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«Non eravamo mica in un romanzo»: Women’s Stories as Inspiration and Education

Abstract

This article looks at the role(s) of girls and women as depicted in some early twentieth-century popular texts and in one more recent text set during those years: Bianca Pitzorno’s Il sogno della macchina da cucire (2018). Pitzorno’s coming-of-age novel explores the power of education, literature and work for an orphan girl, a sartina whose sewing skills allow her a degree of independence, and whose determination to learn, particularly through reading and conversations with other women, allows her to protect herself in a society in which women of her class and background are highly vulnerable. The novel’s engagement with turn-of-the-century popular culture both celebrates and critiques its importance in the lives of women, as the dramatic and melodramatic stories recounted in genre fiction, novels and opera offer the protagonist an escape but also an education. Through the tales – often tragic and cautionary – of Madama Butterfly, Jane Eyre and, above all, Carolina Invernizio’s Giselda (Storia di una sartina, 1892), Pitzorno helps a contemporary audience comprehend the strictures faced by women in earlier times, while also furnishing her young sartina with much greater agency than those antecedents. In reading about this girl’s reading, and about the lives of her friends and employers, we gain new insights into women’s work and leisure in early twentieth-century Italy, and see social expectations and class dynamics brought to life. We also encounter sobering parallels with ongoing issues in today’s society.
Introduction

The focus of this article is a 2018 novel about girlhood in the early twentieth century, Bianca Pitzorno’s *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* (Pitzorno 2018), and its intertexts. The novel depicts the formative girlhood years of a young seamstress, a *sartina*, who goes to the homes of wealthy and middle-class townspeople to sew and mend clothes, underwear, curtains and sheets. Orphaned at a young age, she is brought up by her grandmother, and when the grandmother dies, the *sartina* – still a child – manages to fend for herself: her trade allows her to earn a simple living, and her friendships with other women – both of her own class and of the upper classes – allow her to survive and grow through difficult times. The novel is narrated by the *sartina*, who remains unnamed.

Pitzorno is famous and beloved among Italian readers for her children’s fiction, always populated by spirited girl protagonists (Habrle 2021, 90; Caso 2014, 136). She is also an accomplished author of historical novels. She brings these two forms of writing into alignment in this story of a young seamstress whose girlhood years are shaped by her consumption of cultural products, particularly novels, as well as by her life experiences and friendships. The period setting – painstakingly depicted – belies the novel’s relevance to present-day concerns regarding gender roles and male violence.

In addition to elements of historical fiction, *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* also shares features with the coming-of-age novel, or *Bildungsroman*: it depicts the protagonist’s youthful naïveté and her growth into adulthood and independence. Although her existence is shaped by prevailing gender norms and class-based expectations, she finds a place in society without needing to sacrifice personal fulfilment and creativity. Her trajectory does not end in marriage and settling down in the way one might expect of the more conventional examples of this genre (Lazzaro-Weis 1993, 94). This kind of «conventional ending», Maroula Joannou notes, is often rejected by female writers reworking the Bildungsroman genre (Joannou 2019, 200), and Pitzorno is no exception. The *sartina* does meet the love of her life, a handsome and wealthy young student, but tragedy strikes, and the protagonist is left alone to raise one adopted and one illegitimate child. Moreover, the young couple’s storyline is afforded similar importance to accounts of the lives and struggles of
her working-class neighbours, some of them desperately poor, and her middle-
class and wealthy employers who, despite their affluence, are often themselves
victims of a misogynistic, closed-minded, provincial society.

Genre mixing is a feature of much of Pitzorno’s work. According to Tanja
Habrle she is a keen reader of feuilleton and eighteenth-century literature
(HABRLE 2012, 90), and these feature prominently in the reading diet of her
protagonist in Il sogno della macchina da cucire. In the novel’s episodic
structure – generally speaking, each chapter focuses on a different employer or
friend of the narrator – and in the choice of a sartina as protagonist, there are
overtones of the popular fiction of the turn of the twentieth century, but also a
fresh voice for an empowered protagonist.

By drawing both on stories she heard as a child and on those told in popular
texts of the period, «recombining, challenging, and exploiting old structures to
[her] purposes» (LAZZARO-WEIS 1993, 18), Pitzorno is able to shed new light on
women’s work and experiences, both in the past and in the present. She is at
pains to advise in a short preface that, though fictionalised («frutto di
fantasia»), each of the novel’s characters and events

prende lo spunto da un fatto realmente accaduto di cui sono venuta a
conoscenza dai racconti di mia nonna, coetanea della protagonista, dai giornali
di allora, dalle lettere e cartoline che lei aveva conservato in una valigia, dai
ricordi e aneddoti del nostro «lessico familiare (7).»

The work can thus be seen almost as a fictionalised oral history, bearing
testament to a period – and a trade – that is now all but forgotten. As the author
points out, once department stores began stocking cheap ready-to-wear clothes,
«Il tempo delle sartine era finito». She adds, «Lo scopo di questo libro è che
non venga dimenticato per sempre».2

In addition to its focus on the girlhood years, Pitzorno’s writing also often
displays a keen sense of injustice, especially towards the poor, as evidenced, for
example, in her children’s novel Ascolta il mio cuore (PITZORNO 1991). This text
which, the author stresses, is a fictional, not a journalistic, account – «romanzo
e non cronaca» (quoted in PRUNERI 2015 124) – nevertheless weaves the
author’s own memories into a new narrative, in much the same way as she does
with the stories of older generations of women in *Il sogno della macchina da cucire*.

*The act of reading*

It has been observed that Pitzorno’s protagonists are often voracious readers («forti lettrici») who talk about and are influenced by books (Harble 2012, 92), and that is true of her sartina. Her hard-won ability to read sets her apart from others of her class, and enables her to stay informed, to protect herself from predatory figures in the community, to assist less fortunate women of her own class, and to communicate at a deeper level with women of a different background. In their analysis of the important place of the cinema in the lives of a later generation of Italian girls, those of the 1950s, Treveri Gennari and her colleagues provide examples from oral history interviews of the ways in which cinema-going girls drew inspiration from young female characters in the movies. One interviewee reported «engaging with [Katharine Hepburn’s] Jo [from the film adaptation of *Little Women*] as a role model for her existence as a girl»; she and other interviewees also cite the importance of books alongside cinema (Treveri Gennari et al. 2020, 121, 127). In the early twentieth-century setting of *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* the cinema has yet to arrive; instead, it is popular fiction and the opera, as well as children’s and women’s magazines, and popular song that shape the protagonist’s worldview and «value formations» (ibid. 127) during her girlhood years.

Through her protagonist’s readings, Pitzorno’s novel comments on and even enters into an intertextual conversation with precursor works of fiction. *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* at once celebrates and critiques the centrality of popular culture in the lives of women at the turn of the twentieth century, as the dramatic and melodramatic stories recounted in genre fiction, romances and opera offer the protagonist an escape but also an education and a challenge. If in 1861 the magazine *Le ore casalinghe* warned that novels «insegnano a vedere e giudicare falsamente la società e la vita» (quoted in Gigli Marchetti 1991, 446), for Pitzorno’s sartina a few decades later, such texts instead provide essential life lessons to supplement the advice and exhortations of older and wiser women like her grandmother.
Popular culture was enormously important for early twentieth-century women. In a short essay on Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao and Liala, women who write about female characters for a female audience («scrivono su personaggi femminili e per un pubblico femminile»), Umberto Eco states that not just the romanzo popolare, but the modern novel more generally, is aimed at female audience and especially attentive to female characters («nasce per un pubblico femminile e si caratterizza per la sua attenzione ai personaggi femminili», Eco 1979, 5, original italics).

Pitzorno’s sartina is a voracious consumer of genre and serial fiction, including Eugène Sue’s The Mysteries of Paris (1842-43), novels, popular song, opera librettos (Puccini is her favourite composer), and the weekly magazine Cordelia. She saves up money for such treats and also borrows from the biblioteca circolante, though the city library is still a bridge too far for a woman of her class – she feels too intimidated to enter, struck by the abyss separating her from the fashionably elegant signorine she spies out the front:

Come potevo pensare di essere accettata tra di loro, io che venivo da un altro mondo, che ero nata e vivevo tra la povera gente e a essa appartenevo, che dovevo guadagnarmi da vivere giorno per giorno, che se andavo a casa loro dovevo passare dalla porta di servizio, che nei loro salotti sarei potuta entrare solo con il metro in mano o con la divisa da cameriera e il vassoio dei pasticcini? (172).

At times the sartina’s hobby is frowned upon, however. During the police investigation into the suspicious death of one of her employers, the girl’s testimony is ignored because her reputation for reading novels precedes her and she is deemed to have too active an imagination to be considered reliable: «dissero [...] che avevano preso informazioni su di me. Sapevano che leggevo romanzi. Mi consigliarono di tenere a bada l’immaginazione» (124). Attitudes such as these were common in the mid to late nineteenth century – as documented in Ada Gigli Marchetti’s study of etiquette manuals and women’s magazines during that period (Gigli Marchetti 1991) – and would by no means have been entirely superseded in the early years of the following century, when Pitzorno’s novel is set.
Books are where the *sartina* learns about love, including rudimentary techniques of seduction like colouring her lips with red geranium petal («Questo espediente lo avevo letto in un romanzo», 171), though her readings provide as many examples of betrayal as they do of true love, rendering her ever cautious. The fact that Pitzorno chose a *sartina* as her protagonist and narrator is significant. From the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century, *sartine* figure in many novels, songs and films (No Author 2011). Our protagonist feels keenly the fate of Mimì from *La Bohème* – «che non era una sartina, ma quasi, una ricamatrice» – as well as those of Madama Butterfly («sedotta, ingannata, abbandonata, suicida»), Fleur-de-Marie (la Goualeuse) from *The Mysteries of Paris*, and Carolina Invernizio’s Giselda from *Storia di una sartina* (1892). She also relates to and identifies with Jane Eyre.

Songs relating the downfall of humble working-class women like *sartine* were widespread and popular in the period when the novel is set. One example is a lyric sheet for a «canzone appassionata» recounting one girl’s sad tale, «Triste istoria d’una sartina», distributed in Turin around 1914 (with sheet music for mandolin or for piano available separately for purchase). The song is related by a man, who is in love with a *sartina* but holds back, not wishing to «deflower» her («mi seppi frenar, non volli sciupar / Il vergine candido fiore»). She then ends up the kept woman of a «gran signor», and further down the track the singer-storyteller comes across her – now discarded, one presumes – in a brothel, «in mezzo a tante disgraziate» («among so many unfortunate women») (Artale c. 1914).

Salutary tales such as these are an important part of the *sartina*’s instruction in the ways of the world, particularly after the death of her grandmother (her only relative, the rest of the family having perished in a cholera epidemic). Family stories, passed on orally, are also afforded considerable importance in the narrative. One example is the story of the grandmother’s cousin, Ofelia, who worked as a live-in maid. When she refused her master’s sexual advances and threatened to reveal his behaviour to his wife, he accused the girl of theft and fired her. From then, nessuna famiglia perbene aveva più voluto assumere la «ladra». L’unico lavoro che Ofelia aveva trovato era quello di sguattera in un’osteria. Ma anche là gli
avventori ubriachi [...] le facevano richieste sconvenienti [...]. Una sera venne arrestata, e fu l’inizio della fine. [...] Ofelia era stata costretta a registrarsi come prostituta e a entrare in una casa di tolleranza, dove si era ammalata, e pochi anni dopo era morta di mal francese in Ospedale.11

This story is recounted to the protagonist at a young age, and she returns to it often. She is grateful to have a trade because that enables her to avoid domestic service, thus retaining a modicum of independence and avoiding this kind of predatory master.

A tragic story and its modern-day revision

One of the main intertexts for Il sogno della macchina da cucire is Carolina Invernizio’s dark, gothic Storia di una sartina ([1892] 2015). It is not surprising that Pitzorno’s fictional protagonist is familiar with this tragic, cautionary tale, because Invernizio was extremely prolific and over many decades her romanzi d’appendice, novels with «torrid and often morbid plots» (PEZZOTTI 2014, 192) had «an enormous popular following» (WOOD 1995, 20) among women of all classes. Gramsci famously described her as «l’onesta gallina della letteratura popolare»,12 while in rather more complimentary – though only slightly less sexist – tones Luigi Mascheroni, in an article for Il giornale, refers to her as «sacra icona della letteratura sartinesca e portinaia»13 (MASCHERONI 2008). Fulvio Paloscia describes Invernizio’s novels as bearing witness to the ramifications for all of Italy’s social classes of the «crucial passage» from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century (PALOSCIA 2012; see also ANGELONE 2011).

According to Anna Laura Lepschy, the romanzo d’appendice, which often «appeared as an “appendix” or “supplement” to daily newspapers», was characterized by «suspense, frequent twists, black and white characters and social content» (LEPSCHY 2003, 321). All this is true of Storia di una sartina, which appeared in 1892, though a few years earlier (1889-90) Invernizio had published – in serial form – a version of much the same story (Ij delit d’na bela fia) in Piedmontese dialect (LEPSCHY 1984, 55-75). Storia di una sartina, set in Florence, has an horrific opening: Giselda, a sartina who lives with her blind mother and abusive, drunken father, comes home one dark night, secretly gives
birth in her bedroom, and immediately strangles her baby, before throwing the child’s body in the Arno. She is found out, tried and imprisoned, but repeatedly refuses to reveal the name of the child’s father, who her lawyer declares, in an impassioned but ultimately futile defence, «è il solo colpevole […] che si nasconde nell’ombra»14 (INVERNIZIO 1892, 30). Upon her release from prison Giselda seeks out her former lover, a count, on the eve of his wedding and stabs him. She wishes to die by his side, but he begs her to leave so that his name will not be dishonoured. Accordingly, she flees the scene of the crime, and he drags himself over to his desk to write a suicide note before dying with his fiancée’s name on his lips. Giselda takes her secret to the grave: once the newspapers have duly announced that the count committed suicide and that his fiancée has left for France, she drowns herself in the Arno.

There are a number of apparent parallels between Giselda’s ghastly story and that of Pitzorno’s sartina, but the latter’s is ultimately uplifting, and she lives a long and fulfilled life. The stock character types and situations of genre fiction like Invernizio’s (see FEDERZONI 1979) do not provide much scope for empowerment or self-determination. Her Giselda is doomed from the start and serves to reinforce the message of romanzi d’appendice, in which «[s]ome social conventions are […] inescapable, such as the one which enforces the power of the upper-class male over the working-class girl: victims of seduction and betrayal are generally the poor» (LEPSCHY 2003, 323). Eco observes that the women in Invernizio’s work are not necessarily unhappy or submissive, «ma donne che accettano le regole del gioco».15 For Eco, proof of this lies in the fact that «uno degli strumenti di vittoria […] è il segreto, la reticenza»:16 her protagonists lie or remain silent in interest of preserving decorum (ECO 1979, 26-27, original emphasis). One blogger, Rossella Kohler, neatly encapsulates the experience of a twenty-first-century woman reading Invernizio: «stavo leggendo di un mondo senza scampo, profondamente ingiusto, ma privo di rabbia (quella veniva a me) e di volontà di reazione. Un mondo dato per scontato, così era e così sempre sarebbe stato. Che fastidio» (KOHLER 2018).17

By contrast, Pitzorno’s sartina, despite her tender age and vulnerable situation, makes careful, considered decisions and is empowered by her own determination and knowledge. When she is courted by the grandson of one wealthy employer, she is on her guard from the beginning, having read many
novels – and here she specifically cites *Storia di una sartina* (Pitzorno 2018, 102) – and been told stories by female friends and older women about well-to-do young men seducing poor, humble, working-class women. Her suitor is one Guido Suriani, but their love story is not an admonitory tale. Guido Suriani is a clear antithesis to Invernizio’s cruel and irresponsible «Don Giovanni», Gerardo Soriani (note the similarity in their names). Guido gives up family and inheritance for love and allows the *sartina* her identity – her work, her personal interests – respecting her as an independent woman with ambitions and desires. Although their relationship ends tragically – which then serves to demonstrate women’s legal vulnerability during that historical period – both she and her child (because she, too, has a child out of wedlock) have a happy and fulfilling future ahead of them.

*Il sogno della macchina da cucire* is no *romanzo rosa*, however. Its «happily ever after» is one of gentle contentment, rather than the fairytale variety, and Pitzorno does not shy away from relating stories of exploitation, violence and disenfranchisement. For example, the *sartina* must fend off violent advances by a wealthy baron and, later on, experiences first-hand women’s lack of legal rights. And then there are the stories of women and girls she works for or with: a young servant girl kept as a lover by her master; instances of attempted rape by employers and other powerful men; women forced into prostitution after being fired on spurious grounds, as in the case of Ofelia discussed above; others who suffer financial abuse by male family members; an independently wealthy and apparently liberated woman murdered by her lover when she dares to try to leave him. Through her frequent elucidations of class restrictions, social expectations and gender roles, the novel’s narrator aids the twenty-first-century reader in comprehending the strictures faced by women in earlier times, while also embodying an approach to life that allows her a degree of freedom and independence. As I explore towards the end of this article, we can also find parallels to these stories in present-day social problems.
The reader as rewriter

In Il sogno della macchina da cucire, most of the sartina’s protectors are women wealthier or more fortunate than her. One of her dearest and most loyal friends is Ester, a brilliant, independent and loyal young woman with a wealthy and enlightened father. The two women often bond over their reading. As well as passing on novels and recommendations, Ester fosters in the sartina an active, critical way of reading. When the sartina is moved by the sad fate of the prostitute Fleur-de-Marie in Mysteries of Paris – she gives up love to die alone in a convent – Ester exhorts her, «Non devi piangere, devi arrabbiarti. Non l’aveva mica scelto lei di fare quel mestiere. Perché non poteva sposarsi e vivere una vita normale?» (82-3). Under Ester’s influence, the young sartina begins to question accepted class and gender roles and to reject some of the common conventions in the novels she so loves.

Another of the families the sartina works for are the Proveras. Avvocato Provera is almost pathologically avaricious, subjecting his wife and their two daughters to a kind of extreme financial abuse. These skilled and resourceful women are publicly shamed within their upper-class community, and beyond, by a ruinous fashion debacle; after death of the man of the house their total lack of experience in money matters means they end up squandering the fortune they have inherited. Together, Ester and the sartina get some consolation from inventing, just for their own satisfaction, a story about what became of the Provera women, thus «rewriting» the story of their fellow townspeople. Ester initiates this:

“Sai adesso cosa dovrebbe succedere se il mondo andasse per il verso giusto?”
E si era messa a inventare come se stesse scrivendolo lei un romanzo, ma secondo i suoi principi (83).

But of course, the ways of the world are not those of the enlightened Ester and in the «real world» (of the novel), the women they are discussing meet a much sorrier end. This is a further reminder of the vast gap between many gifted women’s potential and what their condition actually allows them to achieve.

Later, during a short undeserved stay in a lock-up, the sartina is given an English novel by one of her cellmates, a former schoolteacher who, having been
seduced and abandoned, now works in a brothel to support her young child. The *sartina* goes through many emotional highs and lows as she follows the vicissitudes related in the novel which, though never named, is clearly *Jane Eyre*. She identifies with the protagonist, but when things take a turn for the worse in Jane’s love life, she wonders if it’s a sign, a warning to be on her guard: «Che fosse un avviso per me? Per mettermi in guardia?» (PITZORNO 2018, 216).

When her impoverished neighbour Zita falls ill, the *sartina* takes in the woman’s daughter, Assuntina. She briefly sends the girl to an orphanage after Zita dies of consumption but, guilt-stricken, she soon relents and takes the child back. This is not an easy decision, but in giving Assuntina a home, teaching her the value of independence and work, and passing on her trade, she furnishes her with the chance of a secure future. So she is appalled («rimasi malissimo») when in the «English novel» Jane packs the orphan Adèle (possibly Rochester’s illegitimate daughter) off to boarding school. Jane explains, «I meant to become her governess once more, but I soon found this impracticable; my time and cares were now required by another – my husband needed them all» (BRONTË [1847] 2001, 640).

One detects a tongue-in-cheek overtone from Pitzorno herself when she has her own narrator wonder, «Non so perché, mi arrabbiai. In fondo era solo un romanzo, una storia inventata» (217). This apparent dismissal – «just a novel» – belies literature’s potential to depict alternative, more positive outcomes for disenfranchised groups, and also the emotional investment readers can put into the characters they encounter in their reading. *Jane Eyre* is, of course, a ground-breaking female Bildungsroman. Joannou observes that it «[sets] a precedent of assertive female development in Bildungsromane that many later women writers were to follow» (JOANNOU 2019, 205). Pitzorno’s protagonist finds much to admire in Brontë’s novel, but also draws our attention to the fate of a minor figure who is far more disenfranchised than the eponymous narrator and is denied such a happy ending. The *sartina*’s strong sense of justice and solidarity with Assuntina obliges her to find a way to share around her «time and cares». By this point she has matured enough to «rewrite» by example: seeing parallels between her reading and her life, she makes different – and perhaps braver – choices than the literary characters who people her few hours of leisure time.
Twenty-first-century resonances

Greta Gerwig’s 2019 film adaption of Louisa May Alcott’s collective Bildungsroman Little Women (1868-69) enacts an analogous rewriting, not just of its source text but of literary convention, through an apparently small, yet significant change to the ending. In a review of the film, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett observes that by having the character Jo succeed in publishing her book «Gerwig blended [Alcott’s and Jo’s] narratives to create a sort of metafiction, gifting Alcott’s heroine the ending that she – and perhaps Alcott – were both prevented from writing». While Jo (inexplicably for some readers) ends up by marrying Professor Bhaer, Alcott herself never married, and only married off her most spirited and independent-minded protagonist under pressure from her publisher (GRADY 2019). Cosslett notes that in Gerwig’s film version «Jo is told by her publisher, in a guise that could equally be that of a Hollywood mogul, that “if the main character’s a girl make sure she is married by the end”» (COSSELT 2019). This parallel between Hollywood producers and nineteenth-century publishers is a salutary reminder that even today, when women have so many more opportunities, storytelling conventions can be quite limiting.

In subtle ways Pitzorno, too, reminds her readers that historical limitations on women have not all been superseded in the present day. Perhaps one of the key messages of Il sogno della macchina da cucire is that we can learn from the past, and from the voices and stories of earlier generations of women. Danielle Hipkins has noted that «Oral history offers just one particular route into understanding that intergenerational connection, and it is one in which the processes of memory provide the key to unlocking that enigmatic relationship between past and present experiences of girlhood» (HIPKINS 2017, 101). Though this novel is certainly not an oral history in the sociological sense of the term, its choral nature, interweaving so many stories from the author’s own «family vocabulary», means that it provides valuable insights into how lower working-class girls grew into womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century. The «intergenerational connection» to our present times might in some ways help us to appreciate how lucky we are – with easy access to electricity, running water and an education – but it should also remind us not to be too smug about how far we have come.
One important element in the sartina’s Bildung is the mentoring she receives from certain older and/or freer women in her acquaintance. One key figure is the American painter and art critic Miss Lily Rose Briscoe (whose name must surely be a tribute to Virginia Woolf’s Lily Briscoe; WOOLF [1927] 2000). «La Miss» collects and writes about the region’s ecclesiastical art, sending her articles off for publication in a Philadelphia newspaper. Unconventional and open-minded, she has a very different set of values from the locals, and gives the sartina some valuable advice:

«Ascoltami,» disse la Miss gravemente. «Sei giovane, e ti può capitare di innamorarti. Ma non permettere mai che un uomo ti manchi di rispetto, che ti impedisca di fare quello che ti sembra giusto e necessario, quello che ti piace. La vita è tua, tua, ricordalo. Non hai alcun dovere se non verso te stessa.»

Parole difficili, parole da americana (113).21

While it is true that Miss Briscoe’s words betray a cultural background and worldview far removed from the provincial Italian setting, the sartina succeeds in living by this exhortation. Her recollection of these wise words is all the more poignant, though, when we learn the fate of la Miss: despite her modern outlook and her resolve in attempting to escape an abusive relationship, she ends up a victim of male violence, while the nobleman who perpetrated the crime goes free.

The tragic story of la Miss should also remind present-day readers that gender- and class-based inequalities are by no means a thing of the past. Though the very strict class divisions depicted in the novel – dictating who may wear a hat or stroll down the city’s most elegant avenues – are certainly a thing of the past, the rich, famous and powerful still enjoy an alarming degree of impunity, and domestic violence and femicide are huge problems the world over. At the time of writing, newspapers are peppered with stories echoing those of Pitzorno’s women, whether it is female pop stars struggling to regain control over their own wealth, the years of public shaming and mockery endured by Monica Lewinsky, Hollywood producers committing acts of sexual predation, or ordinary women subjected to violence at the hands of their partners.

One member of the service class in the sartina’s acquaintance is Quirica, a devoted maid for more than half a century for a wealthy nobleman and his
mother. Only after his death does it dawn on the young girl that Quirica had been brought in decades earlier to «service» this man’s sexual desires and keep him home and unmarried:

Ne avevo sentite di storie come quella. Di servette giovani assunte dalla padrona di casa perché servissero da sfogo ai signorini. Ragazze di campagna scelte con cura tra le più ingenue e inesperte. Vergini, per essere sicuri che non avessero quel tipo di malattie. [...] Povera Quirica! Non doveva avere più di quindici anni quando se l’erano andata a prendere in campagna. E lei si era innamorata del padroncino. Come piangeva ancora per lui, mezzo secolo dopo! Cinquant’anni da schiava, [...] sopportando il disprezzo e le prepotenze della padrona.

In much more recent times, in Italy and beyond, there have been high-profile allegations of vulnerable, often under-age, girls being brought in to «service» the «needs» of older and very powerful men – billionaires, politicians, royalty. All these parallels suggest Pitzorno’s novel has as much to say about the present day as it does about the time of its historical setting. It also has the potential to find an «afterlife» in translation, since its small-town setting and characters have both appeal and relevance. The huge success, particularly in Anglophone countries, of Elena Ferrante’s tetralogy of Neapolitan Novels (2011-2014) has already shown that very local stories of girlhood can speak to readers across generations, cultures and languages.

Conclusion

At one point in Il sogno della macchina da cucire, in response to the rather bizarre behaviour of the apparently eccentric Proveras, the protagonist thinks to herself, «Non eravamo mica in un romanzo» (49), «this was not a novel, after all», but of course her life is – for us – a novel. And a very deliberately crafted one at that. The popular fiction Pitzorno interweaves with her own serves to remind us of the values most frequently inculcated in women during the early twentieth century, while also subtly reminding us of the fact that our Pitzorno-penned protagonist might be considered something of an outlier whose gifts and opportunities are probably «too good to be typical».
The clear parallel between the stories of Invernizio’s and Pitzorno’s *sartine* neatly encapsulates the revisionism this twenty-first-century novel undertakes, as do the differing attitudes of Jane Eyre and the young seamstress reading her tale. While Invernizio’s protagonist is in every way a victim, both suffering and behaving unspeakably, but never openly rebelling or articulating much outrage, Pitzorno’s novel does something very different, more suited to our present day. It realistically depicts an earlier time, even as the parallels with our own time remind us that many battles are yet to be won, whether in our own backyard or in the developing world, where today’s *sartine* work on a production line. The ongoing, global struggle for women’s rights is not lost on Pitzorno, whose novel is dedicated to the memory of (among others)

*tutte le sartine odierne del Terzo Mondo che cuciano per noi gli stracci alla moda che paghiamo pochi euro nei grandi magazzini di abbigliamento a basso costo – ciascuna lo stesso pezzo tagliato da altri, come alla catena di montaggio –, per quattordici ore, con i pannolini per non perdere tempo ad andare in bagno, e che dopo aver ricevuto una paga da fame muoiono bruciate nelle loro enormi fabbriche-carcere (6).*

This acknowledgement of the intersectional – and international – nature of gender- and class-based marginalisation lends a real urgency to the novel, so that it becomes much more than a charming escapist story of days gone by.

*Il sogno della macchina da cucire* is a homage to reading and the power of education, to female friendship, and to the value of work. What saves the *sartina* is her trade, along with her determination, and the solidarity and generosity of several other women. The intertexts mentioned in the novel serve to fill out a realistic background of the protagonist and her interests, while also resonating with her story. At the turn of the twentieth century, fictional tales such as the tragic story of Invernizio’s Giselda were as much a warning as a source of vicarious thrills and drama, horror and tragedy. Such stories provided an insight into the dangers a man’s world held for vulnerable, uneducated, unprotected women. Near the start of Pitzorno’s novel, whenever the grandmother sees the young *sartina*, already a voracious reader, sighing over a novel, she warns her, «Non va bene montarsi troppo la testa e desiderare cose che non potrai mai avere» (22-23). But actually, it is these very novels,
alongside warnings from trusted family and friends, that teach the soon-to-be-orphaned protagonist how to protect herself from the «advances» – which could all too quickly turn into rape – of her wealthy employers and other hangers-on. It is perhaps a sign of how far we haven’t come as a society that still today we hear, from Hollywood to the Australian Parliament (CRABB 2021), of women warning each other of known predators and being forced to choose between personal safety and professional advancement. In other words, while Invernizio’s melodramatic romanzo d’appendice has certainly dated, present-day analogues of the stories of domestic violence, femicide, and abuse of power that appear in Pitzorno’s novel can unfortunately still be found.
Notes

1 «has its origin in a real-life event that I learnt about from stories told by my grandmother, who was of the same generation as the protagonist, from letters and postcards she kept in a suitcase, from newspapers of the time, and from the recollections and anecdotes that make up our family vocabulary». Page numbers for quotes from the novel appear in parentheses in the text. All translations from Italian are my own, including from my forthcoming translation of Il sogno della macchina da cucire (Pitzorno 2022).

2 «The era of the sartina was over. The aim of this book is to ensure they are not forgotten».

3 Restrictions of space do not permit me to explore this here, but the interplay between the work of sewing and that of writing probably warrants further investigation. In her preface to Ascolta il mio cuore, another novel that is the fruit of «realtà e fantasia» («reality and imagination»), Pitzorno likens the work of piecing together a narrative based on history and memories to the act of sewing: she observes that all the events related in the novel are true but might have occurred in a different order or in different years, and she was the one to «sew the pieces together» («tutte le cose che vi sono state raccontate sono avvenute per davvero […] sono stata io a ricucire insieme») (Pitzorno 1991, my emphasis).

4 «teach [women] to see and judge society falsely».

5 The sartina’s reading diet is also influenced by her wealthy friend and occasional employer Ester Artonesi, whose active, critical reading practice is discussed in a subsequent section of this article.

6 «How could I expect to be accepted by them, when I came from an other world – I was born and lived among poor people, and that’s where I belonged. I needed to earn a living day by day, and if I visited their homes I would need to come through the service entrance, and I would only ever be welcome in their salons with a tape measure in hand or wearing a maid’s uniform and carrying a tray of pastries».

7 «They told me […] that they had received information about me: they knew I read novels. They advised me to keep my imagination in check».

8 «I had read about this trick in a novel».

9 «not quite a seamstress but almost, an embroider».

10 «Seduced, betrayed, abandoned, she took her own life».

11 «After that no respectable family wanted to employ the “thief”. The only job Ofelia was able to find was as a scullery maid in a tavern. But there too the drunk patrons made unseemly demands […]». One evening she was arrested, and that was the beginning of the end. […] Ofelia was forced to register as a prostitute and go to work in a bordello. There she fell ill and a few years later she died in hospital of the French disease».

12 «the honest hen of popular literature».

13 «a sacred icon of the literature of seamstresses and portinaie [female doorkeepers / caretakers, often associated with gossip and meddling]».

14 «is the sole guilty party […] hiding in the shadows».

15 «but women who accept the rules of the game».

16 «one of the tools of victory […] is secrecy, reticence».

17 «I was reading about a world with no escape, profoundly unjust, yet lacking in rage (I was the one getting angry) or any desire to react. A world where everything was just taken for granted – that was how things were and had always been. What a drag».

18 «Don’t cry for her: get angry. She didn’t choose that trade for herself. Why couldn’t she get married and lead a normal life?».

19 «“You know what would happen now, if the world worked the way it ought to?” And with that, she began to make up an ending to the women’s story, as though she were writing a novel, but one that followed her own principles».

20 «“I don’t know why this made me so angry. In the end it was just a novel, a made-up story”».

21 «“Listen to me,” La Miss said in a serious tone. “You’re young, and you might happen to fall in love. But don’t ever let any man be disrespectful to you, or stop you doing what you think is right and necessary, or what you like doing. It’s your life, yours: remember that. Your only duty is to yourself”».

22 «Strong words, the words of un’Americana…».
those sorts of diseases. [...] Poor Quirica! She couldn’t have been more than fifteen when they went to the country to collect her. And then she’d fallen in love with her little lord. She was still crying over him half a century later! She had spent fifty years as a slave, [...] enduring contempt and arrogance from her mistress.

23 «all the modern-day seamstresses of the Third World, who sew for us the fashionable rags we buy for a few euros in cheap department stores – each working over and over on the same piece cut by somebody else, in an assembly line, for fourteen hours straight, wearing nappies so as not to waste time going to the bathroom, and who, after receiving a pittance in wages, are burnt to death in giant prison-factories».

24 «It’s no good getting grand ideas and wanting things you can never have».
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