

Wednesday, May 19, 2010

## [The Dark Lady's Bright Prospects](#)

Italian author [Barbara Baraldi](#) was first mentioned in The Rap Sheet two months ago, in our interview with [British editor and former bookstore proprietor Maxim Jakubowski](#). We reported then that Jakubowski had signed the 35-year-old Baraldi as a contributor to his new publishing imprint, [MaxCrime](#). Her thriller, *The Girl with the Crystal Eyes* (originally published in Italy in 2008), is being released this month in the UK as Max Crime's first English-translated work. Jakubowski describes the book as containing "echoes of Hitchcock and [Italian film producer] [Dario Argento](#) and strong female characters on both sides of the good and evil divide." Which is not faint praise.



Baraldi was born in the northern Italian countryside midway between Modena and Bologna. She fell in love with books and reading while still at school, and eventually she decided to study foreign literature. "My diet was a book a night," she says. During the same period, she started writing "without telling anyone." She had also "fallen in love with photography," and hoped to become a professional shooter. To pay for her studies, she worked as a fashion model, which allowed her the luxury of a "very expensive" pro-quality camera. "That was when I started visually exploring the dark, forgotten corners of Bologna," she explains.

During our recent conversation with Baraldi, we talked about her pseudonymous debut as a writer, her early taste in authors, and her fascination with the "dark side" of life and how that affects her fiction.

**Michael Gregorio:** I'm wondering how a studious young woman from the Italian countryside turned into a writer of noir. And in [Bologna](#), too, a city famous for fine food and a love of the best things in life, rather than violent crime.

**Barbara Baraldi:** Well, I've always liked to tell stories. When I think about myself now, I feel like I was born to be a novelist. Like it was my destiny. When I was younger, I used to baby-sit my three little brothers, and I'd invent scary stories to tell them. My parents were amazed by how quiet I managed to keep them. I was--and I suppose I still am--talking about my fears as a way of exorcising them. When I realized that I could write and eventually publish my stories, it was like finding myself in a new world.

**MG:** How was your first book published? Was it easy to find an editor?

**BB:** It isn't easy for a first-timer anywhere, I suppose. Still, it is hard in Italy, because so many people want to get into print. Just look at the huge number of vanity publishers we have! I started by submitting short stories to competitions, and, while doing that, I finished my first novel, [\*La ragazza dalle ali di serpente\*](#) [*The Girl with the Snake Wings*]. What now? I thought. Well, I didn't know anyone in the business, so I drew up a list of likely publishing houses, and started sending off copies of the manuscript. Some months later, a publisher showed interest, [the book was brought out in 2007 by Zoe Editore] and I signed a contract. They were a very small company and their distribution was limited, but the edition sold out quickly, and my first royalty check came through the post: 40 euros!

**MG:** Were you hoping for more? I mean to say, you'd published a book, and you'd made some money out of it ...

**BB:** *Forty euros?* In the meantime, I'd written a second novel, *La bambola dagli occhi di cristallo* [*The Girl with the Crystal Eyes*] and I used to attend every literary event in Bologna. At one of the shows I met an editor/talent scout/writer named Luigi Bernardi, who had once worked as an editor for Einaudi--he discovered Italy's most well-known crime writer, [Carlo Lucarelli](#) [*Almost Blue, Via Delle Oche, etc.*], by the way. I asked Luigi if he would read the book, and he wrote back quickly, saying, "It's damned good." And the very same week, I won the most important Italian competition for an unpublished short story [il Gran Giallo Città di Cattolica], which brought with it an offer to publish the story as part of the [Giallo Mondadori](#) series. An editor at Mondadori then read *The Girl with the Crystal Eyes* in the Italian version, and he offered me a contract, which I accepted. Suddenly, I was a Mondadori author. And continuing contact with Luigi Bernardi led me towards the creation of Amelia, a character who has now assumed serial status in my work. [Bernardi has also published two other Baraldi novellas in the popular Perdisa Pop series.]

**MG:** So, you had two published novels, an award-winning short story, and a contract with Mondadori.

**BB:** Yes, it was an incredible start. A sort of modern fairy-tale ...

**MG:** And you had a fairy-tale name, I think?

**BB:** I suppose so. I chose the [pseudonym] Luna Lanzoni when I was writing the first novel. *La ragazza dalle ali di serpente* was a novel about growing up in Bologna, a city I really adore. I turned it into a dark, menacing, "gothic" sort of place, the setting for a love story between two girls from different social backgrounds. Much of it takes place at night in backstreet clubs which are swarming with restless souls. That was why I chose the pen-name Luna [which means "moon" in Italian]. The moon ... symbolizes everything female, and women, like the moon and its phases, are in a state of continuous flux and mutation.

**MG:** To which themes are you particularly attracted? I read a comment about how you are "fascinated by the dark side of everyday life ..."

**BB:** One day, I asked myself, "what is really scary?" My answer was "reality," the terrible things that could happen to any one of us any day in the city. I pay a lot of attention to the psychology of my characters, and the motives behind their behavior. No one is simply "good" or "evil"; it's much more complex. I believe that the shades of a personality make each of one us unique. Everyone has a "dark side," like any city or society, and that's what I am trying to explore. The passions and the compulsions that drive people.

**MG:** How do you go about your daily life? I mean to say, does Barbara Baraldi have a dark side, too?

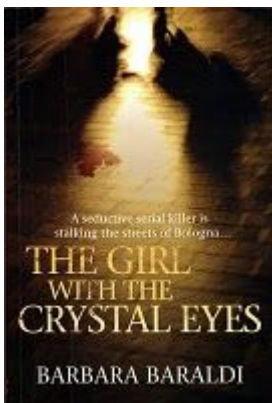
**BB:** Simplicity is the key word in my life. I like cooking, walking in the country, going to the cinema. I spend a lot of time with my family and my dogs. I'm shy and a bit introverted. Writing is a safety valve, I suppose, where I can venture into a different world. I write every day, and I'm very disciplined about it. I consider myself a careful observer, and I'm a little paranoiac, too. I collect gothic dolls and musical boxes, and love going to antiques markets, which is where I find unusual accessories and old-fashioned clothes. I like the "dark lady" look. That's my dark side, I suppose.

**MG:** How do you see the Italian literary scene, and how would you describe your place in it?

**BB:** The Italian literary world is in ferment. There has never been so much attention given to the younger generation of novelists as there is today. I found my space within the noir-fiction genre. Critics and reviewers tend to define my work as "gothic," but I just like to explore character, particularly the psychological mechanisms which make people what they are. Suspense often builds up in their minds before the crime actually happens. I work very hard on the setting, which

may become a character in itself, not just the background to the central story. I wrote a couple of novels that were labeled "dark fairy-tales." *La collezionista di sogni infranti* [*Collector of Shattered Dreams*], for example, was inspired by thinking about the Internet with its dangers and its deceits. The main character, Amelia, after a long "virtual" relationship decides that she wants to meet her Web-chat friend, Marina, in person. Trapped in the countryside and with no possibility of escape, she find herself caught up in a game of lies and deception. In the sequel, which was published in Italy as *La casa di Amelia* [*Amelia's House*], Amelia goes back to confront the ghosts of the past, which surface by way of mysterious phone calls and lurid death threats.

My most recently published novel in Italy is entitled *Lullaby, la ninna nanna della morte* [*Lullaby, the Rock-a-Bye-Baby of Death*]. [Massimo Carlotto](#) [Italian writer of the acclaimed "Alligator" series, which is published in English by Europa Editions] defined it as a "cool, authentic, gothic novel." I often say that it is written with my own blood, because it took me years of hard work before I managed to finish it. It is a kaleidoscope of light and dark, an ancestral sense of danger, the idea that something terrible is about to happen. And, of course, it does happen. A series of murders erupts in a small town, and there seems to be no way of stopping it. Two unlikely investigators, a man in a midlife crisis and a "difficult" young girl, join forces to save themselves, and salvage their innocence. The tale is packed with suspense, black humor, fear, suffocating situations, a cast of intriguing characters, and a soundtrack of New Wave music from the late '70s and early '80s.



**MG:** *The Girl with the Crystal Eyes* is being released this month in English by Max Crime, a John Blake imprint directed by Maxim Jakubowski. How do you feel about that? I mean to say, very few Italian authors manage to find themselves an English editor and a publisher who is willing to take a chance on a name which (for the moment) is virtually unknown to the English-reading public.

**BB:** It is a very great honor for me to be published in English. I can hardly express the emotions that I went through, and I'm very grateful to Maxim for his faith in me. ... Even so, I didn't really believe that it was true until I held a copy of the book in my hands a few days ago.

**MG:** Can you give us the author's "cut" on the book? What should readers expect from *The Girl with the Crystal Eyes*?

**BB:** It's a journey through the mind of a seductive female serial killer. She is smart and apparently uncatchable, but Marconi, a detective inspector, believes that he has found the key to unravel the

meaning of the crime scenes. The case becomes an obsession, and he gets embroiled in a wicked game of hunter and hunted, where there is very little difference between good and evil. Bologna becomes a deadly labyrinth where nothing is quite what it appears to be. I particularly enjoyed creating the character of a young medium who seems to foresee the actions of the killer, while fighting the ghosts of her own past.

**MG:** You are very active on the Web in Italy, via Facebook and Twitter. How important is it to have this ongoing daily contact with readers? Would you recommend it as a strategy for other young writers?

**BB:** A presence on the Web is very important for a novelist. Lots of well-known writers now have a social network account and engage in discussions with their readers. We can't ignore it. The Internet shortens the distances between those who produce culture, and those who benefit from it. I keep in close touch with my readers. They send many e-mails expressing their opinions, asking questions, or sometimes just to say how much they like one of my characters or books.

**MG:** Which books and authors have had the greatest influence on you?

**BB:** I grew up reading classics such as *Narcissus and Goldmund* by Herman Hesse, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf, whose novels I really do love. I'm really into Romantic literature, you know, [Edgar Allan Poe](#), Mary Shelley ... Oh, and I love the fantastic stories of [Italo Calvino](#). I think I started writing noir because I wanted to explore the atmosphere that you find in the sort of films that [Alfred Hitchcock](#) and the Italian filmmaker, Dario Arento, were making. I was, of course, influenced by contemporary Italian writers like Carlo Lucarelli and Massimo Carlotto. Otherwise, I read books--all sorts of books--to open up my mind, really. It seems to me that every period [in my life] is marked and characterized by certain books.

**MG:** What projects are you working on for the immediate future?

**BB:** *Scarlett*, my new novel, will be launched by Mondadori at the [Turin Book Festival](#) [later this month]. An urban fantasy set in Siena, a lovely old town in Tuscany, it provided the opportunity for me to indulge in my "undying" passion for the supernatural. The story takes place in a high school, the librarian is murdered, and one of the pupils sets out to catch the killer. It is aimed at teenagers, though it explores adult themes like love and friendship, the break-up of a family, the importance of time and its passing.