

Alain Elkann, 64, was born in New York but now spends most of his time in London. On 1 October, a collection of stories called Racconti is to be released by Bompiani.

"AT AGE 19, I ASKED TO MEET ITALO CALVINO. AND MY LIFE TOOK A TURN."

Who but a person that dreamed of being a writer would imagine showing up at Einaudi without an appointment? With the release of his short story collection, Alain Elkann takes us back to the beginning of his career. And he reveals what his next project is going to be. He would like to write a book with a special co-author – his grandson Leone.

By Paola De Carolis

The voice and words are those of a confident man. But Alain Elkann tortures his fingernails while he is speaking. He has done many things in his life – he points out in his home in London where he spends most of the year – but he was born to write. This new book, *Racconti*, which brings together works from over many years - from his first stories to more recent writings - is of great importance to him. "This is my biography as a writer," he says. A biography with a theme. "There's no such thing as a happy human condition. There's no absolute truth aside from the fact that we are born and we die."

How did it feel to go back over the stories you wrote when you were young?

A story is like the photograph of an instant, a sentiment. Am I happy to have written this book? I'd rather still be on my first story. It would be nice to start all over from the beginning.

Have you ever wanted to do anything else?

Never. This has always been my dream. I have very strong memories of the first six or seven novels that I wrote. I was 19, and I lived in Turin. At the time in Turin, Einaudi was the only publishing house that one thought about. I didn't know anybody. Nobody in my family had the slightest interest in what I was doing. I went to Einaudi with nothing, without an appointment. I said to the doorman, "I have some stories, and I'd like to talk to Italo Calvino." This gentleman didn't bat an eyelash and said, "Can you wait a moment?" Fifteen minutes passed, and a man came down. It was Paolo Fossati. I didn't know it at the time, but he was a professor of romance studies, and he was on the publishing house's reading committee and was friends with Calvino. I gave him my stories, and he said, "How kind of you. I will have Calvino read them, and then let's see." This is how my life as a writer began.

Do you prefer writing short stories or novels?

You can write a story quickly, all at once in just a few days. With a story, the writer is a poet in prose, in a certain sense. With this book, I want to defend the short story.

What do you read?

My reading takes many different directions. There are books I read because I teach. There are books I read because my interest has been piqued by a review. I read for the book I am writing.

Is there a book that has disappointed you?

The book I'm reading now. *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis. I don't know if I will finish it or not just to be polite.

How do you find living in London?

I feel very free. I like thinking in Italian while everyone else speaks English. One can get too wrapped up in Italian life at times.

Your book is dedicated to your grandchildren. What kind of grandfather are you?

I didn't expect it to be as wonderful as it is to have grandchildren. There's a very strong bond for all of us. We need them to remind us of our own childhoods and youth, and they need us to know about things from the past. When you enter a room and hear five voices that call out "*nonno*" in unison, it really makes quite an impression on you. My oldest grandson, Leone, asked me why I never write children's books. I told him that we should write one together. I hope we will be able to do that.

FORTY YEARS OF ADVENTURES

The last wish and final reflections of an American woman as they pertain to her life and herself. The secret relationship of an Italian manager who has never learned to love despite the presence of two women in his life. And then the author's personal memories of spending summer vacations in Switzerland in a luxurious hotel with his grandparents. From nostalgia to passion to fear of the unknown (with a bit of irony), the stories in *Racconti* (Bompiani) were written by Alain Elkann over 40 years. They've been gathered together in a collection for the first time. The book opens with four previously unpublished New York stories.