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“The Answer to Every Problem”? Narratives of Boomtime Ireland: *Service* by Sarah Gilmartin, translated by Valeria Rigoldi In Conversation with the Author and her Italian Translator

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Abstract:

Born in Limerick in 1982, Sarah Gilmartin is one of Ireland’s most talented literary voices of this decade. An arts journalist and a lecturer at DCU, she made her debut with short stories that have appeared in *The Dublin Review*, *The Tangerine* and *The Stinging Fly*, with *The Wife* receiving the Máirtín Crawford Short Story Award in 2020. Her novel *Dinner Party* (2021) was shortlisted for the Irish Book Award and the Kate O’Brien Award, and *Service* (2023) was top book of summer for *The Washington Post*. In 2025, Gilmartin became the Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at DCU, and *Service* was published as *Il ristorante* in Valeria Raimondi’s translation. What follows explores the creative work of both Gilmartin and her Italian translator, with special attention to *Service* and its compelling read.

Keywords: Celtic Tiger, Food Culture and Gender, #MeToo, Sarah Gilmartin, *Service*

As Sarah Gilmartin’s *Little Vanities* is due for release on 21 May 2026, we look back at her second novel, *Service* (2023; *Il ristorante*, 2025), in conversation with both its author and its translator.

The story is set in and around a trendy restaurant in Dublin, “two streets over from the Dáil” (Gilmartin 2023, 9), at the height of the Celtic Tiger, the economic boom that saw Ireland’s transformation from one of the poorest countries in Western Europe to the second with the largest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2022 (Statista 2023). This was also a time in which the Irish Citizens’ Assembly was making recommendations aimed at shifting from a 1930s view of gender roles to

a modern, equality-focused and inclusive framework¹. ICA reports in 2021-2022 endorsed significant amendments to the Irish Constitution to bring gender equality up-to-date and to remove what was deemed as “sexist” language. A Special Joint Committee on Gender Equality was established to devise an implementation strategy, leading to the formulation of proposed referenda held in March 2024². By then, the global network #MeToo movement had emerged, motivated by the drive to change “culture [...] and relationships that perpetuate sexual and gender-based violence” (me too.), while the UN had been promoting the “Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women”³.

Service by Sarah Gilmartin results largely from those energies and transformations, to which it responds, echoing their vibrations and reflecting the intricacies of gender relations within the private and the public spheres. There is more to this outstanding and thought-provoking novel, however for, if on the one hand the story exposes patriarchal discourse and denounces the physical and verbal abuse still suffered by women within the household and in the workplace, on the other, *Service* reflects on contemporary Ireland through the lens of boomtime Ireland, where “opportunities had taken decades – centuries – to filter down”, writes Gilmartin (2023, 10), and which had finally (*finalmente*) “diventate realtà” (2025, 10), as Valeria Raimondi’s insightful translation reads. Time is indeed of the essence in the novel: the action takes place between 2007 and 2017, and it moves back and forth along the line of that vibrant decade. Narrated in the first person by protagonists Hannah (a waitress), Daniel (the Head Chef) and Julie (his wife), the novel opens with recollections of the past (“that summer”, Gilmartin 2023, 9), and ends in the present (“the three of us are silent”, 251) as it dreams of a different future (“with each new kilometre, pulling us away from the land towards the water”, *ibidem*), a future that will possibly have made peace with the past (“like a small shoal of fishes trying to get back to sea”, *ibidem*). Individual stories merge with and reflect the (his-)story of a people and of a country, Ireland, with the *hip* restaurant called “T” representing a miniature nation as well as being a catalyst to its profound cultural transformations since the 1980s.

¹ As reported in the ICA webpage, “the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality was established by Oireachtas resolution in July 2019 to ‘consider gender equality and make recommendations to the Oireachtas to advance gender equality by bringing forward proposals to: challenge the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender discrimination towards girls and boys, women and men; identify and dismantle economic and salary norms, that result in gender inequalities, and reassess the economic value placed on work traditionally held by women; in particular, seek to ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in the workplace, politics and public life; recognise the importance of early years parental care and seek to facilitate greater work-life balance; examine the social responsibility of care and women and men’s co-responsibility for care, especially within the family; and scrutinise the structural pay inequalities that result in women being disproportionately represented in low pay sectors” (The Citizens’ Assembly).

² “On 8 March 2024, Irish citizens were asked to vote in two referendums to change [the Irish] Constitution. The first Referendum concerned the concept of Family in the Constitution. The second Referendum proposed to delete an existing part of the Constitution and insert new text providing recognition for care provided by family members to each other. There were two separate votes on whether you wish to make the proposed changes to the current text of Article 41 of the Constitution. The proposed amendment to the Constitution was put to the people on Friday 8 March 2024. The proposal was rejected by the people” (The Electoral Commission).

³ See <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/resolutions/ga_res_by_topic.htm#1> (05/2026).

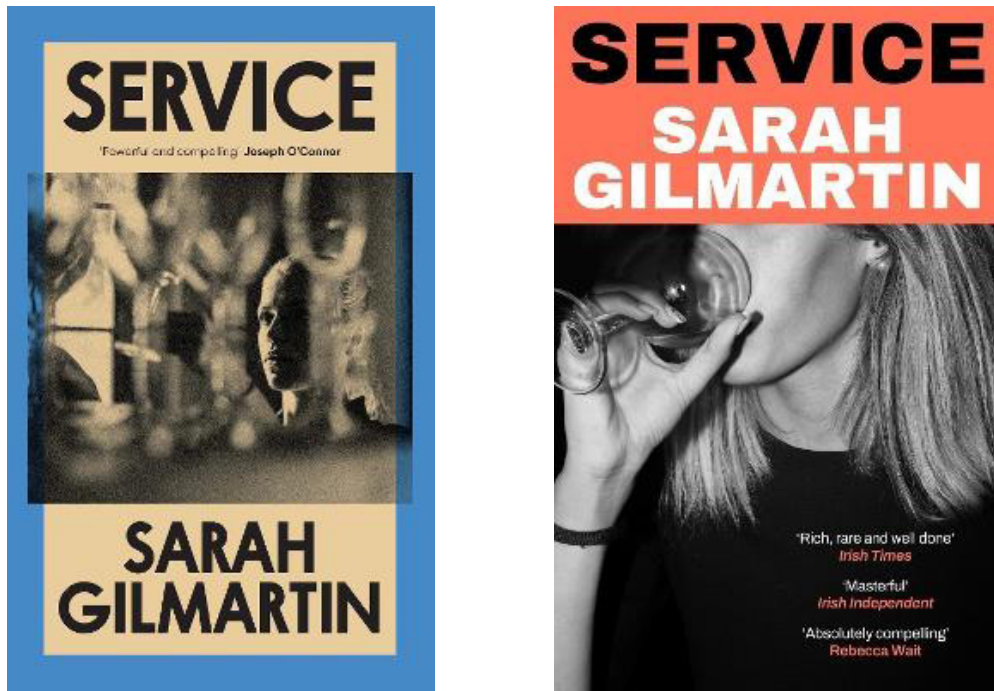


Figure 1 – Hardback cover (right) and Paperback cover (left) of *Service*

The term “service” as a title, however, situates the story’s epicentre not so much on the place (as suggested in the eponymous *ristorante* of the Italian translation) but on the question of finances, of capital value, of something (a service of some sort) that is done or received in exchange for money. And money is, no doubt, crucial to the world recounted by Gilmartin. Appearing to be at least on a par with time, money is significantly associated with food, in a social and cultural context where the memory of poverty and of “An Gorta Mór”, the Great Famine of 1845-1852, are very much alive still today, to the extent that for some, certain “graves” may be still “walking”⁴. The Great Hunger – that “greatest social disaster of 19th century Europe” – had “something of the characteristics of a low-level nuclear attack”, as Terry Eagleton has observed, not only because “the Irish population of almost 8.2 million shrank by a third”, but also because “starvation and disease killed 1.1 million” and “emigration claimed another 2 million” (Kelly 2012, 2). Its legacy is reflected in the language (it has been dubbed the Irish “holocaust”, Fogarty 2017; Rutledge 2023), and it cannot be underestimated considering, for instance, that over 70 million people of Irish descent live outside the island of Ireland today⁵. The long-term effects

⁴To echo W.B. Yeats’ words from Scene 1 of his verse drama *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), where a character named Teig says: “They say that now the land is famine struck / The graves are walking” (Yeats 1953, 2). The lines are quoted as an epigraph to John Kelly’s study, *The Graves are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People* (2012).

⁵See <<https://www.ireland.ie/en/irish-diaspora/>> (05/2026). See also Salis (2019), “[t]he Irish are today one of the largest diaspora communities in the world. This ‘diverse array of people’ scattered throughout the globe view Ireland ‘as a place of origin’, and ‘claim some connection with her, either directly through emigration or indirectly through descent from emigrants’ ” (29).

the Great Famine has had on the Irish psyche⁶ must also be taken into account. A starving and starved nation turned into a “foodie nation” (Deleuze 2012), to the point that, over the past three decades, food has received unprecedented attention from academics, media and cultural operators as well as society at large. Interest in food may partly owe to Ireland’s traumatic past, as noted, but also to “a new self-confidence bolstered by the [country’s] growing economy”: during the Celtic Tiger, in fact, “dining out ceased to be reserved only for special occasions and became a regular activity – encouraged in part by reviews, food writing and restaurant criticism. Restaurant options soared and the country became heavily invested in and *obsessed with food*” (Cawley, O’Mahony 2021, 183; my emphasis).

Service is recounted against the backdrop of that Ireland, a nation whose vision of and attitude to food had changed radically, as we learn, also, through Daniel Costello’s self-narrative. A working-class hero in his own right and a self-made man, the Michelin-starred chef is a pivotal character in the novel. Likewise, his restaurant kitchen becomes a microcosm of a nation that (feels it) has moved beyond its traumas and tradition, and where food acts both as a vehicle for cultural transformation and liberation, and as the agent of self-creativity and of exuberance, in contrast with past stringencies and limitations. This gives rise to its second connection, its link with sex. The restaurant and its kitchen turn into a hotbed of corruption and abuse, both verbal and physical, vis-à-vis the traditional family kitchen in its idealised version as a safe place, the heart of the domestic realm. A private space, the family home stands in stark contrast to the “T”, where private and public clash, as do past and present, and where dissonant notions of food, of nourishment and of cooking also collide. In this atmosphere, nostalgia kicks in, every so often: it does so in the shape of Hannah’s parents visiting from the countryside (Thurles, Co. Tipperary), and again through Julie’s reminiscences of her youth, when she and Daniel first met, a couple united by a passionate love, and by their common backgrounds, values and ideals.

Service is a fascinating novel, whose strength and allure lie in Gilmartin’s ability to explore and articulate the complexity of interpersonal relations and to narrate the contradictions, the ingenuities and the ambiguities of our contemporary world, suspended between the hegemony of profit, of social media and of the politically correct, where the question of power and gender roles remains unresolved to a large extent, and where the past holds up a sometimes disturbing mirror of truth. “In this age of misandry, we’re the answer to every problem” (Gilmartin 2023, 217), says Daniel, relieved and arrogant, as he celebrates a unanimous verdict that says that he is “Not guilty” (*ibidem*), while that “fifty-year old infant” (243) clearly is.

What follows expands on these themes, as it further investigates *Service*, in conversation with Sarah Gilmartin, first, and then with Valeria Raimondi, the novel’s Italian translator, whose work sheds light on the world brought to life by the Irish author.

LS: Can you tell us about the novel, what inspired it, and how did you develop the story?

SG: I had written a short play in 2019, a two-hander that was performed at a festival, and one of the actors subsequently asked me if I would write her a monologue for an audition at The Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre. There were no real parameters, other than a first-person voice, and the one that emerged was a waitress character in a fine-dining Dublin restaurant at the height of the Celtic Tiger. This monologue turned out to be an early draft of what became

⁶ For the impact of the Great Famine on mental health, see research work carried out by Oonagh Walsh, Professor of Gender Studies at Glasgow Caledonian University: “Tracing the Legacy of Great Hunger Trauma”, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYpmXsdAFPw>> (05/2026).

the first page and a half of the novel, in Hannah’s perspective. I’d worked as a waitress in my 20s – not in Dublin, largely in the US – and the intensity, buzz, fun, pressures and dangers of that world had clearly remained with me, on an unconscious level, because the monologue came very easily. What happens in the book is fiction, but my knowledge of the environment, and the problematic sexist culture of the noughties more generally, helped to inform it.

LS: The story is set and revolves around a trendy restaurant in Dublin and its staff, the head chef most especially. Where does your knowledge of that world, its hierarchy and vocabulary originate from?

SG: I had waitressed in quite fancy restaurants in New York, so I knew the world from that perspective, had observed the riches, luxuries and celebrities, the whiff of power. The chef’s chapters, on the other hand, took an amount of research. I am a terrible cook and have no real interest in improving, so I read many interviews with chefs in the media, books like Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential* (2000), and watched a lot of TV shows like *MasterChef Professionals*, in order to get a sense of the pressurised environment in which acclaimed chefs like Daniel Costello must operate on a daily basis. This was essential research when it came to creating his voice and character, and to understanding his worldview. But for a novel to come to life, the imagination has to take over at some point, and much of the vocabulary, the mindset of the chef, comes from my imagining of how a man like that might speak, act and behave – both before and after #MeToo; likewise, how that might change from Celtic Tiger Ireland to a country in recession.

LS: Service is a highly intertextual, theatrical and cinematographic novel. Can you tell us something about your relation to the literary tradition and the canon? Has anyone suggested a stage or film rendition of the novel? Who would you pick up for the role of Daniel Costello?

SG: It’s hard to speak generally about an Irish literary canon, but there is certainly a distinct vibrancy in setting, voice and character – a kind of aliveness – in the novels and stories of Irish writers that I admire, the ones I return to again and again: John McGahern, Edna O’Brien, Anne Enright and Claire Keegan. I’m thinking now of McGahern’s tyrannical father figures; O’Brien’s flighty, freedom-seeking country girls. Joseph O’Connor, another beloved Irish writer of highly cinematic, theatrical novels, compared *Service*, with its trio of perspectives, to Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* (1979). I hadn’t figured out that connection myself, but I had studied the play under Frank McGuinness’ riveting tutelage in University College Dublin some years before, and perhaps it was there all along, as an unconscious blueprint. The monologue origins of *Service* gave an automatic theatricality to the book. The retrospective narrative – I’m thinking here of Hannah’s sections – also has an inherent dramatic quality: a character inviting the reader into her world, her story, showing them what happened, and typically in retrospective narratives, where it all went wrong. Daniel’s pompous nature, his buffoonery, is also quite theatrical in tone. As is the setting of the restaurant: very colourful, obviously sensual, one of those worlds that resets itself, like theatre, every day a new show, a new set of customers, the tables quite literally set and reset. It’s a place that many people know but don’t really know. Most people have been to a restaurant, but what goes on behind the scenes? Closed off worlds. That kind of thing makes for interesting fiction. The dramatic rights were acquired in 2024 by a UK production company, Dash Pictures. The rights have recently been renewed. Dominic West was one actor I could imagine in the role of Daniel, though I think (forgive me, Dominic) he might be too old now to play the younger version of Daniel. He would still be excellent in the present-tense storyline. Colin Farrell would be great too. Alison Oliver is an Irish actress who I would love for Hannah. Maybe Eva Birthistle or Caitriona Balfe for Julie.

LS: The novel resonates with powerful sentences. I could list a dozen, at least. One for all: “It’s OK, Hannah. You’re OK” (Gilmartin 2023, 194). These are Daniel’s words to Hannah, immediately after he has abused her. Two deliberately strong and ambivalent lines.

SG: Yes, lines with ambivalence hold the reader’s attention, remain longer in the memory, provide a deeper connection to the text, and are particularly important when dealing with big themes and subject matter such as sexual assault. This is a line of dialogue, and in keeping with reality, I like the dialogue in my novels to be loaded with subtext. To Hannah it is clear that what has just happened between them is wrong and not something she wanted to happen. Daniel knows this too but he’s a man who is used to getting what he wants and is happy, now that he has gotten or taken what he wanted, to rationalise it, both to himself and to her. I think there’s also a warning implicit in his words: nothing bad has happened here, and as long as you agree with that, you will be ok.



Figure 2 – Photo of Sarah Gilmartin

LS: One final question. How does Sarah Gilmartin become such a great writer?

SG: I’ve been very lucky to have had the means and opportunity to study creative writing at university in UCD (University College Dublin), under teachers like Éilis Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright and Frank McGuinness. Anne’s tutelage in particular was a huge help when it came to writing my first novel *Dinner Party*. I’m not sure I would have gotten there without her guidance and the generative learning environment of the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programme. Outside of college, I’ve also benefited greatly from Claire Keegan’s writing workshops. She has such a unique way of looking at structure and is gifted in her ability to impart this knowledge to her students.

LS: *Little Vanities is being released in a couple of months. What next?*

SG: I’ve just started my fourth novel, which is at such an early stage that it’s hard to talk about, but it’s my first novel set outside Dublin – in my home county of Limerick during the recession.

LS: *Finally, a curiosity. The name of the restaurant (there’s a contest going on among students of my Contemporary Literature course). What does “T” stand for?*

SG: “T” is deliberately enigmatic in order to get readers (Irish in particular, but delighted that your students are doing likewise) to hypothesise about the restaurant name and potential real world parallels, even though such a restaurant doesn’t exist.

Valeria Raimondi has worked as a literary translator for over thirty years. Her interest in contemporary Irish literature began with Edna O’Brien, whose lucid and uncompromising attention to women’s lives left a lasting mark on her. The search for truth, the tension between belonging and independence, and the subtle, often fraught dynamics between men and women — within families as much as within society — continue to shape the work of writers such as Anne Enright, Sarah Gilmartin and Claire Keegan. That continuity is what most deeply informs her interest in Irish fiction as a translator. She is currently working on the Italian translation of Sarah Gilmartin’s first novel, *Dinner Party* (to be published by Marsilio by the end of 2026).



Figure 3 – Photo of Valeria Raimondi



Figure 4 – Cover of *Il ristorante*

LS: How did you approach the work of translation?

VR: I have been translating literary fiction for many years, and my work always begins with a careful analysis of the novel. I was lucky because I got to read *Service* before the publisher decided to acquire it, and I loved it. So when they offered me the chance to translate it, I already had a clear idea of the work ahead.

LS: What were your major challenges in translating the novel?

VR: At first glance, *Service* may seem like a straightforward novel, but it is layered with complexity and remarkable psychological depth. Throughout the translation process, I remained constantly aware of the tense dynamics between Daniel and the women working in his restaurant, of his distorted relationship with his wife, and of the fragile construction of his masculinity. Rendering this level of complexity in another language was my greatest challenge.

LS: How does Service translate into Il ristorante? What other options did you consider, if any?

VR: Honestly, I think keeping *Service* as the title would have been a better choice. Translators rarely have a say in the matter, though. Decisions about titles usually belong to the marketing department. *Service* captures the ambiguity of the restaurant's dynamics much more effectively.

LS: "It's OK, Hannah. You're OK" (Gilmartin 2023, 194). Daniel's words to Hannah, following his abuse. Two deliberately ambivalent sentences.

VR: The sentence "It's OK, Hannah. You're OK" is one of the most disturbing moments in the novel. Its apparent simplicity conceals a profound act of manipulation. Daniel is not comforting Hannah; he is asserting control over the narrative of what has just happened. By declaring that "it is ok," he attempts to normalise the violence. By telling her "you are ok," he implicitly defines her emotional reality for her, denying her the space to name the abuse for what it is. In translating this passage, it was crucial to preserve that deliberate ambiguity and the chilling calmness of the tone. The sentences had to sound almost banal — and precisely for that reason, deeply unsettling.

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