

Replanting the Family Tree, the Reconfiguration of Kinship in the Family Novel after 1968

The family novel, as a distinct literary genre, has been the focus of extensive critical and theoretical inquiry. Such efforts at definition have frequently produced a narrowly delimited framework, typically characterized by features including the portrayal of three generational spans, an emphasis on *longue durée*, and the recurrent depiction of familial rites and traditions. However, such criteria fail to encompass the full range of forms and possibilities inherent in the family novel. The family novel has long been a pervasive presence within the Italian literary landscape. Through its explorations of temporality and kinship—both in their conventional and unconventional forms—it has variously reconfigured, challenged, or reaffirmed existing power structures and hierarchies. In novels written by authors such as Alba de Cespedes, Elsa Morante, or Goliarda Sapienza, the traditional sense of the family novel is challenged with new concepts of kinship which shift the genealogical structure or family tree that is typically representative of continuity and the past. In addition to these challenges to the traditional parameters of the family novel, postcolonial and diasporic approaches have illuminated alternative understandings of kinship and community-oriented care. Similarly, ecocritical and non-anthropocentric narratives have proposed new configurations in which the natural environment is integrated into the familial network—not merely as a reflection or metaphor, but as an active and constitutive element of the family structure. At the same time, the family novel is often described as one with a “horizontal structure,” the plot of the family novel, therefore, is constructed through the intersection of these two narrative structures. This formal configuration reflects the authors’ aspiration to transform and extend the traditional narrative form into a new phase of development. (Yi-Ling Ru, *The Family Novel. Toward a Generic Definition*, New York, Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 36-37). The family novel has been described as a subterranean genre (Marina Polacco, *Romanzi di famiglia. Per una definizione di genere*, «Comparatistica», 13, 2004), one that has long existed yet has often been overlooked by critics. Although it has been regarded as a conservative form (Philip Thody, *The Politics of the Family Novel: Is Conservatism Inevitable?*, «Mosaic», Vol. 3, N. 1, Fall 1969), it also resisted the reform of family structures. Especially since 1968, the family novel as a genre has faced new challenges; however, the recent proliferation of such novels demonstrates its remarkable ability to adapt to changing social and cultural referents – for instance, by addressing themes of family diaspora and moving beyond the traditional topos of the family house.

Through an analysis of the family novel genre from the perspective of care, this panel proposes the possibility of constructing a more inclusive and emancipatory model of the family tree—one frequently depicted in contemporary fiction yet often overlooked due to its nontraditional configurations of kinship and relationality. This panel aims to explore how more fluid and expansive definitions of the family novel can contribute to the formation of community and the restoration of a sense of equity.

Possible areas of inquiry that could traverse the scope of this panel include but are not limited to:

- Timescapes and temporality in the contemporary Italian novel
- 20th century women writers
- Inheritance and memory transmission
- Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Environmental humanities
- Queer, Gender and Sexuality Studies
- Postcolonial Studies
- Mediterranean Studies
- Transnational Studies
- Digital Humanities

Presentations may be delivered in English or Italian and should not exceed 15 minutes following questions. Please send your proposal (250-300 word abstract completed with title and accompanied by a short biographical note) by January 3rd, 2026 to Beatrice Basile (University of Pennsylvania, bbasile@sas.upenn.edu), Lourdes Contreras (University of Pennsylvania, lourdesc@sas.upenn.edu) and Laura Pergola (University of Turin, laura.pergola@unito.it). All participants must hold an AAIS membership, present and current.