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The Leopard is back — and it's claws

Sixty-two years after the classic film of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel, a radical TV reboot is sowing division among the author's descendants, reveals James Imam

The Palazzo Lanza Tomasi in Palermo is a shrine to one of Italy's most celebrated modern literary figures. Its ballrooms sparkle with chandeliers, portraits of ancestors in cardinals' robes hang on the walls and endless rows of bookcases hold faded tomes. This was the last residence of the Sicilian noble Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, one of modern Italy's greatest writers. A display cabinet preserves the manuscript, typescript and first edition of *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), his celebrated tale of the slow decline of Sicily's aristocracy. Published posthumously in 1958, Tomasi di Lampedusa's only novel captures the 19th-century opulence and decay of the fictional Salina dynasty, whose members attend extravagant balls, negotiate marriages with the rising bourgeoisie and fret over the revolutionary fervour of the Risorgimento unification movement. It was an instant bestseller, going through 52 editions in under six months, and in 1963 was adapted by Luchino Visconti into a blockbuster film starring Burt Lancaster.

Now a Netflix adaptation that will be streaming from March 5 aims to bring the story to a fresh global audience. The result is a striking, fast-paced drama. Scenes feature grubby farmhands toiling under the sun, decadent palazzi set among palm groves, dining tables filled with delicacies and epic battle sequences among iconic Palermo landmarks. "We wanted to interpret the novel in a way that will speak to a modern audience, with a visual and dramatic language that we're more used to," says the director, Tom Shankland.

But within the walls of Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, the prospect of the series has been met with horror. Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi, 72, the Duchess of Palma and widow of Tomasi di Lampedusa's adoptive son, is the palazzo's present inhabitant. "It's absolutely the opposite of any idea of *The Leopard*," she says of the series between mouthfuls of fusilli pasta with wild fennel, toasted almonds and pecorino pesto. "Seeing the trailer is enough ... Literally I don't want to think about it." Netflix presents the six-part mini-series as "a dazzlingly sensuous epic," but Nicoletta dismisses it as a vacuous money-spinner. "This is not keeping alive the legacy of *The Leopard* and Gioacchino. This is just making money out of it."

So does the new version, starring Kim Rossi Stuart as Fabrizio, have what it



Deva Cassel and Saul Nanni in *The Leopard*. Below: Gioacchino and Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi in 2015. Right: Astrid Meloni and Kim Rossi Stuart in the series



takes to enthrall viewers the way Visconti and Tomasi di Lampedusa's visions have for more than 60 years?

The book centres on Don Fabrizio Corbera, the prince of Salina, who contemplates his family's fate as Garibaldi's forces disembark in Sicily in 1860. His dashing nephew, Tancredi, opportunistically fights with the revolutionaries, spurns Fabrizio's daughter Concetta and marries Angelica,

the beautiful daughter of a social climber, securing his future. Tancredi delivers the book's most famous line: "For things to remain the same, everything must change."

Tomasi di Lampedusa's personal history gave an autobiographical edge to the novel. Born into a noble Palermo family in 1896, he married the Latvian aristocrat Alexandra von Wolff-Stomorse. Although the couple did not have children, Tomasi di Lampedusa adopted Gioacchino Lanza, a distant cousin 37 years his junior, a year before his death from lung cancer. (Gioacchino then adopted the surname Lanza Tomasi.)

Tomasi di Lampedusa said that Fabrizio was based on his great-grandfather Giulio Tomasi. Over lunch at the palazzo, Nicoletta says that Tancredi was partly inspired by Gioacchino, whom she married in the 1980s. "Giuseppe was incredibly affectionate toward Gioacchino," she says. "He was really his chosen son."

Initially divisive, *The Leopard* was dismissed by left-wing intellectuals as conservative nostalgia. Yet it offers a timeless message about power amid political upheaval. The literary scholar Salvatore Nigro draws a parallel with US

civil servants adapting to the uncertainties of the Trump era.

"The novel speaks to us today because the classics never die," he says. Giovanni Capecchi, a literature professor at the Università per Stranieri di Perugia, agrees: the book "addresses issues that are always current because they belong to man, wherever and whenever he lives."

The duchess considers herself the protector of this proud tradition. A former Russian interpreter and globe-trotting adventurer who grew up in Venice, Nicoletta met Gioacchino, a prominent musicologist and future head of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, at the Venice Film Festival. Together they created a listed library at the frescoed Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, salvaging Tomasi di Lampedusa's books and cataloguing letters and photos. Nicoletta, who hosts Sicilian cooking classes and group tours, plans to digitise documents and turn part of the residence into a museum.

Many visitors no doubt know the book through the 1963 movie. With its lavish costumes, rich panoramas and dusky soundtrack by Nino Rota, it unfolds

