



**Natalia Ginzburg** (1916-1991) was raised in a political and staunchly antifascist Jewish family that is the subject of her novel *Family Lexicon*. During World War II, Ginzburg and her husband edited an antifascist newspaper and after the war she wrote several novels, short stories, essays, and two plays, many of which have been translated into English.

**Peg Boyers** is a poet and the executive editor of *Salmagundi*. She teaches poetry at Skidmore College.

**Jenny McPhee** is a translator and the author of the novels *The Center of Things*, *No Ordinary Matter*, and *A Man of No Moon*. She is the Director of the Center of Applied Liberal Arts at NYU and lives in New York.

## FAMILY LEXICON

by Natalia Ginzburg

A new translation from the Italian by Jenny McPhee  
Afterword by Peg Boyers

NYRB Classics Original

\$14.95 US • \$19.95 CAN • £9.99 UK • Paperback • 224 pages

ISBN: 9781590178386 • ebook ISBN: 9781590178393

*“Family Lexicon* recalls the great modernists’ reimaginings of childhood—Joyce, Compton-Burnett, Katherine Mansfield, parts of Italo Svevo’s *Zeno’s Conscience*, and, farther back, *Swann’s Way*...” —Eric Gudas, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

An Italian family, sizable, with its routines and rituals, crazes, pet phrases, and stories, doubtful, comical, indispensable, comes to life in the pages of Natalia Ginzburg’s *Family Lexicon*. Giuseppe Levi, the father, is a scientist, consumed by his work and a mania for hiking—when he isn’t provoked into angry remonstrance by someone misspeaking or misbehaving or wearing the wrong thing. Giuseppe is Jewish, married to Lidia, a Catholic, though neither is religious; they live in the industrial city of Turin where, as the years pass, their children find ways of their own to medicine, marriage, literature, politics. It is all very ordinary, except that the background to the story is Mussolini’s Italy in its steady downward descent to race law and world war. The Levis are, among other things, unshakeable anti-fascists. That will complicate their lives.

*Family Lexicon* is about a family and language—and about storytelling not only as a form of survival but also as an instrument of deception and domination. The book takes the shape of a novel, yet everything is true. “Every time that I have found myself inventing something in accordance with my old habits as a novelist, I have felt impelled at once to destroy [it],” Ginzburg tells us at the start. “The places, events, and people are all real.”

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. On page 23, Ginzburg writes, “If my siblings and I were to find ourselves in a dark cave or among millions of people, just one of those phrases or words would immediately allow us to find each other. Those phrases are our Latin, the dictionary of our past, they’re like Egyptian or Assyro-Babylonian hieroglyphics, evidence of a vital core that has ceased to exist but that lives on in its texts, saved from the fury of the waters, the corrosion of time.” Do we see examples of this in the book? Which phrases from the lexicon did you find particularly memorable or enlightening?
2. Describe Giuseppe Levi—often referred to as Beppino—the father in the book. In her afterword, Peg Boyers writes that, “Beppino, monumental in his *superbia* and buffoonery, is the most important figure in the book.” Do you agree with this statement—why or why not?

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3. Throughout *Family Lexicon* characters discuss politics. How do their discussions of politics shape our understanding of the individual characters and the family?
4. On page 3, Ginzburg writes, “The places, events, and people in this book are real. I haven’t invented a thing, and each time I found myself slipping into my long-held habits as a novelist and made something up, I was quickly compelled to destroy the invention.” How does this initial knowledge that all of the people and places in *Family Lexicon* were real affect your reading of the novel? Was this something you considered as you read?
5. In what ways does the “family lexicon” allow the characters to maintain a sense of normalcy under fascism?
6. On page 102, Ginzburg writes, “My father and mother were never nationalists. In fact, they loathed nationalism in all its manifestations. But Mario’s disdain for Italy seemed to include them, and all of us, and our way of life, our entire lives.” What do these lines reveal about the parents and about Mario, Ginzburg’s older brother?
7. Throughout the book, many of the characters, including Ginzburg herself, are jailed. When describing Lola, on page 184, Ginzburg writes that a new job “didn’t remotely resemble [Lola’s] jail experience, which she considered the best and noblest time of her life.” How do other characters view jail and jail time under a fascist regime?
8. In the afterword to *Family Lexicon*, Peg Boyers suggests that “The very enterprise of *Family Lexicon*—the insistent, loving, faithful construction of a family chronicle—may itself be said to be an act of fidelity and resistance” (page 212). How do you interpret this statement in the context of the book?
9. How would you describe Ginzburg’s narration style? How does she handle significant events in the book—jailings, death—versus the details of everyday life?
10. What similarities did you find between the historical and political moment described in *Family Lexicon* and our present moment?

#### FOR FURTHER READING

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Cesare Pavese

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