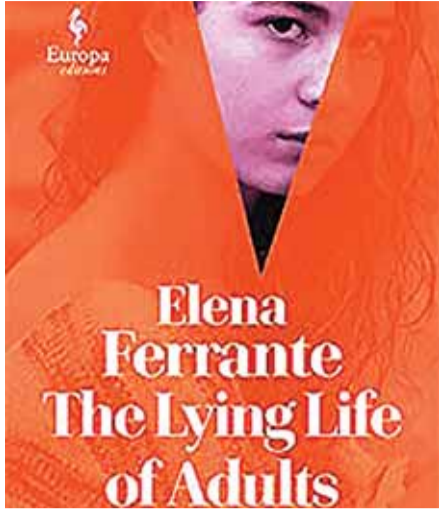


Lifestyle | Features



The cover book of "The Lying Life of Adults".

New **Elena Ferrante** book sparks fan fever in France

Queues formed outside French bookshops Tuesday as legions of Elena Ferrante fans rushed to get a copy of her acclaimed new book, "The Lying Life of Adults". English language readers will have to wait till September to dive into her first novel since her massively successful quartet of "Neapolitan Novels" ended with "The Story of the Lost Child" in 2014. Her new saga is also set in the southern Italian city. But this time the heroine Giovanna hails from the upper echelons of Naples' society rather than from its working-class fringes, with the novel opening in the wealthy hilltop district of Vomero in the early 1990s.

Both her parents are seemingly enlightened intellectuals, and she is brought up to feel "proud to have been born female". But that does not mean Giovanna is not put

through the wringer, with the opening paragraph teased by Ferrante's publishers revealing how marked she was by overhearing her father tell her mother that she was very ugly. While some Italian critics look down their nose at Ferrante-mania, it has been generally warmly received. Italian fans queued up at midnight in November to buy the first copies of the book and then read it together in all-night vigils.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic—which also delayed the book's publication in English from June to September—it has become a runaway bestseller. French critics were also generally wowed by the emotional roller-coaster of its teenage rebellion and the treasonous twists and turns of the plot. Olivia de Lamberterie told French radio that "Ferrante does not set out to seduce the reader.

She has a way of laying out her characters in all their complexity... Friendships are often awful and treasonous."

The ending has also left many asking if this could be the beginning of a new Ferrante series, but her Italian publisher claims that even they do not know. Netflix announced last month that they will also bring "The Lying Life of Adults" to the screen. Ferrante became a household name with the first of her Naples books, "My Brilliant Friend". That is also the title of a hit HBO television series drawn from the books. The quartet of novels, which follows the enduring friendship of two sensitive young girls, has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide.—AFP

Salzburg Festival saves 100th edition with slimmed down event

The Salzburg Festival of music and drama will go ahead in August, organisers said Tuesday—but with special measures in place to meet the threat of the coronavirus. And while the event has escaped the global wave of cancellations caused by the pandemic, the 100th edition has been radically stripped down. All 80,000 tickets on sale—down from the usual 230,000—will be personalised to enable contact tracing in case of an infection. Organisers will also operate a system for seating the audience similar to that used for boarding planes, with one group after another called to embark rather than all at once. Spectators will have to wear masks until they are seated and there will be no intermissions or catering. "We know we are walking on thin ice... But the longing for performances is just so big," said artistic director Markus Hinterhauser, explaining the safety precautions taken by the festival.

The programme has been slashed by almost half from the 200 performances originally planned to 110 performances. And measures are also in place to protect the remaining performers who did make it. Artists unable to keep a distance of at least one metre (three feet) from their colleagues, such as those in an orchestra, will have to undergo weekly coronavirus test and keep a diary monitoring their health. The festival, which will run throughout August, will include two operas and a play based on the writing of Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke, which is being staged for the first time.

The festival's two operas are "Elektra" by Richard Strauss, staged by Poland's Krzysztof Warlikowski; and a production of Mozart's "Così fan tutte" by German director Christof Loy. Austria, an Alpine nation of nearly nine million people, has so far escaped the brunt of the pandemic, recording some 16,900 new coronavirus cases and fewer than 700 deaths.—AFP



An usher waits for guests prior to a concert at Vienna's State Opera in Vienna, Austria on June 8, 2020. —AFP photos



Vienna's State Opera director Dominique Meyer poses for a picture prior to a concert at a stairway of the State Opera in Vienna, Austria.

Mask-clad music lovers trickle in as Vienna concert houses reopen

After months of lying silent because of the coronavirus pandemic, Vienna's illustrious classical music venues are throwing open their doors—but their vast halls can now play host to only 100 audience members at a time. Those eager concert-goers have snapped up the few available tickets for the first shows to be put on since Austria's concert houses shut their doors in March under a strict lockdown to stem the spread of the new coronavirus. As the increase in infections has abated and the country eases its restrictions, venues such as Vienna's State Opera are now allowed to reopen after hundreds of shows were cancelled.

"I watched live streams, from Paris, New York, Vienna, but it's something else when you sit in the concert hall and so I'm so happy that it's starting again now," said Evelynne Strobel. The 64-year-old teacher was among the lucky ones who trickled into the imposing foyer of the 1,709-seat State Opera on Monday, wearing a mask matching her pastel-coloured outfit, to watch its first post-shutdown show. Another audience member, 57-year-old Ulrike Grunenwald, drove 16 hours from France's northeastern Alsace region to Vienna to attend the recital by Austrian operatic bass Guenther Groissboeck with her daughter.

She said she was armed with a negative coronavirus test in case of any border controls. State Opera Director Dominique



Guests leave after a concert at the 'Wiener Konzerthaus' in Vienna, Austria.

Meyer told AFP that while it was "frustrating" to have to cap audience numbers—and of course not economically viable in the long term—the resumption of concerts was a "symbol". "It's important for the soul, for people's mental health and the well-being of society," he said, adding that tickets priced at 100 euros (\$110) or less for the opera's 14 shows in June were all snapped up within half an hour when they went on sale last week.

'Important moment'

Meyer said he "could not hold back a little tear" when attending one of the very first classical concerts since the shutdown on Friday, a performance of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the world-famous Daniel Barenboim at the

city's Musikverein. "It was extremely beautiful... and Daniel Barenboim, who conducted and played Mozart's 27th concerto, told me that he had played this concerto a hundred times but had never heard it played so well, and I never heard a sound so beautiful," he said. Barenboim told reporters last week ahead of his performances that it was "a very important moment when the music starts again". "For us it's just important that we can play," said an emotional Daniel Froschauer, first violinist and section leader of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

All orchestra members tested negative for the new coronavirus last week and so played without masks. Spectators too are allowed to take off their masks once they reach their seats in the new chequerboard-like layout devised to observe social dis-

tancing rules. But the smaller audiences affect the sound, commentators noted. "There is a difference because each body absorbs sound, so when the room is empty, there is less absorption and therefore a little more echo," Meyer said.

'Very unusual'

Gerlinde Kraft, who attended a concert at the Austrian capital's famous Konzerthaus on Saturday, told AFP that being among so few spectators "doesn't bother me but it is very unusual". Nonetheless, concert houses are looking to the future with trepidation, especially the prospect of a new wave of coronavirus infections. "For us it's pure joy to hear the music again in the places where it belongs," Konzerthaus director Matthias Nasse told AFP.

He added, however, that audience limitations were "absurd" from an economic point of view. From July 1, up to 250 spectators are to be allowed, and the limit will be raised again in August. A return to full concert halls—and larger-scale productions—is expected from September. The opera and other concert venues have asked the government for special support for musicians—many of whom lost their income entirely when concert halls shut down.—AFP



A camel waits at an overlook by the (left to right) Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops), Pyramid of Khafre (Chephren), and Pyramid of Menkaure (Menkheres) at the Giza pyramids necropolis on the southwestern outskirts of the Egyptian capital.—AFP



In this file photo taken on March 25, 2020 Egyptian municipality workers disinfect the Giza pyramids necropolis on the southwestern outskirts of the Egyptian capital Cairo, as protective a measure against the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19. —AFP photos



The Giza pyramids necropolis on the southwestern outskirts of the Egyptian capital Cairo is pictured empty after the site closed to the general public as a protective a measure against the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19.

Hotels have ramped up hygiene, archaeological sites have been sanitised and beaches cleaned up—Egypt is gearing up to welcome back tourists kept away by the coronavirus pandemic. "We are laying the groundwork for tourists from around the world to find this destination ... in exemplary sanitary conditions," Egypt's antiquities and tourism minister, Khaled al-Anani, told AFP. Egypt has since March halted air traffic and shuttered archaeological sites, museums and hotels to stem the spread of COVID-19.

The North African country, like elsewhere, has in recent weeks started loosening confinement measures as it looks to slowly open up to tourists in the summer season. "We are waiting for our curve (of contaminations) to stabilise," the minister said. Conditions for international tourism will be announced in the "coming days", he said, adding that the government was

"not rushing" it. "All we want is to make sure that tourists face no problems when we open up." Egypt's health ministry has so far registered around 35,000 COVID-19 cases, including more than 1,200 fatalities.

The minister said Red Sea resorts including in South Sinai will be the first to open along with Mediterranean beaches west of the coastal city of Alexandria. Top tourist attractions such as the Giza pyramids and Aswan's Karnak temple will also reopen to tourists but with controls. Luxor's star attraction, the tomb of Tutankhamun, for example, will grant entry to a maximum of 10 people at a time, Anani said. Other tourist magnets in the densely populated capital, Cairo, will open at a later stage, he said. Egypt had high hopes for tourism in 2020 before the health crisis hit. The government expected 15 million tourists to visit this year, up from 13 million in 2019. The tourism industry, a key pillar of Egypt's economy, had started to show signs of recovery

after years of political turmoil since the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak.

Financial aid

All plans came to a halt with the suspension of international flights and closure of tourist destinations. Now, hotels are to be allowed to operate with up to 50 percent capacity, according to the minister. The facilities are required to provide masks and sanitisers to all guests, while common areas must be regularly disinfected and the use of elevators limited to 50 percent capacity, he added. Anani said the ministry has green-lighted only 73 out of 178 hotels that requested to reopen, adding that he "could not take the risk" of opening any deemed unfit. "I'd much rather support these hotels than open them."

Official figures showed that the tourism sector generated \$13 billion in revenues last year. There have been

no official figures on tourism losses this year, but Planning Minister Hala al-Saeed said in April that they could amount to \$5 billion. The central bank has earmarked up to 50 billion Egyptian pounds (\$3 billion) in loans to support the sector at reduced interest rates of five percent, said Anani.

The funds were allocated to paying salaries and revamping hotels, buses, cruise ships and travel agencies, according to the minister. Egypt has secured an urgent aid package of \$2.8 billion from the International Monetary Fund to offset the economic downturn. It also agreed with the IMF on another \$5.2 billion stand-by arrangement "to maintain macroeconomic stability amid the COVID-19 shock". In 2021, authorities are counting on the inauguration of the Grand Egyptian Museum at the Giza plateau to spur tourism.—AFP