. Sereni's journey into the experience of motherhood is in many ways parallel to that of Law 180, as she becomes increasingly engaged in the commitment she shares with Franco Basaglia, to give to the mentally disabled and – in equal measure – to their families, “a life worth living.” Beginning with *Casalinghitudine* (1987), up to the 2004 documentary film *Un silenzio particolare*, made by Sereni's husband, filmmaker, and screen-writer Stefano Rulli (*La piovra, La meglio gioventù*), the chapter traces the author's trajectory from a place of ‘otherness’ to one in which she reclaims the rights of the mother as well as the child to a life of dignity and inclusion.

Because not all of Clara Sereni's works have yet appeared in English, at the end of this volume, we have added the translation of four short stories that we feel are representative of the breadth and scope of her writing. For speakers of English who may not be familiar with Sereni's untranslated work, these excerpts will help to illustrate and inform the essays that precede. These are from *Manicomio primavera, Eppure*, and *Il lupo mercante*. “Triumphal March” and “Important Moments,” translated by Susan Briziarelli, illustrate the daily struggles and small moments of joy experienced by mothers caring for disabled children. “Atrazine,” translated by David Ward, looks at workplace injuries and disability as well as at the invisible effects of environmental pollution. “Clac-

clac,” translated by Giulia Po DeLisle, tells the story of the devastating flood in Florence in 1966, a story that, in the aftermath of the recent Emilia Romagna flood in May 2023, offers a reflection on climate change and human impact on the environment while uncovering a universal message of solidarity and love.

Originating from the firm belief that Clara Sereni’s works require and deserve further analysis, this volume seeks to cast a new critical light on the studies of a female author who documented a century of Italian cultural and political life and, within this historical context, was able to tackle issues that strike a chord that is very personal and yet universally relevant. Her themes are ones that resonate with the individual and engage in a global conversation about self and community, and our responsibilities to both. Many of her works received broad critical acclaim, garnering prestigious literary prizes and nominations; a few, equally impactful, remain predominantly limited to an Italian audience. We trust that this volume will inform English-speaking readers and scholars of/from heterogeneous disciplines (literary studies, gender studies, cultural studies, disability studies, and history) and engage them in the discovery of a unique writer whose life and writing were always driven by a utopic vision for an ethical horizon of social justice, collective responsibilities, and civil rights.

After her death, the international Premio Letterario Clara Sereni was established in Italy, with its first awards in 2020. Recently, the Clara Sereni Archive was opened in Florence at the prestigious Gabinetto Scientifico Letterario G.P. Vieusseux, founded in 1820. Her richly interdisciplinary writing has attracted the attention of scholars of Jewish Studies, European and Italian History, Women’s Studies and Comparative Literature, to name a few. Most scholars approach Sereni’s work from their own disciplinary perspective, often focusing on a specific aspect or on a single work, but nothing has been published thus far in English that brings together the salient motifs into a single, cogent discussion. Precisely because Sereni’s works are so steeped in multiple disciplines, the editors felt that a comprehensive set of essays that address and bring together the multiple strands of her writing was much needed, but still glaringly absent. This volume brings broader and as-yet unexplored perspectives on Sereni’s work as a whole, opening opportunities for further dialogue and helping single-discipline scholars to place Sereni into this overarching context.

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Contributors

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Chiara Ingrao (born 1949) is a writer, educator and activist: first in the student movement, later in the feminist and peace movements. Her novel *Ladyfingers and Factory Hands (Dita di dama)*, soon to be published in the US, is based on the author's personal experience as a young labor organizer. Her autobiographical book *Salaam Shalom* tells about her experience with Palestinian and Israeli peace activists, and her impact on the war in the Balkans inspired the novel *Il resto è silenzio*. Where Sarajevo and Antigone's Thebes intermingle in the story of three pairs of sisters. Other books by this author include "Soltanto una vita" (with writings by her mother and accounts of her life), the novel "Migrante per sempre" (based on the life of an Italian migrant), three children's novels, two collections of rhymes, and many articles and essays, available on her web site www.chiaraingrao.it

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Novel in Recipes, SUNY Press, 2005]. Her last publications include *Bitter Trades. A Memoir* (Legas, 2018) and *Mondo Nuovo* (Rubbettino, 2021).

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Puma Valentina Scricciolo teaches Italian Literature at the University of Perugia (FISSUF) and is a Professor of Literary Disciplines at ITTI in Castiglione del Lago. A Cultrice della materia at the University of Perugia, she received her Ph.D. with the dissertation *Una famiglia di carta. Clara Sereni e la scrittura*. Passionate about women's signature writing studies, she wrote the monograph *Io volevo essere io. Clara Sereni e la scrittura* (Aracne, 2021), as well as numerous essays and articles. A publicist journalist, she is about to publish a narrative biography of Clara Sereni (Bompiani, 2024).

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Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); Piero Gobetti's *New World: Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing* (Toronto: the University of Toronto Press, 2010); *Contemporary Italian Narrative and 1970s Terrorism: Stranger than Fact* (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2017); and one in Italian, *Carlo Levi: Gli italiani e la paura della libertà* (Milan: Rizzoli/Nuova Italia, 2002). He is also co-editor, with Sciltian Gastaldi, of a volume of essays on the writings of the children and relatives of the victims of terrorism, entitled *Era mio padre: Italian Terrorism of the Anni di Piombo in the Postmemorials of Victims' Relatives*, published in the *Italian Modernities* series by Peter Lang in 2018.

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