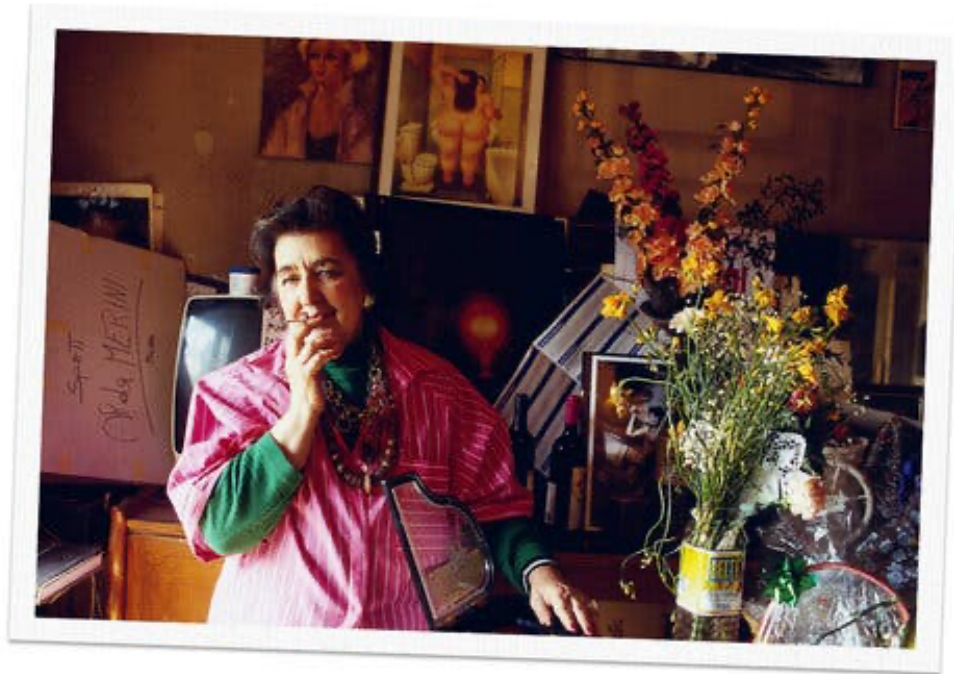


Overlooked No More: Alda Merini, Poet Who Wrote of Life's Joys and Struggles

Countless fans have been intrigued by her verses carrying erotic and sacred imagery, and by her life, from her childhood in Milan to her time spent in asylums.



Alda Merini in 1995. Today her poems and aphorisms are widely shared on social media. Credit...Leonardo Cendamo/Getty Images

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This article is part of Overlooked, a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.

The voice of the marginalized. The lady of the Navigli. The mad poet. Alda Merini didn't like these labels, but as one of Italy's most celebrated literary figures, she couldn't escape them. Countless admirers have been intrigued by her life, from her upbringing along the system of canals in Milan called the Navigli, to her struggles with mental illness as an adult.

Merini found inspiration everywhere. In verses carrying erotic and sacred imagery, a homeless man became "a fiery icicle laying over my warm secret," the patients of a mental asylum a "herd of hermits" inside the walls of Jericho.

Her struggles with mental illness began in the late 1940s or early '50s, and her life has been described as alternating between moments of great happiness and deep sorrow. But it stung when people called her mad.

“Many gave a name to my way of life,” Merini dryly wrote in a 1985 poem, “and I was only a hysteric.”

Between it all she achieved mainstream success and became a best-selling author. Even today her poems and aphorisms are widely shared on social media. In one she wrote: “I am not a woman who can be domesticated.”

Alda Giuseppina Angela Merini was born on March 21, 1931, in Milan to a family of modest means. Her father, Nemo, worked for an insurance company, and her mother, Emilia Painelli, was a homemaker. Early on, Alda displayed an aptitude for the written word, which her father encouraged her to cultivate. When she was 5, he bought her a dictionary and would teach her 10 new words a night. She started writing poems at 9.

Alda’s literary flourishing was temporarily stifled during World War II. In 1943, as Milan was subjected to aerial bombing, the Merinis’ home was destroyed, forcing the family to rebuild in the countryside.

“The terrible years of the war brought great upset to my life,” Merini wrote in “Crime of Life” (1994), her autobiography.

After the war, back in Milan, she completed trade school and began working as a secretary. But when her compositions were shared with the renowned literary critic Giacinto Spagnoletti, her life took an unexpected turn.

Merini became a regular guest at Spagnoletti’s home, a gathering place for Milan’s intellectuals, including the writer Maria Corti, who would become a close friend and collaborator, and Giorgio Manganelli, a married journalist with whom Merini, still a teenager, began an affair.

Merini is said to have experienced the first signs of mental illness around this time, and in 1947 she spent a month in a clinic for the mentally ill.

“The Presence of Orpheus,” her first book of poems, came out in 1953. A year later, after breaking things off with Manganelli, Merini married Ettore Carniti, a young baker. She gave birth to her first daughter, Emanuela, in 1955 and to her second, Flavia, in 1958.

Domestic life did not suit Merini. The need to write poetry was all-consuming, distracting her from familial responsibilities.

“When she wrote she entered her own bubble,” her daughter Emanuela Carniti wrote in her book, “Alda Merini, My Mother” (2019), “and we knew that she would get annoyed if we disturbed her.”

Merini's extravagant spending was a source of disagreement with Carniti. She resented his squandering time at the local osteria. The two would get into violent fights.

At the same time, the literary world's enthusiasm for her work was waning, and editors started turning it down, as Ambrogio Borsani wrote in the introduction to *"Il Suono dell'Ombra"* (*"The Sound of the Shadow,"* 2010), one of the most comprehensive collections of Merini's poetry.

In 1965, her husband had her admitted to the Paolo Pini psychiatric hospital in Milan, and for years she found herself in and out of asylums, where patients often lived in harsh conditions.

The exact state of Merini's mental health was never clear. As a teenager she was told she had hysterical blindness, now known as conversion disorder; later in life she was said to be schizophrenic. Those who knew her often relied on euphemisms: Emanuela wrote of her mother's "ghosts"; her close friend and editor Marina Bignotti referred to the "shadows of her mind," an expression frequently used by Merini herself.

Bignotti, who is also the president of the Alda Merini Association, which seeks to raise awareness about mental health, said Merini sometimes had violent outbursts, becoming irrational, confused, obsessive or aggressive.

In one poem she wrote: "You go to the mental asylum to learn to die / Nobody brushes my hair as well as the wind / Madness comes to visit me at least twice a day."

But her life did not come to a standstill during this period of institutionalization. She gave birth to two more daughters, Barbara and Simona, and continued to write with the encouragement of her doctor. But the course of her life was altered. "After that first internment, Mom was never the same," Emanuela wrote in her book.

Merini's memory started to falter, most likely a result of the electroshock therapy she had received, and her three youngest daughters were sent away to be raised by others.

In 1978, when the Italian government ordered the closing of asylums, Merini returned home to Carniti. After he died in 1983, she reconnected with old friends, including Corti and the poet Michele Pierri, 30 years her senior, with whom she started an intense relationship.

In 1984, Merini and Pierri married and moved to Taranto, a coastal city in southern Italy. That year, with the support of Corti and the publishing house Scheiwiller Libri, Merini produced *"The Holy Land,"* a poetry collection that, with its raw and spiritual reflections on life in a mental institution, is widely considered her masterpiece.

As her second husband's health declined in the late 1980s, Merini struggled with her mental state once again. In 1988, she was admitted to the psychiatric wing of Taranto's hospital. Isolated and in anguish, she turned to Bignotti, who helped her relocate to Milan shortly before Pierri's death.

There, struggling financially and emotionally, she leaned on a group of friends. Scheiwiller Libri paid her rent; Bignotti also assisted her financially. Corti and the poet Giovanni Raboni shepherded her writing into new poetry collections, which led to her rediscovery.

Susan Stewart, a professor of English literature at Princeton University and the author of "Love Lessons," a collection of Merini's poems translated into English, said in an email that Merini had written "without inhibition of her inner life, and she was not interested in fulfilling the expectations of readers."

"Her work is deeply empathetic to history, to myth, to the emotions and, in the end, to her own fate," Stewart said.

Merini won two coveted Italian literary awards, the Librex Montale in 1993 and the Viareggio Prize for poetry in 1996. In 2001, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Image



A bridge in Milan named for Merini. There have been festivals to honor her memory and theatrical performances based on her work. Credit...Mairo Cinquetti/NurPhoto via Getty Images

In her final years she regularly appeared on TV, unkempt and regal at the same time. She was cheerful and witty, always ready to tell a joke. She was known to fish money from her bra and give it to those in need.

Merini wanted to be regarded as “the poet of joy,” Giovanni Nuti, a jazz composer who set her verses to music, said in an interview.

She died of cancer on Nov. 1, 2009, in Milan. She was 78. Her last wish, expressed to Nuti just before her death, was that her poetry be shared widely. Since then there have been festivals to mark her birthday and the anniversary of her death, as well as theatrical performances based on her work. A bridge in Milan was named after her.

“She wanted to reach the farmer at the market, the milkman, the butcher,” Nuti said by phone. “She wanted to reach everybody, because her language was one of love, speaking to everyone’s heart.”