

The People of the Novel

A reader's guide to the cast — by James Abruzzo

Alfredo Cercando (Fefè) — The protagonist. The book traces his life from age five on his uncle's farm in Avola, Sicily, through his family's passage to Paterson, NJ. A prodigiously talented pianist, he wins a scholarship to Boston Conservatory and spends summers at Tanglewood, where he meets Eleanor Thomas. The story opens around his sixtieth birthday, celebrated in Avola with a concert arranged by his lifelong friend Franco.

Eleanor "Lena" Thomas — Alfredo's wife, from a Presbyterian Rhode Island family. She raises their two children while Alfredo tours the world, and eventually comes into her own professionally, rising to head of European operations for SONY.

David Lister — An English writer Lena meets through her work at SONY.

Franco — Alfredo's childhood friend in Sicily, now head of the Politeama theater in Palermo. He presents Alfredo as a soloist for the sixtieth-birthday concert in Avola.

Krystyna "Krysia" — A Polish artist thirty years younger than Alfredo, whom he meets during the week in Avola before his family arrives for his birthday celebration. Her presence recurs at pivotal points in the years that follow.

John — Alfredo and Lena's older son, a driven, athletic businessman whose demanding career creates distance between him and his father.

Noa — Alfredo and Lena's daughter, a brilliant scholar who falls in love with Leili.

Leili — Noa's partner, a Persian American woman whose father served as a deputy to the Shah of Iran. She and Noa have a daughter, Isalena.

Isalena — Noa and Leili's daughter, introduced as a precocious child with perfect pitch and a gift for the cello.

Hanna — A Singaporean researcher Alfredo meets after buying a stone house in the Sicilian countryside. She becomes his traveling companion, guiding him — and the reader — through the history and culture of Sicily.

Samiro — A world-class violinist from Gibellina, a town destroyed by an earthquake and later rebuilt as the Cretto di Burri memorial. Alfredo recognizes him as one of the boys in a photograph he took in Siracusa forty years earlier.

Cenza Ghirlandaio — An arte povera artist and fellow survivor of the Gibellina earthquake, and Samiro's friend. She stages a tribute concert commemorating the lost town.