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Picturing our *green* future

What Ireland will look like in 2050
if we meet our climate action goals



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Is there room for
both in Dublin?

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ICYMI* with Tanya Sweeney

**In case you missed it*



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In depth



Resting his eyes: Boris Johnson appears to take a nap between UN secretary-general António Guterres and David Attenborough at Cop26 in Glasgow

1. Sulks, snoozes and high drama at climate conference

There were plenty of inspirational moments at Cop26 climate conference in Glasgow, but let's give a moment's attention to the shenanigans of the pale, male and stale brigade. Firstly, a maskless Boris Johnson caught 40 winks next to 95-year-old 'national treasure' David Attenborough. Then Joe Biden appeared to have a nap during the event too, and a 'sulking' Emmanuel Macron left early after a fight with Johnson. Amazing to think that the drama quotient was this high, and Donald Trump wasn't even there.

2. Game of Thrones sex scenes were a thing to behold during the show's eight-season run, but according to one actress, you should have been there (or rather shouldn't).

According to Gemma Whelan (who played Yara Greyjoy), chaos reigned. "They used to just say, 'When we shout action, go for it!', and it could be a sort of frenzied mess," she told *The Guardian*. "There was a scene in a brothel with a woman



and she was so exposed that we talked together about where the camera would be and what she was happy with. A director might say, 'Bit of boob biting, then slap her bum and go', but I'd always talk it through with the other actor."

3. Wedding bells for Kristen Stewart

She has impressed with her portrayal of Princess Diana in *Spencer*, and now Kristen Stewart is enjoying a personal high point too. This week, it was announced that she is engaged to Dylan Meyer, her girlfriend of two years. "We're marrying, we're totally gonna do it," Stewart said on *The Howard Stern Show*. "I wanted to be proposed to, so I think I very distinctly carved out what I wanted and she nailed it. We're marrying, it's happening."

4. Prince Andrew's lawyers file 'slutty girls' claim

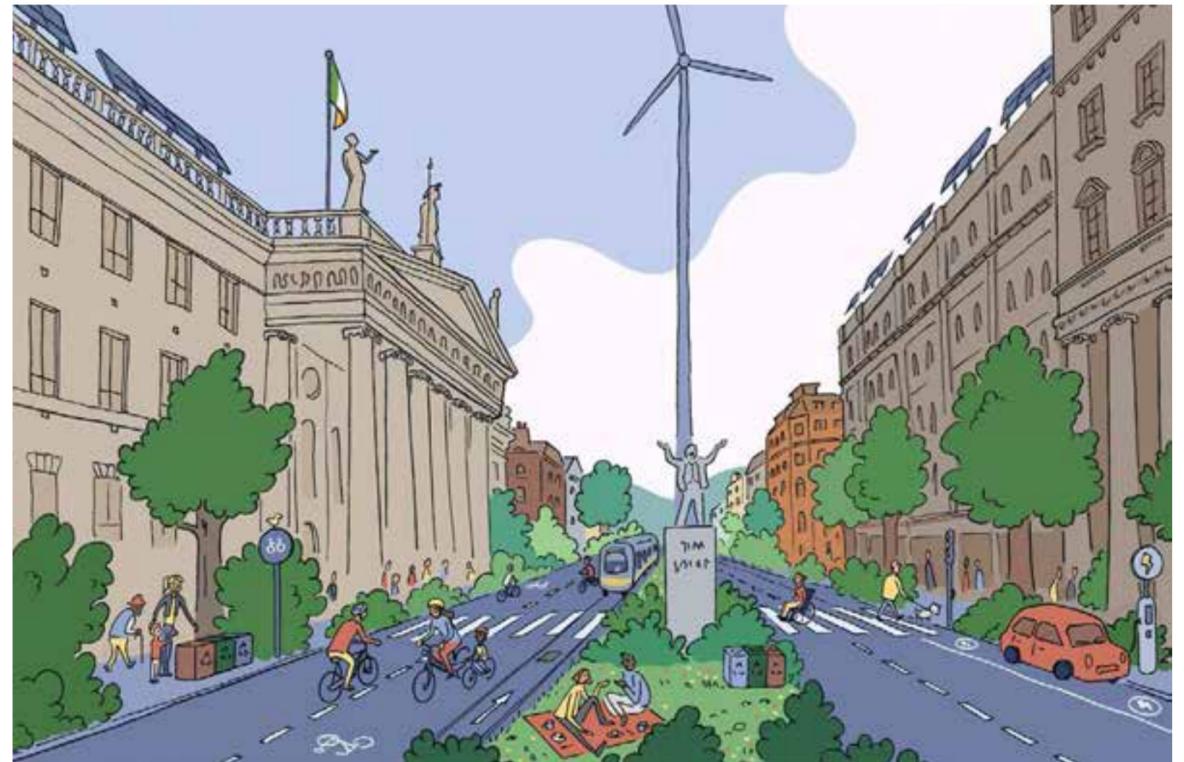
Prince Andrew has hit back at Virginia Giuffre,

the woman who has accused him of raping her when she was 17 (an accusation he denies). His lawyers have claimed that she searched for 'slutty girls' to bring to paedophile Jeffrey Epstein. In response, Sigrid McCawley, Giuffre's lawyer, said: "If Virginia Giuffre had stood silent in the face of outrageous statements like those Prince Andrew routinely churns out — his motion to dismiss the litigation being no exception — the decades-long sex-trafficking ring his friend Jeffrey Epstein operated... would have never been exposed."

5. Web Summit's Cosgrave sorry for jibe at journalist

Web Summit founder Paddy Cosgrave apologised to the *Irish Independent's* technology editor Adrian Weckler after suggesting that the newspaper's coverage was influenced by an advertiser. Pressed on whether the IDA, an early partner in Web Summit events, is at this year's event, Cosgrave had said he did not know. He then told assembled reporters: "Adrian is the tech editor of the largest newspaper in Ireland and fiercely protective of one of their largest advertisers, which is the Irish Development Agency." (The IDA is not a significant advertiser with the *Independent*.) However, at the end of the press conference he offered an apology, suggesting that the claim had been made in jest. "I'd like to apologise to Adrian for teasing him a little," he said. *Irish Independent* editor Cormac Bourke said he was glad the record had been set straight.

'I'd like to apologise to Adrian for teasing him a little'



Green ways: By 2050, there should be fewer cars on the roads and greater use of bikes and public transport. Illustration by Lieske Keegstra

Ireland 2050: what to expect from life in a carbon-neutral country

From car-free neighbourhoods to cycle superhighways, Ireland looks set for a lifestyle revolution by the middle of this century, when we have committed to cut our greenhouse emissions to zero. **Kim Bielenberg** looks to the future

Over the past century, we have experienced dramatic changes in our way of life, from deep recessions to the Celtic Tiger boom and the arrival of the internet to the financial crash and the disruption of pandemic.

The next revolution will arise from ecological necessity: we have promised to play our part in the global effort to avert climate catastrophe.

Under Government plans, Ireland intends to become carbon neutral by 2050. That could bring about the most dramatic change of lifestyle of all.

Reaching 'net zero' as an emitter means we might still produce some carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, but we would have to compensate by removing an equivalent amount from the atmosphere.

So, how will life change in this carbon neutral world order? By 2050, it will mean the end of gas-guzzling internal combustion engines; there will be no petrol stations, because there will be no petrol to sell; and fireside chats warmed by logs or peat briquettes will be a distant memory.

Instead, we will be powered by wind energy through turbines that will increasingly dominate the horizon on land and at sea; there will be tens of thousands of solar panels on rooftops and on farms, and even waves will be harnessed to keep the lights on and our homes heated.

While cars will be run on electric power, they may be discouraged from entering many urban areas as pre-eminence is given to cyclists and pedestrians. And the person in the driving seat may not be paying too much attention to the road, because cars should be able to drive themselves — at least part of the way.

As urban dwellers are encouraged to embrace the idea of the 15-minute city or the liveable village, the countryside will change as more trees are grown, bogs are rewetted as carbon sinks and farmers are increasingly cast as environmental managers as well as food producers.

We could do everything right, and get a squeaky clean green badge for reducing CO2 emissions to net zero by New Year's Day 2050, but there are no guarantees that other countries will follow suit.

This places us in danger of dramatic changes to

the weather. Even if the world co-operates to cut emissions, there is still likely to be increased risk of floods, rising sea levels and summer droughts.

Reversing our car culture

The most notable change we will notice when we enter a town or city in 2050 will be the almost eerie quietness of the streets and freshness of the air.

The sale of new petrol and diesel engines is due to be banned by 2030, and this should ensure that the entire fleet of private cars will run on electricity or other forms of renewable energy by 2050. All public transport will be electrified.

William Walsh, chief executive of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, says 66pc of transport to work is by car but this is likely to fall by 2050 as more people work from home or in local hubs. He predicts that fewer people

will own cars as public transport is made more available, cycling infrastructure improves and drivers opt to rent vehicles.

Experts in transport planning envisage villages or suburbs where cars are pushed to the margins. "It's not about stopping people driving," says Lorraine D'Arcy, lecturer in the School of Transport at Technological University Dublin. "It's about making the most sustainable choice the easiest."

She says we could move to a model close to that of the Vauban suburb of Freiburg in Germany, where cars are parked on the edge of the area, and are only brought next to the home for, say, dropping off or picking up children and groceries.

Children play and cycle freely on the streets, and cars have to be driven at a very low speed. Sadhbh O'Neill, lecturer in climate policy at Dublin City University, says we should develop a model of liveable towns where cars are removed from the streets and where children can play and walk to shops and schools.

The concept is to improve quality of life by creating cities where everything a resident needs can be reached within a quarter of an hour by foot or bike. The 15-minute city concept requires minimal travel between homes, workplaces, restaurants, parks, hospitals and cultural

Reinvesting:
Noel Carey,
Sarah Fogarty
and John
Fogarty of
Community
Power at
Templederry
windfarm,
Co Tipperary.
Photo by Don
Moloney



venues. Under this model, each neighbourhood should fulfil six social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying. Dr D'Arcy prefers the notion of the liveable village, where everything is accessible, to the idea of the 15-minute city.

"It could be a rural village or an area of a city," she says. "We have already seen in the pandemic that people are reconnecting with their communities. Their homes are not just places to sleep."

Smaller, energy-efficient homes

One of the Government's biggest challenges is to adapt existing homes by 2050 so that they are heated by renewable energy. At the moment, Irish homes use 7pc more energy than the EU average and emit 58pc more CO2. In 2019, they were 70pc reliant on fossil fuels, including oil-fired boilers.

By 2050, new and retrofitted homes will tend to be equipped with heat pumps that work by converting energy from the air outside the home into heat inside.

Once the initial outlay has been made, William Walsh of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland believes homes will be healthier and warmer.

Sadhbh O'Neill of DCU says new housing will be built at higher density, homes will be smaller and less of the space between buildings will be devoted to car travel and parking.

However, higher density will not mean vast tower blocks, but apartment buildings of four to six storeys, interspersed with smaller developments.

Walsh says homes are more likely to be built from sustainable materials such as wood.

A growing number of neighbourhoods of dense housing will be able to rely on district heating. "District heating is already common in other parts of the world," Walsh says.

"The heat generated in a heat and power plant close to the apartment blocks is piped into homes. Effectively, the cost of having one heater that heats [a number of] apartments is much lower than having 150 systems running in a block or a number of blocks."

The heat for these systems could come from a variety of sources. There is already a project being developed to draw heat from an Amazon data centre in Tallaght, Co Dublin. Pipes that will carry hot water to buildings around the centre of Tallaght are still being laid and the system is expected to run from next spring.

Initially, it will serve council buildings, Technological University Dublin's Tallaght campus and 133 affordable homes to be built on public land. The incinerator at Ringsend will also become a source of district heating close to Dublin city centre.

By 2050, we will rely on renewable energy and most of this will come from wind and solar farms, says Walsh.

There will be better storage options for wind energy, making it easier to supply the national grid, and wave energy is likely to be seen as a viable source of power.

"One of the advantages of wave energy is that it is less intermittent," says Walsh. "You don't have to wait for the wind to blow or the sun to shine."

Farms of solar panels will increasingly become a feature of the landscape. The single largest solar farm in the Republic was recently opened near Kinsale, Co Cork, to supply power to the Eli Lilly pharmaceutical plant.

Whatever money does accrue from our small project stays in the local economy

We will have to travel smarter and buy into a new kind of holidaying

Pól Ó Conghaile

It's easy to imagine a future whizzing around on electric cars and bikes. But what about flying on electric or hybrid planes, sailing on zero-emission cruise ships or taking city breaks by high-speed rail? Or perhaps just imagine travelling less.

When it comes to travel, futurists love the sexy, sci-fi side of things: hyperloops, affordable trips to space, planes with massage seats and transparent ceilings. But unless Elon Musk suddenly unveils Tesla teleporters, the reality will be a lot more incremental and involve a lot of compromise.

As Cop26 plays out, it feels like we are in a moment — and a mindset — for genuine change. Hotel culture wars are playing out from Dublin to Dubrovnik. Lockdowns led us to reassess our lives, reconnect with nature and re-engage with our communities. Apocalyptic weather events have made sustainability mainstream.

Then you see flights for the price of a few pints. You read about the pent-up demand to travel, how essential aviation is to our island economy. That's the dilemma. Greenhouse gas from commercial flights make up about 2pc of the world's total carbon emissions and are expected to triple by 2050,

according to the International Council on Clean Transportation.

One solution is to change the hardware. Innovators are looking at electric, solar and hydrogen-driven planes, but successes to date have been with small craft. Larger, commercially viable planes are a distant dream. Lower-emission or hybrid planes and ships are more likely. Ryanair says its newest Boeing 737, for example, will consume 16pc less fuel.

Another is answer to disincentivise unsustainable travel. After flight shaming, think flight rationing.

2050 isn't that far away. But it's time enough for change — 30 years ago, we hadn't heard of smartphones, Airbnb or Instagram. Travel doesn't have to go away. Tourism is an important contributor to economies and can encourage conservation. Costa Rica's ecotourism drive has given new livelihoods to communities once dominated by logging, hunting and gold prospecting.

The challenge is to travel smarter, emit less and buy into a new kind of holidaying that sustains local communities rather than drive-by trips that treat the planet like a toilet and price people out of their homes.

But that's not something a mindset alone will change. As long as cheap flights exist, we will fill them.

Built by the Irish-owned company Enerpower, the farm has 13,000 solar panels on a 16-acre site. In some areas, communities have tried to take power into their own hands, hoping to supply energy to the grid. Community energy projects have been slow to get off the ground, because of red tape, but could be more common by 2050.

In Templederry, Co Tipperary, residents set up their own windfarm as early as 2012, and even have their own utility, Community Power. Among the driving forces of the project were the Fogarty family, with father John helping to set up the project, which is promoted by his daughter Sarah.

The group started selling electricity to the grid in November 2012, and all dividends from the community-owned project will be reinvested in local activities.

"The windfarm is run along co-operative principles and the benefits to the country of this type of project are huge," John Fogarty says. "It means that whatever money does accrue from our small project stays in the local economy, rather than going abroad."

Cycle superhighways

Sadhbh O'Neill of DCU advocates the development of cycle superhighways to enhance carbon-free transport in 2050.

A network of these routes is being developed in Denmark and the idea is to increase the number of commuters who cycle from 5km to 30km every day by improving access and safety. Greenways have been introduced across Ireland, but they are mainly targeted at leisure cyclists and tourists.

"We need to have more special cycle routes, particularly for commuters, and these could connect towns," O'Neill says.



'Our landscape will look very different': Diarmuid Gavin in his garden at Kilmacanogue, Co Wicklow. Photo by Frank McGrath

From olive trees to grapevines, Irish gardens will have a Mediterranean feel

Diarmuid Gavin

Gardeners are acutely aware of the changes happening in our environment. Our climate is warmer, wetter and subject to extreme weather. Flash floods are becoming common, as are summer droughts.

For some on our small island, spring arrives up to a month earlier than it used to, and winters can be so mild that lawns are being mown in December and January. This is only the beginning.

We're expecting more of the same, with milder and wetter winters with summers being hotter and drier. All of this will lead to huge changes in how and where we garden.

By 2050, the Irish landscape and garden will look very different. We can expect our plots to take on more of a Mediterranean feel. While some flowering summer perennials like lupins and delphiniums will have a challenging time in dry summer soils, other plants that are familiar to us from trips abroad such as citrus fruits, grapevines and pomegranate, olive, peach and almond trees will become common.

But so will bugs and diseases. If there are no harsh

frosts to kill them off, pests such as lily beetle, berberis sawfly and vine weevil will proliferate.

Saving rainwater in tanks underneath our gardens will become common; compost will be made from green waste; the ubiquitous neat lawn that is a barren desert for wildlife will be a thing of the past; and we will have stopped our reliance on artificial plant feeds and nitrates.

Our flower beds will be designed to cope with flash floods and we'll plant smaller species of trees that will be able to withstand storms.

Instead of walls and fences, we will be encouraged to grow hedges: living walls. On the walls of our homes we'll plant vertical gardens. Even roofs will be commonly used for planting as valuable spaces to grow food in towns and cities, and as a way of insulating buildings.

Self-driving technology will open the way for more green spaces. If we want a car we will summon it. When we reach our destination, rather than park, we will watch as it moves away. At the moment, a typical car is parked for 95pc of the time. Cities and towns should give over parking spaces to green plots. And multistorey car parks can become city farms.

Offal, insects and whelks will be the dishes of the day

Aoife Carrigy

By 2050, the days of cheap protein from intensively reared living animals will be remembered with incredulity. Meat and poultry will be the expensive luxuries that they once were, while Irish grass-fed beef will be a premium health food prized for its omega-rich fats.

We will have rediscovered the appetite for offal and other offcuts that our thrifty grandparents enjoyed, alongside a taste for lab-grown meat.

Insect farms will also provide cheap protein, though these will throw up their own challenges, as with any other intensive farming. Low-impact aquaculture with self-cleaning water systems will produce sustainably farmed fish alongside seafood such as whelks and abalone, which we will no longer simply export but will have learned to love.

The national herd will be smaller, both in volume and physique. Diminutive native breeds will be in

demand because they are better suited to Ireland's varied terrain and because they have less impact on the land.

We will employ an array of green science and regenerative farming solutions to minimise the herd's impact on atmosphere and land, including dietary supplements made from sustainably farmed seaweed extracts to reduce methane gas output, and mob grazing of fully grass-fed beef cattle to reduce land degradation.

Food security will be key as global supply chains become vulnerable to interruption and shortages.

Irish soy milk and oat milk will replace imported almond milk. Wholegrain bread from Irish-grown heritage wheat developed to withstand drought and floods will displace sourdough made with imported flour.

Roof gardens, balcony farms, allotments and community gardens will play an important role in providing grassroots access to clean plant-based food. Community agriculture schemes and bakeries will become widespread.

She says the emergence of e-bikes as a popular form of transport is a game-changer and they have enabled people to get around at faster speeds and over longer distances.

One option for traffic planners in towns and cities is the idea of filtered permeability. This is an urban planning concept that "filters out" through car traffic on selected streets to create a more attractive environment for walking and cycling, while maintaining accessibility for residents, deliveries or emergencies.

Back to nature

James Moran, lecturer in ecology and agriculture at Galway Mayo Institute of Technology, says: "On the face of it, the countryside will not look all that different in 2050, but if you look closely, you will notice changes."

Farmers are being required to cut emissions dramatically and bogland will be rewetted to retain its carbon-storing qualities.

To maintain these bogs, farmers will have to be subsidised to "farm the carbon" by acting as environmental managers, according to Dr Florence Renou-Wilson of University College Dublin, who is an authority on peatlands and climate change.

"Our bogs can be a significant sink of CO2," she says.

Moran says dairy and beef production will continue in the countryside, but this type of farming will have to be less reliant on fertilisers made from fossil fuels. Farmers are being encouraged to change the type of grassland for grazing cattle to a variety of species including clover.

This reduces the requirement for chemical fertilisers and helps to cut emissions, he says. As a result, according to the scientist, fields will again be 40 shades of green.

Droughts, floods and less snow: how our weather will change

Caroline O'Doherty at Cop26 in Glasgow

Ireland could be a transformed country in 2050 if our net zero plans come to pass, but that won't stop our climate changing. Much as we like to talk about 'Irish weather', what happens in the skies above us is largely dictated by global factors.

Globally, the average temperature rise is already at least 1.1C above where it was before we started spewing vast quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels.

By some calculations, such as those used by the Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University, which is exhibiting at Cop26 this week, we have gone slightly past 1.2C. Either way, the most recent report of the IPCC, the UN's scientific body, published in August, says that will increase to 1.5C in the next 20 years, and probably sooner rather than later.

So how much will our national climate change? The answer is an apparently contradictory "not a lot but very significantly". The "not a lot" refers to temperature and rainfall. Our generally benign climate will remain. According to models from the Irish Centre for High-End Computing (ICHEC), temperatures overall are projected to increase by 1-1.6C compared with the average recorded between 1980 and 2000.

There will be more notable warming at the 'extremes', so daytime in summer and nighttime in winter will have increases of up to 2.4C.

These changes will affect the growing season, which is set to lengthen by 12-16pc. On average, that means growing will start 15-24 days earlier, but it could be a month or 10 days, depending on location.

The number of days of frost and ice will meanwhile fall by half. Similarly, we will have a 50pc reduction in snowfall. Given that its appearances are rare enough already, that means the children of today's children may never experience snow in their own country.

The impact of that may be more sentimental than practical, however, and the thrust of the anticipated changes overall seem quite harmless. But it's not averages and overalls that cause problems.

Summer heatwaves are expected to occur more frequently, with the south to experience them most. Rain will become more variable, with many more extended dry periods and more heavy rainfall. That is very significant because of how poorly we cope with relatively minor variations in weather patterns.

WATER SHORTAGES

A dry summer causes drought warnings because almost all our water supply relies on regular rain and surface sources such as rivers.

Just 15 days without rain is officially classified as a drought here. There are water shortages, rationing kicks in and farmers may face a winter fodder crisis if they cannot grow enough grass. A wet summer causes similar grief, with flooding on land that hasn't dried out after the typically wet winter. Shortages of vegetables because machinery cannot get into waterlogged fields, and a winter fodder crisis if the grass doesn't get enough sun and warmth to grow.

Alternate the two — more prolonged dry spells with more intense rainfall — and a new set of problems emerge. Here's what the ICHEC said about the impact on farming: "The results suggest a warming climate may present some positive opportunities for farming. However, the results should be



Continued from Page 5

viewed in the context that a warming climate will also result in an increase in pests as a result of an increase in heating and a decrease in frost and ice days.

"Furthermore, projected increases in extreme temperatures, heatwaves, heavy precipitation and dry periods/droughts will have substantial adverse effects on agriculture in Ireland by the middle of the century."

Beyond agriculture, 'heavy precipitation' can cause huge disruption to social and economic life, as has been seen by some of the 'freak' rainfall events experienced in Donegal, Leitrim and Galway in the past few years.

Sudden, intense cloudbursts have dumped as much as a month's rainfall in a few hours, causing landslides, damage to roads and bridges and flooding of wide areas. These incidents were in mainly rural areas but the damage in cities and towns can be severe too.

Urban drainage networks do not have the capacity to cope with sudden, sustained deluges that will quickly flood streets, halt transport and clog sewage systems. The gutting and roofs of many older buildings — and some newer structures — cannot withstand the force either and will suffer damage.

River flooding is already a serious and contentious issue, with huge amounts being spent on flood protection. In many cases, this consists of ugly concrete walls that do the job required but remove amenity value from the river in times of normal flow and detract from streetscapes and historical character. Flooding on rural lands, where no length of walls will contain the flow, is another growing problem.

In coastal areas, the biggest problem will be sea flooding. Sea levels are rising, with the most detailed records — from Dublin — showing an increase of 3mm a year.

It sounds inconsequential, but 3mm a year over 30 years is 9cm — just over 3.5 inches.

COASTAL FLOODING

High tides, winds and storms mixed with that magnitude of sea level rise will bring many challenges. Buildings, roads and rail infrastructure may become inundated, while the ground around them may be eroded.

Alastair McKinstry is a climate scientist at ICHEC, which works with the Environmental Protection Agency, universities, Met Éireann and other scientific bodies to pull together the latest climate data for crunching through the centre's supercomputers.

"We're looking in much greater detail at sea level rise and coastal flooding," he says.

"We're validating the last of that data at the moment and hope to be finished next spring. That will be the first time we have detailed regional projections for around the coast."

Coastal flooding maps already exist but McKinstry says they used quite generalised ocean current data. The new projections will take into account the unique tidal conditions that apply to each section of coastline, which will give a much better indication of what will happen when sea level rise combines with high tides, high winds and storm surges.

Even if Ireland does transform into a net zero nation by 2050, the likelihood of the world collectively achieving the same is doubtful.

That leaves the 1.5 degree target in grave doubt. In fact, so much excitement greeted modelling by the University of Melbourne published at Cop26 this week that showed a limit of 1.9C warming was possible that it appears the conference's nominal 1.5C goal has all but been abandoned.

The outlook then for 'Irish weather' and its impacts on our society and economy will require a whole new set of forecasts.



Michael Collins: 25 years on, history should look kindly on Neil Jordan's film

The Big Fellow biopic was released to instant controversy, but the sight of the War of Independence on screen was staggering — and the movie's impact on the Irish film industry cannot be overstated, writes **Paul Whittington**

What would *Michael Collins* have been like had Kevin Costner made it? According to Neil Jordan, the Hollywood giant was at one point interested in a Collins biopic, and was seen loitering with intent in the vicinity of Béal na mBláth. Lords knows what mawkish paddywhackery the director of *Dances with Wolves* would have inflicted on our War of Independence, and a proposed Michael Cimino version might have been even worse.

Happily, it was Neil Jordan who convinced David Geffen and Warner Bros film studios to back his plan for a biopic of the Big Fellow, and *Michael Collins* was released 25 years ago this month. Its impact on Irish cinema, and broader culture, cannot be overstated, but the wonder is that it ever got made at all.

In the mid-1990s, to talk of an Irish film industry was to indulge in wishful thinking: no project on a similar scale had ever been attempted by an Irish film-maker, and Jordan pushed his project towards production on the strength of his reputation alone. By that point, he had become an A-list director, riding high on the success of movies such as *The Company of Wolves*, *Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game* and *Interview With The Vampire*. It was the strong box office performance of the last film

Free to dream big: Director Neil Jordan was given an estimated budget of \$25m to create the epic movie



that persuaded David Geffen that Jordan was a director to be trusted.

He had written the script in the 1980s, and had promised the lead role to Liam Neeson. "I knew he was a startling actor," Jordan explained to me when I spoke to him a few years back. "I told him I was writing this and that if I ever got to make it, I'd like to make it with him. The only alternative I could think of was Kenneth Branagh, but myself and Liam had made a pact. By the time it came round we were both almost too old to do it, but not quite."

Some critics dryly noted that while Neeson was 43 during filming, the real Collins had died at 31, but it hardly mattered.

With an estimated \$25m to play with (a handsome budget for the time), Jordan was free to dream big and create vast sets that corresponded to his epic vision, while telling a story that stretched from the 1916 Rising through the War of Independence, the Treaty talks and the Civil War to Collins's assassination.

The Bloody Sunday massacre at Croke Park was staged at Bray Wanderers' Carlisle Grounds, which he remodelled and packed with 5,000 extras at an estimated cost of IR£1m. He spent IR£1.5m recreating the GPO and early 20th-century O'Connell Street on the grounds of Grangegorm, the largest film set ever created in the country at that time.

Using real sets instead of sound stages and special effects would give his film a compelling grittiness, and a sense of history's sweep, but meanwhile actual history was about to make a controversial project even

more divisive. Jordan started making the film just a year after the announcement of a fragile IRA ceasefire, and while he was shooting, the Provos ended the ceasefire by detonating a bomb on Canary Wharf.

Physical-force republicanism was alive and kicking, and before Jordan's cameras had started turning, talking heads had emerged from the ether to attack the project.

"The minute it was announced," he told me on the film's 20th anniversary, "everybody began arguing, and before I'd finished the final draft there were items on TV, and historians commenting... it was almost like I'd been commissioned to make a national monument."

REMORSELESS EYE

Collins, the 1916 veteran and ruthless architect of the IRA's guerilla war against British forces, is a uniquely divisive figure in Irish republican politics. After the signing of the Treaty (a mess not of his own making), he turned his remorseless eye on anti-Treaty rebels, whom he suppressed with vigour, sometimes using British guns and artillery. A hero to some, a villain to others, Collins had always fascinated Jordan.

"In six years of his life, from 1916 to 1922, he encompassed all the contradictions of Irish politics, the hopes, the ambitions, the naivety and the brutality," he said.

And his film would tell the story of "a man who built a guerilla army and then tried to decommitment it".

Neeson swaggered his way through the film in fine style, giving us a real sense of Collins' cha-

risma, his single-minded ruthlessness, and the price he was prepared to pay for his nation's freedom.

But for every hero, there has to be a villain. Enter Éamon de Valera, played with an oily flourish by the late, great Alan Rickman, a controversial choice in some quarters as he happened to be an Englishman.

Barry McGovern had played de Valera with distinction on the 80s RTÉ series *Caught in a Free State*, and the 1991 TV movie *The Treaty*. "He would have been a good choice as well," Jordan said, "but I went with Alan Rickman because he was such a spectacular actor, and he looked more like Dev".

No one could deny the calibre of Rickman's characterisation, which Michael Dwyer of *The Irish Times* called "a terrific performance... precisely catching the nuances in Dev's delivery and uncannily resembling him as a young man".

But not everyone was happy with the implications of that performance, and a screenplay that depicted the father of the nation as a sneaky and Machiavellian character who ruled by stealth and was largely responsible for the Civil War.

The notion that Dev, with Jesuitical cunning, sent Collins to the Treaty negotiations in his stead knowing that embarrassing compromises, including partition, were inevitable, has long been widely believed. In the film, and perhaps in life, de Valera was allowed by the hated



"The film was a lot of things, but in a way, it was a study of violence as a substitute for politics and the ultimate failure of that"

Oath of Allegiance to wash his hands of the Treaty, thereby plunging the 26 counties into civil war. But the idea, implied in Jordan's movie, that Dev had a hand in Michael Collins' assassination, might be a bit of a reach.

It made for great cinema, though, as did the sight of Alan Rickman's lugubrious de Valera gloomily predicting that "in the fullness of time history will record the greatness of Michael Collins, and it will be recorded at my expense".

Though Irish in many ways, *Michael Collins* was also a Hollywood movie: in other words, romance was inevitable.

HEROIC BUT DOOMED

Happily, history was able to oblige — well, sort of. It's well known that both Collins and his erstwhile best friend Harry Boland (played by Aidan Quinn) were both keen on Longford beauty Kitty Kiernan (Julia Roberts): Jordan's film played up this love triangle for all it was worth.

In Ireland, much cruel fun was made of Julia Roberts' heroic but doomed attempts to approximate an Irish accent, but what they failed to realise was that without big names like Neeson and Roberts, *Michael Collins* might not have been made at all. That romantic interlude was a tad embarrassing, leading some critics to characterise the film as a flawed but noble endeavour. This was unfair.

It did huge business at home, becoming

Politics and romance: (From far left to right) Aidan Quinn as Harry Boland and Julia Roberts as Kitty Kiernan; Alan Rickman as Éamon de Valera and (main picture) Liam Neeson as Michael Collins

Is the hotel-building boom leaving no room for culture in Dublin?

The loss of some of the capital's favourite venues has led to protests that tourist accommodation is being prioritised over the arts and locals' needs. **John Meagher** investigates whether the claim is fair

For Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin, it was the final straw. The musician had witnessed beloved venues associated with Dublin's rich artistic culture being levelled to make way for hotels. Now he was hearing that the Cobblestone's future was under threat.

Plans to build a nine-storey hotel over and adjacent to the Smithfield pub, famed for its trad music sessions and as an incubator of emerging talent, were made public last month. He was determined to make his voice heard, especially when it was clear that much of the venue would be erased.

Thanks to social media, Ó Ceannabháin and other like-minded people organised a series of protests.

The first attracted widespread media coverage and featured hundreds of campaigners marching from the site of the Cobblestone, which faces Smithfield's centuries-old square, to Merchant's Arch in Temple Bar, on the other side of the Liffey. Another hotel is being planned for that site, which would, its detractors say, forever alter the complexion of the 200-year-old laneway. In a show of anger at the changes wrought in the capital, protesters carried a mock-up coffin with them.

"The two protests that we've had over the last month or so are indicative of the importance of the Cobblestone," says Ó Ceannabháin, who is a member of People Before Profit, "but it also speaks to something wider that's happening in the city, the way planning and development happens here, and a lot of the anger ties into the housing crisis and the fact that the city is so expensive for people to live in.

"Decisions are being made based on what will maximise the profits of developers and speculators and that can mean, in the case of Dublin, that catering for tourists is going to be a lot more profitable than building affordable housing.

"Too often cultural sites are being destroyed, or completely undermined. In the case of the Cobblestone, the front bar would remain, but the back venue would be gone, so while the front bar might be there, and attractive to tourists, it wouldn't be anything like the place we've known for so long."

It's a sentiment shared by the musician and film-maker Myles O'Reilly. "Without the Cobblestone, we mightn't have bands like Lankum or Ye Vagabonds or Landless," he says, "and its

'Great community meeting place': Myles O'Reilly is troubled by plans for the Cobblestone



importance goes back to people like Liam Weldon and Christy Moore. For 50 years, it's been turning out great musicians, partly because it's been bringing them together. It's one of our great community meeting places in terms of music."

O'Reilly is troubled by what he sees as the prioritisation of hotel-building over the preservation of cultural venues. The Tivoli Theatre, which hosted Oasis's first Irish gig among countless other shows, and Andrew's Lane Theatre, a favoured haunt of David Bowie's in the 1990s, have both disappeared in recent years. Finishing touches are being applied to the hotels that now stand in their place.

"The focus is on tourism rather than the needs of those living here," he says. "I don't know what Dublin is trying to become. I've been to some cities, like Zurich, that was just so soulless — people hiding behind rich doors — there was nothing happening there. Culture seemed to be squeezed out and Dublin is heading that way. And where do the tourists go when they come to these new hotels?"

Hotel development is in the crosshairs of many of those who rail against what they see as a destruction of Dublin's soul.

Last week's news that the country's largest bookshop, Chapters, would close its doors after 40 years' trading in central Dublin only amplified questions about the city's future, especially as Dublin is designated a Unesco City of Literature. In 2010, it became only the fourth place in the world to be bestowed with the honour.

TOURIST DESTINATION

But is pitting culture against new hotels fair? Fáilte Ireland has long argued for the need for more hotel rooms.

"Tourist accommodation is a vital part of the tourism and leisure product in Ireland," says Weldon Mather, Fáilte Ireland's head of accommodation development.

"While accommodation is just one part of a wider tourism product, which encompasses a much broader spectrum of attractions and activities, it is a core component of what makes up a successful tourist destination, and its presence in a destination is instrumental in facilitating and maximising tourism spend in the area, with significant benefits for local businesses such as cafés and restaurants, local visitor attractions and local residents."

Mather points out that "tourist accommodation, and especially hotels, often plays an important role

I've been to some soulless cities, culture seemed to be squeezed out and Dublin is heading that way'



as a 'community hub,' which, he says, provides other benefits for residents and businesses such as employment, recreational facilities and "area regeneration effects, environmental and sustainable development."

According to Fáilte Ireland, more than 4,000 new hotel rooms are expected to become available in Dublin over "the coming years". About 2,000 rooms were scheduled to be completed in 2021 (but some have been delayed by Covid) followed by 1,600 next year and 800 in 2023. This is an increase of about 50pc on the number of rooms delivered between 2018 and 2020.

Just before the pandemic, it was estimated that about 100 hotels were being built in Dublin. Many are still under construction.

"Failure to provide adequate tourist accommodation in a tourist destination will ultimately lead to a situation where potential overnight visitors will instead become lower-spending day trippers, or indeed, lack of adequate tourist accommodation might deter potential tourists from visiting a destination at all," Mather says.

"This will mean a loss of revenue for local tourism businesses and wider economy, with

knock-on effects for local employment and for the wider community benefits that hotels provide. Hotels are major employers and remit significant tax revenues."

Richard Guiney of Dublin Town, the association of city centre retailers and businesses, says the capital needs more hotels, but not at the expense of cultural institutions. He recalls a similar conversation at a convention he attended in Philadelphia three years ago.

"A number of American cities were trying to get the balance right between preserving what makes a place attractive and then people want to visit it," he says. "The concept then was moving to a model of preservation of use and preservation of buildings so within the planning system, important cultural assets would be protected. The thinking is that that's what gives an area its reputation and identity.

"We were underserved for hotels, but we [in Dublin Town] would be erring towards the idea of preserving what we have, especially as the city moves towards a night-time economy. Our own research with Dubliners indicates that they want to engage more with arts and culture."

He believes there is comparatively little opposition to hotels in themselves; it's more when any future development threatens an existing cultural space.

From a purely commercial point of view, tourists are important to Dublin businesses. Guiney says that while tourists represented 7pc of the footfall in the city centre pre-pandemic, they were spending, on average, three times more than Dublin residents. But, he says, getting the balance right is important.

"It comes down to what defines a city. Why would people visit a city? A lot of the cultural assets and instructions are what give you your

identity. If we strip out too many of those assets, it will impact on our long-term vibrancy."

Dublin City Council wrestled with those questions when it set up the Dublin Recovery Taskforce in April, a matter of weeks before Covid restrictions started to lift. Coifin O'Reilly, executive manager, North City, is heading the taskforce but an interview request was turned down by the council. "We do not have anyone available for this interview," a press officer told *Review*.

The council suffered another contentious week when it was reported that it had recommended rezonings in the draft Dublin City Development Plan maps without councillors' knowledge.

Independent councillor Damien O'Farrell uncovered the executive's actions.

"The maps included over 100 amendments and they weren't highlighted to us," he said at a meeting of city councillors on Monday. "These maps now will go out after our meeting as our draft development plan public consultation with the implication that they are approved."

"I don't like any development taking over what is a little gem of a cultural place. The Cobblestone is an important cultural site; Merchant's Arch is important from an architectural point of view. It just wouldn't be the same if you just incorporated a pub into a hotel. It would lose that thing that made it special."

Meanwhile, Myles O'Reilly and Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin insist that the mobilisation of people opposed to hotel-building at the expense of culture is only beginning.

O'Reilly believes the fight to preserve Dublin's cultural venues is his generation's Wood Quay — a reference to the high-profile protests in the late 1970s centred on Dublin Corporation's plans to build its headquarters at the location of one of Europe's most significant Viking sites.

"There's a lot more voices now that are being heard and many of them are musicians with 30,000 followers on Twitter," he says.

"Maybe we can make a difference, maybe decisions that would have a long-lasting impact on Dublin can be changed.

"There's anger and frustration out there. We're going nowhere."

Backlash: Protests at plans for the redevelopment of The Cobblestone in Smithfield, Dublin. Photo by Damien Storan/PA

About 2,000 hotel rooms were due to be completed in 2021, followed by 1,600 next year and 800 in 2023. This is an increase of about 50pc on the number delivered from 2018 to 2020

in Dublin at the moment. Dublin is having trouble getting people to come to the existing hotels. There was a shortage of [hotel] space years ago, but that's not the case now."

The councillor is frustrated with the role developers continue to have in Irish life.

"They are like lemmings," he says. "They latch on to an idea and they all follow each other. A few years ago it was student accommodation and they were all building student accommodation. Now they want to change over that accommodation to Airbnb. Then they have build-to-rent, which leads to a transient population because all the people are renters. Then you've co-living. They follow the fad. And the fad at the moment is that hotels are where you put your money in."

Costello believes there are more than enough hotels in the north inner city. Dublin City Council had ruled against the building of a hotel on Capel Street on the basis that there was an over-concentration of them in the area, but the decision was overturned by An Bord Pleanála last month.

"Rather than hotels, I want to see more emphasis on getting indigenous footfall into the city centre and bolstering the historical and cultural aspects of it," Costello says. "I'd like the focus to be on Dublin becoming an attractive place, firstly, for our population and then for tourists. We have to put down roots and the problem with a lot of the development we're seeing in Dublin militates against putting down roots, especially for families. There are no family-friendly units being built at the moment."

Costello says he is heartened by the public's response to the Cobblestone and Merchant's Arch plans.

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Culture

GEORGE HAMILTON 'I NEVER PLANNED THOSE LINES... YOU WANT TO BE SPONTANEOUS'

Interview

John Meagher



As he publishes a memoir that takes its title from his famous quote before David O'Leary's penalty at Italia 90, the veteran broadcaster talks about his segregated Belfast upbringing, why he missed out on a career as a footballer and how players' attitudes have changed

George Hamilton has been commentating at matches for the best part of half a century. He reckons he has covered thousands of games and has long lost count of the number of stadiums where he has worked. Yet, at 71, he says he never takes his good fortune for granted.

He will be in the commentary box at the Aviva Stadium for Ireland's sell-out World Cup qualifier against Portugal on Thursday and seems as giddily excited about the prospect as he was when he first broadcast from the ground — then simply Lansdowne Road — 48 years ago.

"It's something I get great pleasure from," he says, over the course of a long conversation in a north Co Dublin hotel. "Just because you're commentating doesn't mean you can't absolutely enjoy the game and everything that goes with it. And a full house at the Aviva after the couple of years we've just had — it will feel special."

Hamilton's soft Belfast brogue has long been part of the fabric of the Irish experience — for sport lovers, at least. It's his words that have added spice to some of our greatest sporting occasions and now, after initially resisting the idea, he has written a memoir. *The Nation Holds its Breath* is beautifully and engagingly written — no surprise to anyone who reads his long-running classical music column in *Review*.

The book, Hamilton says, "gestated" during lockdown. "I thought it might be more straightforward than it turned out to be," he says. "But when I started, a Pandora's box opened up, especially about my early life."

Hamilton was given carte blanche to write what he wanted and he was keen for a large chunk of the book to centre on growing up in a Protestant family in east Belfast.

"The city was pretty segregated," he says. "The estate where I grew up would have had former [military] servicemen. My father was in the Royal Air Force but he never saw active service because of a dodgy knee.

"There was only one Catholic family on our street at the time, the Devlins — it was just an aspect of the times. It was only when I went to university that I met my first Catholic friend, Tom Egan."

He says his sense of Britishness was "fuzzy", especially when noting that the Northern Irish football team was simply known as 'Ireland' until the mid-1950s. "You were always aware that you were Irish — you certainly weren't English — but that sense of Britishness was evident in the fact that any newspaper that came into the house was from there and not the Republic. But there weren't blue, white and red kerbstones where we lived."

Although his voice would be synonymous with some of the blue-riband moments in Irish sport — that penalty shoot-out against Romania in the 1990 World Cup, Ray Houghton's marvellous goal against Italy in Giants Stadium four years later — he knew little of the Republic in his formative years.

"It only became significant when we got a car. This [the Republic] was where you went on holiday. I remember our next-door neighbours heading off on a road trip — they came back with two cats, Dingle and Kerry. In those days, when you crossed the Border in a vehicle you got what they called a triptych [a triangular pass that went in the windscreen], which said you were entitled to drive into the Republic. It was stamped at where you would cross the Border so the regular one was the crossing at the Belfast-Dublin road, but if you saw somewhere like Pettigo or Blacklion — well, these were exotic places!"

A love of sport, fostered from childhood, also provided a window into life south of the Border. "My grandfather used to buy a local paper called the *Northern Whig* — it's long done now — but for some reason it covered the League of Ireland, so on a Monday when he'd finished with it, I'd be reading about [former top-flight Dublin clubs] Transport and Drumcondra. And

I remember seeing Shamrock Rovers playing Ards when I was doing my A-Levels — and [Rovers] players like Mick Leech, Pat Courtney [the former *Irish Independent* sports editor], Mick Smith, the goalkeeper, and Bobby Gilbert, the centre forward."

Hamilton first went to Lansdowne Road in 1967 to see an international rugby game against Scotland. He was on the third team at Belfast's famed Methodist College, known as Methody, and they were in Dublin to play a match the day before.

SECOND HOME

His next visit, the following year, was more momentous. Manchester United were in town and playing the then best team in the league, Waterford. Little was Hamilton to know that the old rugby stadium, which rarely played host to football back then, would become something of a second home for him in his working life.

He is tickled by the memory. "Even though I was 18, my dad lifted me over the turnstile and I got in for free."

Just five years later, he would be back — in a professional capacity. Having long had a fascination with print journalism and broadcasting, he started to get freelance work at the BBC in Belfast. After impressing with the odd match report, he was asked to commentate on Ulster Rugby's match with Leinster. He has a vivid recollection of going to Dublin on the team bus and staying in the Shelbourne Hotel. It was the start of a lengthy innings behind the

microphone. But fate could have intervened.

Hamilton had been a fine footballer who excelled on the university team. His father, Jim, had played for Cliftonville and George could have followed his example after catching the eye of Portadown in the top flight of the Irish League.

"I had thrown myself into the football at Queen's and at the end of my second season, Gibby McKenzie [Portadown manager] wanted to sign me and I said, 'I can't because I'm going to Germany at the end of August [as part of his degree]' and he said, 'When you come back, ring me.'"

When he returned to Belfast, McKenzie was out of a job and Hamilton's semi-professional football career had ended before it began.

"It's one of those sliding-doors moments," he says. "If I had come back and Gibby had still been there, I would have undoubtedly have signed for Portadown and if I was playing for them with a sniff of getting in the first team, I would have stayed playing football and this" — his broadcasting career — "might never have happened."

Hamilton was involved in the launch of BBC Radio Ulster in 1975, where he and Gloria Hunniford were the original presenters, but he was also getting freelance work with RTE. He could scarcely believe it in 1978 when the national broadcaster offered him the chance to join their commentary team at the World Cup in Argentina.

"My first memory of the World Cup is watch-

ing the 1958 tournament [which featured Northern Ireland] and here I was, 20 years later, and I'm actually at the gig. I remember it like it was yesterday — the canary blue of Brazil's shirts, the noise, the atmosphere, the fact that the police wore fatigues, rather than uniforms."

Hamilton moved permanently to RTE in 1979 and, although there would be a further stint with the BBC in the mid-1980s, he has been in Montrose ever since.

He has a special place in his heart for Euro 88, Ireland's first appearance in a major tournament. Not only was it an opportunity to commentate on matches that would be watched by record audiences back home, but he would also get to reacquaint himself for a period in a country, Germany, that had been formative in his university years, and ensured he never got to sign for Portadown.

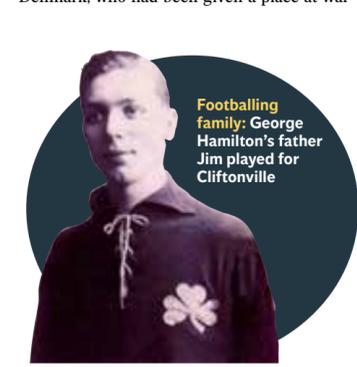
Ireland's maiden appearance at the 1990 World Cup would see him delivering his most famous line. "The nation holds its breath," he said, his voice pitched with excitement as David O'Leary stood up to take the penalty that would send the team to a quarter final with hosts Italy. The veteran defender duly delivered. "We're there!" Hamilton exclaimed, as the country went delirious.

"I never planned those lines in advance," he says. "You want to be as spontaneous as possible." Several of Hamilton's best-known phrases have long been celebrated and one of them,

'Even though I was 18, my dad lifted me over the turnstile and I got in to Lansdowne Road for free'

"Danger here!" — oft uttered in those moments when it looks as though Ireland will concede — is the name of a playful website that collects distinguished phrases from commentators and pundits.

The Jack Charlton years coincided with Irish football's golden age. "So many special memories for everyone," Hamilton recalls. He believes 1992 was the one that got away. Had the country qualified for that year's Euros, "they could have won it, I really believe that". In the end, it was Denmark, who had been given a place at war-



Footballing family: George Hamilton's father Jim played for Cliftonville



Early days: George Hamilton and Gloria Hunniford launching BBC Radio Ulster in 1975; and below, in the BBC Sportsound studio with colleagues Joy Williams and Ira Milligan



'They could have won it': George Hamilton at the Aviva Stadium, where he will be commentating as Ireland play Portugal next week. He believes the 1992 Euros was the one that got away for Ireland. Picture by Arthur Carron

was me and they came over — it was the era that they came from. They had the respect for the journalist in a way that they're not allowed to develop it now — they're so sheltered."

He believes sport has become overly commercialised and many of the gleaming stadiums don't hold a candle to what went before.

"The old Wembley was a very special place," he says. "I was doing an England game there and I took my dad with me — to the commentary box — and I remember him walking out to the gantry before me and Wembley suddenly appears before him. He'd been to the '53 FA Cup final. He turned to me — he was proud — and said, 'I wish I'd brought my camera.'"

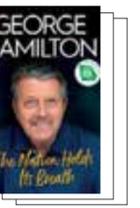
Retirement isn't something that Hamilton has given much thought, even when he suffered heart trouble a decade ago.

"I got a letter from Bill [O'Herlihy, the late presenter of RTE's football coverage] who had had a bypass in 1984 and he told me that his specialist said he could either become a cardiac cripple or a cardiac survivor." Hamilton, like O'Herlihy, chose the latter.

"I feel great now," he says. "I would have been back with the cardiologist every six months at the start and now it's every year. I took more exercise. My situation was not a heart attack — it was a rupture of the valve. It was like blowing a gasket, so it was a mechanical thing as opposed to requiring stents or anything like that."

He likes to keep busy. He has been a presenter at RTE's classical station, Lyric, for 18 years — a role he adores — and he has filed more than 800 columns for this newspaper. He plays the piano — his wife, Linda, bought him a baby grand. Big sporting occasions loom on the horizon — and he is determined to be there, his words flowing, his voice rising in excitement.

● *The Nation Holds its Breath* is published by Irish Academic Press. It has been nominated for Sports Book of the Year at the An Post Irish Book Awards.



PABLO LARRAÍN 'THE MORE YOU TRY TO UNDERSTAND DIANA, THE LESS YOU KNOW'

Interview
Paul Whittington



The Chilean director on his new film *Spencer*, which stars Kristen Stewart as the princess in crisis, and how his mother inspired its making

At a key moment in Pablo Larraín's nightmarish melodrama *Spencer*, Princess Di (Kristen Stewart) gets lost on her way to Sandringham. It's Christmas 1991, and she has been summoned for the royal holiday celebrations, a gruelling three-day round of pheasant hunts and seven-course meals — no joke if you happen to be a bulimic animal-lover.

Diana gets lost, despite the fact that she grew up next door to Sandringham, so she parks the old MG outside a roadside café and goes inside to ask for directions. Like one of those moments in a western where the gunslinger enters a saloon, heads turn and the room falls silent, as 'commoners' stare open-mouthed, overawed by the presence of Britain's tabloid celebrity number one. Fame is a terrible thing.

Celebrity is one of the themes of *Spencer*, which portrays Diana as a caged bird suffocated by a loveless marriage and meaningless royal traditions, who is preparing to fly the coop. Even if she does, a normal life will forever be impossible for her, as banks of snapping cameras will follow her wherever she goes. And though she might live in palaces and shop at Harrods, Larraín's Diana is living proof that you can be miserable in just about any circumstance.

Larraín is one of the most talented and original directors working in cinema today: in films such as *Tony Manero*, *Post Mortem*, *No* and *The Club*, he has robustly addressed the historic crimes of state and church in his native Chile. The travails of a pampered princess might seem an odd choice for the director, but it's all his mother's fault, apparently.

"Diana is a universal myth," he tells me, "which just became part of the world's narrative, but my mother was very interested in her when I was small, and that was probably my first introduction to it all. Then I grew up and I realised that there were millions and millions around the world who were just as fascinated

as my mother, and I became very curious to try and understand why.

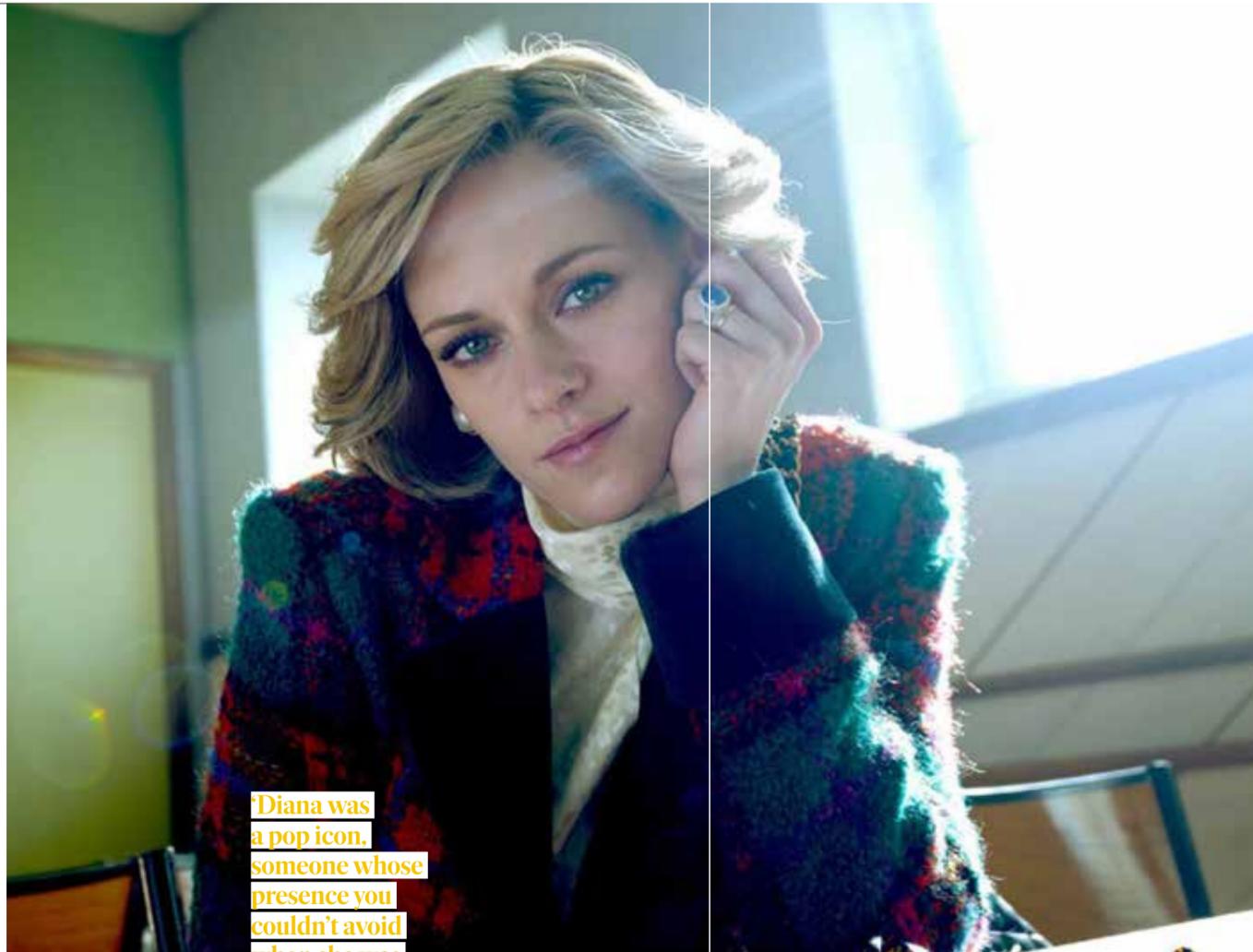
"But after extensive research, seeing pretty much everything that's been made about her for film or television, reading countless books and articles, you name it, and even after making the movie, I really don't think I completely understand who Diana was. It's a huge mystery, and in a way, the more you find out, the less you know. And that mystery, I guess, is what makes a movie possible."

As Larraín puts it, the film "flirts with different genres", and what begins as a lush psychological drama soon takes on tinges of melodrama, dark thriller, even haunted house horror. Cleverly, its action is confined to a stressful three-day sojourn at Sandringham, during which Diana's inner turmoil will reach boiling point. Bullied by underlings, ignored by her husband, told what to do and which dress to wear at every moment, she stares longingly out the window at the wider world which, until now, has been denied to her.

'JAILBREAK MOVIE'

"I think you're able to understand a person better when they're going through difficult times," Pablo explains. "The way they react, the things they do in crisis, reveal who they are, and so we decided with Steve Knight [the writer] to compress this into three days, and then throw in the idea of, what if she's breaking up with Charles? It seemed a great starting point to have that bird in the cage, as you put it, and then eventually she escapes, so in a way we thought of it as a jailbreak movie."

Relieving the movie's relentless tension are the fleeting moments Diana spends with her young sons William and Harry, playing games, giving them jokey presents, and engaging lovingly with the boys. "In my experience," Larraín says, "I only get to understand the kind of movie I want to make, and its real motivation, while I'm making it. We shot during lockdown,



'Diana was a pop icon, someone whose presence you couldn't avoid when she was alive, even if you wanted to'

so the two boys who were playing William and Harry would often be around on set even when they weren't in the scene. It was fun having them there, they were great for lots of reasons, and it also helped Kristen get close to them, which was important for the film. But watching them interact, I was reminded of my own experiences with my mother, and I realised that those scenes are what makes the movie more universal."

It would be easy to characterise Diana's non-compliance with royal etiquette as petulance: after all, palace life with all its privileges hardly seems a penance. But as we see in *Spencer*, Diana at heart was a relatively normal girl, who liked Duran Duran and disco dancing, shopping for clothes, going to clubs. Instead, she was forced to endure the strictures and endless arcane rules of royal life. In the film, she is weighed when she reaches Sandringham, and again when leaving, part of a Christmas tradition intended to prove that guests have enjoyed the festivities by packing on the pounds.

Poor Diana will puke most of her food down the toilet, and race howling down the mansion's endless corridors, desperate for a means of escape. And at one point she becomes so overwhelmed that she glimpses Anne Boleyn's ghost, who urges her to make a bolt for it.

"If you think about it," Larraín says, "the royals are trapped in the worlds of history and tradition, and they're there to perpetuate it all, that's their job, they're there to occupy a role. That same role has been occupied by others, Anne Boleyn among them, and they're just

expected to fulfil this role and live their lives in front of others. So if you're born into that situation, or marry into it, it might seem like a fairy tale at first but it might become a nightmare. And the story does operate as a kind of fable, doesn't it? That's how we thought about it from the start."

There are aspects of horror also, which he acknowledges. "It's funny, I've been asked in interviews about the movie's relationship with films like *The Shining*, and other horror films. We've been asked about *The Shining* a lot, and obviously for me as a film-maker that film is very important, but I didn't really look at it [that way], and it wasn't a straightforward reference. The movie that we saw more was *Barry Lyndon*. Tone and style-wise it's different, but there are things in common, and we discussed with Kristen also *A Woman Under the Influence* from [John] Cassavetes."

Spencer is not the first film Larraín has made about a cultural icon. In 2016, he released *Jackie*, an almost unbearably tense drama starring Natalie Portman as Jackie Kennedy as she negotiates her way through the immediate aftermath of her husband's assassination.

"I've made other movies that deal with real people," he says, "and once you understand that whatever you portray will never be that person, it makes you feel freer, it frees you from the conventions of whatever our culture understands as biopics. I don't think a biopic is actually possible, and I don't think what I've done is a biopic, I think it's more of an anti-biopic, a little slice of someone's life that might cre-



'Diana is a universal myth': Director Pablo Larraín



Preparing to fly the coop: Kristen Stewart plays Diana in the film as she deals with her loveless marriage and meaningless royal traditions

**Theatre
Katy Hayes**



Blockbuster: Callan Cummins, Kate Gilmore, Derbhle Crotty, Colin Campbell and Emmet Kirwan in *Straight to Video*. Photo by Patrick Redmond

Video shop drama rewinds to the 90s to deliver plenty of laughs

Emmet Kirwan, playing Tallaght video store owner Barry in his own new play, is wearing Speedos in a brightly lit cupboard. It takes a few minutes to figure out that he is in a stand-up sunbed inside his shop.

Barry is having a midlife crisis. He has left his wife and is sleeping in the security room, cruising girls and applying suntan lotion to himself in moments of daft vanity. A gangster called Coach (Stephen Brennan) lures Barry into a dodgy video-pirating enterprise. Once a chink appears in his morality, Coach exploits this to drag Barry into deeper criminal waters.

Kirwan's writing is cartoonish-funny and his characterisation is second to none. A community-led campaign against heroin pushers is in full swing on the streets outside. It appears we are in the land of the workplace drama; so far, so Billy Roche. We are transported sociologically and dramaturgically back to the 1990s.

Good as the first half is, the second takes off like a rocket. The inspired arrival of Denise (Derbhle Crotty doing a glamorous turn as an oracle figure in stiletto boots) alters the tone and catapults the play into the realm of theatrical magic. There are several first-rate verbal firecracker exchanges as the action heats up.

Straight to Video

The Civic, Tallaght; Project Arts Centre, Dublin until tonight at Civic, Nov 9–Dec 11 at PAC

Director Phillip McMahon steers the ship gracefully, while keeping the pace fast and the energy high. All the performances shine: Kate Gilmore and Colin Campbell are the insouciant shop workers. She a proto-socialist, he a closeted gay man on a journey — both very funny. Callan Cummins makes a big impact as the oddball hanger-on nephew who adores the movies. And Lloyd Cooney, one of Coach's henchmen, is a hard thug with a soft side. Kirwan himself in the central anti-hero role is outstanding.

Designer Grace Smart emphasises the comedy with a bright palette for her shop interior, whilst the positioning of street lamps and corrugated fences are a nod to the rougher outside world.

Producer Anne Clarke, for Landmark Productions in association with The Civic and Project Arts Centre, has spotted a real winner here. This invented world is clever, exciting and funny, but an essential sweetness in the creative energy is also hugely comforting. Just what audiences need at this time.

Gay farmer tries to cultivate a relationship

This new monologue play by Chris Kelly is a subtle piece, moving delicately along a low-key trajectory. Eoin O'Sullivan plays an only son growing up on a farm in Kerry. When a handsome blonde Latvian man, Alexander, comes to work briefly on the farm, our lonely young farmer becomes aware that he is gay.

He has never met a gay man, cannot imagine a future as a gay man, and doesn't see the point in coming out to his parents. His father will simply fret about who the farm will be passed on to. His parents die within a few years of each other, and he finally embarks on an attempt to find love with the help of a dating app.

The play is dependent on an accumulation of poignancy for its drama, as the now 34-year-old man prepares himself to go on a date with someone he has connected to

Twenty Minutes From Nowhere

Bewley's Café Theatre until Nov 20

online. He is both excited and terrified as he awaits his date, and these moments of vulnerability are well explored. But yearning, as a dramatic ingredient, is tricky to handle; it always carries the danger of being inert.

Opportunities to explore deeper issues of personal growth are missed. The writing is heartfelt, but we never get any real sense of why this man is so lacking in personal drive. Co-directors Martha Fitzgerald and Kelly create thoughtful mood shifts with simple lighting changes. But as an investigation into a rural Irish lonely gay life, this farmer doesn't dig deep enough.

Marital cracks: Princess Diana and Prince Charles during their Canadian tour in October 1991. Pablo Larraín's *Spencer* follows over the Christmas of that year

avoid when she was alive, even if you wanted to. Most of us would have a perception of her, an idea of what she was like, so we complete and finish the operation of the movie through our own perceptions, and that's the best thing a film can do, I think."

When we spoke in London, Larraín was preparing to screen the film for a very influential critic: his mother.

"Yeah, back when we started I said, 'Look mom, I'm making a movie — and I really hope that you like it', and my brother produced the film so we were both saying 'This is for you mom!'. Then we went to the Venice [film] festival and she read some reviews, and she said to us, 'What are you doing? Why did you make a movie about Diana that has a ghost in it?' And I said, 'Mom — look, you've been cutting your hair like her for 40 years, you've been wearing clothes just like hers, let me tell you that's the scary thing, not the ghost'. And she was like OK, show me the movie."

We hope she likes it.

● *Spencer* is in cinemas now



ListenUp
with John Meagher

ALBUM OF THE WEEK

Abba
Voyage

Polydor
One of pop's most unexpected comebacks has yielded an album that Abba fans could only dream of. The winning sounds of the past have not been tampered with, so *Don't Shut Me Down* is a Scandi-disco delight, while *Just a Notion* — which pairs

Agnetha and Frida's vocals from 1978 with contemporary instrumentation — is rooted in the *schlager* tradition that Abba emerged from. There's high-tempo pop, bewitching balladry and some hokey fare too — the latter represented by the Kilkenny-referencing faux-Celtic *When You Danced With Me*. The good stuff is great, but Abba haters won't be converted.



ROCK
The War on Drugs
I Don't Live Here Anymore

Atlantic
It's been a steady build for Adam Granduciel over the past decade or so, each album burnishing his band's reputation that bit more. Detractors thumb their nose at the Philadelphian's Springsteen

and Petty fixations, but this is heartland rock with soul. Guitars and emotions are to the fore on this fifth outing, not least on the propulsive, Dylan-referencing title track — one of the great songs of 2021. *Harmonia's Dream* tugs hard on the heart strings while *Rings Around My Father's Eyes* is a melancholy meditation on getting older and making peace with that.



SINGER-SONGWRITER
Ed Sheeran
=

Atlantic
The unfathomably popular English troubadour dropped his latest album without warning last weekend, sending his fans into squeals of excitement. The groans from the critics are just as loud, though — *Equals* (every album is named after a

mathematical symbol) doesn't stray far from Sheeran's bland template. There's polished production, a surefire knack with melody and a rare gift for saying precious little. New fatherhood preoccupies him on a number of songs, but it's his declaration of love to wife Cherry Seaborn on *First Times* that's particularly wince-inducing.



Music
John Meagher

FERGUS O'FARRELL MUSIC MADE ON BORROWED BREATH

New film *Breaking Out* documents the life of this determined Irish talent, who was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at a young age but never let his disability get in the way of his creative output

It is a scene that sears itself into the mind. Fergus O'Farrell, the musician from west Cork who has spent most of his life battling muscular dystrophy, is at home, in a makeshift studio, trying to sing. He is sitting in a wheelchair and struggling to draw breath, so one of the musicians who is helping him make an album, Glen Hansard, starts to blow air into his lungs through a rubber pipe. It is O'Farrell's idea and each breath that the Frames frontman puts into his lungs helps him sing for a few seconds. There's huge effort involved — and, in truth, the whole thing looks very strange, when viewed with Covid-tinted lenses — but it's borrowed breath that allows him to compete the album.

It is an especially potent moment from the feature-length documentary film *Breaking Out*, which tells the remarkable story of O'Farrell and his band, Interference. Five years after his death at 48, the film is finally getting a post-pandemic cinema release. Years in the making, it lifts the lid on one of the great talents in Irish music history — a musician's musician who never quite got the mainstream acclaim his talent deserved.

Michael McCormack, *Breaking Out's* director, became acquainted with O'Farrell's music in his middle teen years. "I saw Interference play one of the shows connected with Self Aid," he says of the 1986 fundraising gigs, the most famous of which was held at the RDS.

"Bands that were playing in Ireland at the time were quite similar and then this band came on the stage had swagger and confidence and this guy standing at the mic with that looked like a rock-star pose. I found out later it was the way he had to stand because of the muscular

dystrophy. They raised the bar for me — and I started following them around then."

Interference, a floating cast of musicians centred on O'Farrell, released just one album in their first coming — a self-titled album, in 1995. Although critically acclaimed, it barely sold in a musical landscape fixated on Britpop. O'Farrell, who had put a decade of his work into the album, was dejected and stepped away from the scene. McCormack's film zeroes in on the point some years later when his desire to make music returns strongly, despite his health being in slow, debilitating decline.

Breaking Out does what all music films intend to do: send the viewer scurrying back to the music, or begin a first-time investigation. That's certainly what McCormack hopes. "He left a lot of great songs behind," he says. "I envy anyone coming to them for the first time."

BRUTAL PROGNOSIS
O'Farrell was eight when he was diagnosed with the disease. His parents had been concerned that something was wrong when he just didn't seem to have the energy of other kids. News of his illness was delivered brutally. A consultant told his mother — with young Fergus sitting next to her — that he would be in a wheelchair by 12 and dead by 18. The latter point of information was conveyed with a click of the doctor's fingers.

That he lived a full three decades longer than that prognosis is a sign not only of his own lust for life, but also the huge support of his family and friends.

It was while a boarder at the fee-paying Clongowes Wood College in Co Kildare that O'Farrell fostered a passion for music. Rugby may be



Passion for music: Fergus O'Farrell and Glen Hansard on stage. Photo by Denise Foley

'This was a huge ego trapped in a limited physical body. What he was able to put through from his lungs into his throat was pure freedom'

the school's stock in trade, but he found like-minded culture lovers there and, soon, Interference were born.

The group made an impact on the Dublin music scene at the time, with Glen Hansard — then honing his trade by busking on Grafton Street — among those bewitched by early performances. "I looked up to Ferg all my adult life," Hansard says in the film. "I revered his band and his songs."

BB King was also taken with the singer and his impassioned delivery. Both were guests on an RTE television programme and afterwards the blues veteran told O'Farrell: "You've got a lot of living in that voice — for such a young man."

His disability — which ensured that most gigs were performed sitting down — did not appear to adversely affect the Interference experience. "This is a huge ego trapped in a limited physical body," Hansard says, "and, yet, what he was able to put through from his lungs into his throat was pure freedom."

O'Farrell's father had owned the old Winstanley shoe factory in Dublin's Liberties and the abandoned building served as both a place to live —

part of it was converted into a flat — and a large rehearsal space. Several emerging bands in 1980s Dublin, such as Hothouse Flowers, went there to rehearse and O'Farrell was the glue that bound many musicians of different hues together.

While his contemporaries all recorded albums quickly, O'Farrell obsessed over his music. A perfectionist, he struggled to accept when a song was finished, much to the frustration of his bandmates.

The muscular dystrophy's remorseless march truly started to take its toll after he left Dublin in the late 1990s, and when he moved back home to Schull with his Chinese wife and former nurse, Meng Li. One day, the disease reached to such a degree that he could no longer play the guitar — it was, he says in the film, "like a bereavement".

Guitarist Paul Tiernan stepped into the breach. "I felt like I was his hands," he says. "I was always a fan of Fergus and the band and Fergus said, 'I can't really play any more — do you want to play what I play?' I said I'd love to.

Documentary: Director Michael McCormack and Glen Hansard at a screening of *Breaking Out* at The Gate, Cork. Photo by John Allen/Provision

(Below) Fergus with his wife Meng Li in Times Square, New York



in the early 90s in Whelan's. For me, it was all about his voice, his way of interpreting a lyric and when he sang, I was never aware of his disability because of the power of his singing."

O'Farrell's voice was remarkable right up to the end and can be heard on the second Interference album, *The Sweet Spot*, which was released in 2017, a year after his death.

On paper, *Breaking Out* sounds like a maudlin, downbeat film, but the result is quite the opposite.

There's a joie de vivre at its heart. Despite the many setbacks, Fergus O'Farrell did achieve significant recognition while still alive.

Glen Hansard is pivotal to that.

Not only did he shepherd *The Sweet Spot* to completion but he also was instrumental in ensuring that one of O'Farrell's great songs, *Gold*, would appear in the John Carney film *Once*. The song is central to the celebrated musical adaptation too.

As a result of *Once's* unexpected success, Interference got to play Radio City Music Hall, the support act to The Swell Season, Hansard's band with Markéta Irglová, his Czech co-star in *Once*.

Maurice Seezer was on stage with him that night.

"It was a very special moment," he says, and the gig at the fabled Manhattan venue gives *Breaking Out* its emotional core.

"You can see the joy in Fergus having played that stage and we all witnessed the joy in seeing one of his songs achieve the success that it did. He knew then that there would be some significance to his career."

● *Breaking Out* is at selected cinemas from November 19. *Interference* play the Sugar Club, Dublin, on November 12. *Cyprus Avenue, Cork, on November 14 and Monroe's, Galway, on November 17.*

Classic Talk
George Hamilton



Cult figure: Erik Satie set up his own sect with only himself as a member

Erik Satie, the eccentric who invented background music

The Frenchman believed his compositions should be part of the furniture, despite his distinctive piano style

To say that Erik Satie was something of an eccentric would be stating the obvious. The composer did things very much his own way. Born in Normandy in 1866, part Scottish through his mother, and given the names Eric Alfred Leslie, by the time he was 20, he had taken to styling himself Erik in the European way.

A reluctant student, described as the laziest in his class at the conservatory, he tried the military but didn't fancy that either, engineering a discharge on medical grounds.

His talent as a pianist kept him afloat with a residency at a cabaret club. But though this kept the wolf from the door, and brought him a public for the music he composed, it wasn't what he wanted at all, and he would later describe what he wrote during this period as crude rubbish.

He dabbled in religion, even setting up his own sect at one point, though it never got beyond a single member — himself.

He kitted himself out with seven identical nondescript corduroy suits, one for each day of the week, so that he could save himself the trouble each morning of deciding what to wear.

He would walk everywhere, carrying a hammer with him — for protection, he said. When he got home, he would shut the door and refuse any visitors. There were just two rooms in his apartment, one of which was always locked. And there was a piano he never played.

Then there were the umbrellas. He would often be seen carrying one (along with the hammer), but when it rained, he would never put it up, preferring to keep it dry under his overcoat. It turned out he had an absolute hoard of them. And handkerchiefs. Nobody knew anything about this. It was only after

he died that hundreds upon hundreds were found in his shabby apartment, most of them still in their original wrapping.

Satie's eccentricity filled his output as well. Like his friend Claude Debussy, whose music could be described as the melodic equivalent of an impressionist painting, Satie ventured off down avenues not yet explored.

He came up with two distinct styles of piano piece, easily recognisable, which he styled *gymnopédie* and *gnossienne*, though nobody really has any idea what either description actually means.

He put forward the notion that music shouldn't actually be listened to, it should just be there. You could say he was the inventor of background music. Satie had a term for it — *musique d'ameublement*, literally music as part of the furniture.

He was serious enough about what he was doing to give studying another try, signing up for a course at music school just short of his 40th birthday.

He was getting famous. Ironically, this led to something of an estrangement from Debussy, who had orchestrated two of his *gymnopédies*, and had become jealous of how well they had been received. Maybe he had done too good a job.

The three *gymnopédies* and the experimental *gnossiennes* that followed — contemplative and free-flowing — offer Satie the eccentric at his very best. The romantic cabaret song *Je Te Veux* shows an altogether more conventional composer at work. Art for art's sake, but the eccentric had his bills to pay too.

● George Hamilton presents *'The Hamilton Scores'* on RTE lyric fm from 10am each Saturday and Sunday.

GRIEFCAST STARS SHARE STORIES OF LOST LOVED ONES



Podcast of the week
Tony Clayton-Lea

Comedian Cariad Lloyd goes some way to taking the shock out of death in her candid conversations with guests including Marian Keyes, Stephen Mangan and Aisling Bea

Not many people like talking about death, let alone thinking about it. Yet it remains as much a part of, well, life as anything else we experience. In the past 20 months, of course, grief has become a far more open topic of conversation, with daily figures presented to us as part of our normal diet of national and international news.

Hosted by British comedian Cariad Lloyd, *Griefcast* is a long-established podcast that has gone some way to ameliorating the shock of death. It began in November 2016 with Lloyd interviewing friends and colleagues from comedy and the media about loved ones they had lost. Her primary aim, she says, was to start a conversation that, when it finished, didn't make you feel even more miserable.

"We're all in this club that no one asked to join," she notes in the podcast introduction, "and it's really helpful when you realise there's other people in the club. Part of grief is feeling quite isolated, so when you realise, 'Oh, it's not just me,' it does help."

The multiple award-winning podcast, now in its eighth season, initially had Lloyd in conversation with comedians such as Adam Buxton and David Baddiel but has latterly broadened its range of guests to feature actors (Stephen Mangan, Robert Webb, Gemma Whelan, Aisling Bea, Olivia Williams), writers (Dawn O'Porter, Emer McLysaght, Marian Keyes) and musicians (Ana Matronic, Amanda Palmer). Despite focusing on just one topic, however, what surprises is not only how different each person's story is, but also how they tell it.

"Who are we remembering today?" is Lloyd's opening question. An adroit interviewer whose sympathy and empathy are intuitive and realistic (and who leaves professional analysis at the door), she leaves the question to be answered in numerous ways.

There is, thankfully, no script here, just natural conversation, punctuated by genial inquiries that



Emotional weight: *Griefcast* host Cariad Lloyd

Lloyd makes the point that in Irish families, especially, death isn't hidden away

allow memories to flow. During her conversation with comedian/actor Stephen Mangan (whose roots are rural Irish), Lloyd makes the point that in Irish families, especially, death isn't hidden away. "Whoever was around at the house," says Mangan, recalling the time of his mother's death in her mid-40s, "just stayed for dinner. There would be laughter and giggling."

Lloyd admits that she has spoken to a number of Irish people for the podcast "because they're so willing to talk about it, and they're so comfortable with it."

Such openness is what makes conversations with the likes of Marian Keyes and Aisling Bea as much emotional as instructive. Keyes talks about the slow death of her dad, Ted, referring

to the Emily Dickinson poem, *Tell all the Truth but Tell it Slant*: "The Truth must dazzle gradually".

The conversation with Bea, meanwhile, revolves around a different kind of death — her father's suicide when she was three. "Zero craic," she says, in an understandably jokey way, but the remainder of the chat is undercut by an acute self-awareness and no small emotional weight.

Across the episodes — there are more than 150, most about an hour long — *Griefcast's* balance of lightheartedness, bravely articulated despair and human resilience is pitched not always perfectly but with efficiency.



Television
Chris Wasser

Who was Diego Armando Maradona? Everyone knows the legend. The beautiful game was a lot more beautiful whenever a ball was at the miraculous feet of Argentina's golden boy, who died last November, aged 60.

You've seen the goals. You know how this plays out — what happened when his extracurricular activities got the better of him. That's the real drama, and there was plenty of it. But a decent biographical series — especially one with Amazon money behind it — should push harder and at least try to shine a light on the people behind the stories. Is *Maradona: Blessed Dream* (Amazon Prime) that series? Not quite.

We shouldn't ignore the challenges. For a start, casting was always going to be an issue. How the hell do you find someone to accurately portray one of the finest athletes in history? To be fair to writer/director Alejandro Aimetta and his team, they have at least discovered a way to divvy up the hard work by hiring not one, not two, but three different actors — and a capable child performer — to carry the load. From what we've seen, most of them know their way around a pitch. The other obstacle, of course, is that football films and TV shows (aside from *Ted Lasso*, obviously) rarely work. How come? Dunno. They just always end up looking silly, don't they?

How ironic, then, that one of the best things about *Blessed Dream* is its atmospheric game sequences. It's everything else that lets the side down. We begin in the latter stages of Maradona's life when, after a particularly wild night with close mates and dodgy acquaintances, our man with the golden touch (portrayed by Juan Palomino) collapses outside his home and ends up in hospital.

To understand how he got here, *Blessed Dream* takes us back to Villa Fiorito where, as a young boy, Diego dreamt of turning things around, not just for himself, but his entire family.

There is a lot going on in here. Aimetta's series arms itself with an epic, 10-hour running time — and still, it flies through the important stuff. There is no explanation for why or, indeed, how young Diego is good with a ball. He just



MARADONA DRAMA MISSES THE TARGET

The new Amazon Prime series on the life of the troubled Argentinian soccer legend has some decent individual performances but fails to gel

is. At the age of nine, he is snapped up by Argentinos Juniors. At 16 (played by a decent Nicolás Goldschmidt), he has made his way into the international squad. He moves his family to a bigger home, hires his buddy to be his press agent and manager, meets, falls for and subsequently loses interest in the woman who will become his wife (Julieta Cardinali and Laura Esquivel as Claudia Villafañe) and does his best to keep his temper in check.

On the sideline, we have Diego's mother and father, without whom he would be nothing. In the background, we have a country torn apart by right-wing death squads. Remember, Maradona's ascent to global superstardom occurred at a

time when military forces in Argentina hunted people down if they so much as looked the wrong way. *Blessed Dream*, then, operates as a sort of earnest docudrama/historical thriller/flat and soapy reconstruction. And that, I'm afraid, is indicative of its biggest problem: it has no idea what to do with itself.

On a basic storytelling level, it's all over the shop. Filmed on location in Argentina and Uruguay, *Blessed Dream* shifts recklessly through the Maradona timeline, flipping back and forth with nary a hint of regard for momentum or structure. That's a shame, because the performances are tight and there are some neat ideas in the mix. It's a messy business, then,

The three Diegos: Nazareno Casero as one of a trio of stars in the title role in *Maradona: Blessed Dream*

and one that leaves us with more questions than we had going into it. Will it get better? Maybe. I'm currently on episode four, and Diego hasn't yet signed for Napoli (he's just now developing a taste for the outrageous things in life). Have we learned anything of any real value? Not yet. Is Asif Kapadia's operatic documentary (also available on Prime) still the best Maradona show in town? You betcha.

UNINTENTIONAL HORROR Speaking of outrageous, did you hear the one about the "sex-positive puppets" who joined forces with a rap superstar (Saweetie) and a bunch of comedians to make the worst show of 2021? Yep. **Sex: Unzipped** (Netflix) has to be seen to be believed.

What's it about? Sex. What does it involve? Well, there are masturbating puppets, penis teddies, somatic sexologists, a visibly uncomfortable host, lots of comedians (including Romesh Ranganathan and Katherine Ryan) telling jokes that aren't funny, ghastly musical sequences and... are you still with me?

Think *Muppets Gone Wild/Sesame Street After Dark*. Now, remove the charm, wit and everything else that makes those enterprises so special. Yep. *Sex: Unzipped* bills itself as a "late night comedy" but is more of an unintentional horror. Honestly, it is so staggeringly awful that I am genuinely mortified for anyone who had a hand in its creation. There is a puppet pun in there if you fancy tackling it.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have Alex Fegan's admirable documentary **The Irish Wedding** (RTÉ One). It is a fly-on-the-wall account of eight Irish weddings — filmed throughout the pandemic — that, when pieced together, form a sweet, funny, diverse and well-intentioned portrait of traditional and contemporary Irish nuptials.

The film cleverly captures the essence and joy of each celebration, but — and I don't say this often — it could stand to be a little longer. At the minute, it resembles a lovingly crafted group wedding video. But if Fegan had dug a little deeper, thrown in some context, tidied up the editing and made real characters out of its participants, it could have been something really special.

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Radio CHILLS AND THRILLS IN THE DARKEST CORNERS OF FREAKY MUSIC

Darragh McManus

Halloween, as heard on **The Home Show** (Newstalk, Sun 8am), is descended in large part from the Celtic festival of Samhain.

Clodagh Doyle, keeper of the Irish Folklife Collection at the National Museum of Ireland, told Sinead Ryan that the Christian festival Halloween (a contraction of "All Hallow's Eve") followed on from Samhain.

That meant "summer's end" in Irish, as the Celts divided the year into two parts. "It's like the evening before Celtic New Year... the dark half of the year brings you from November to May," Clodagh explained.

She spoke about how the "darker days and bad weather" of winter made our ancestors "thankful for the bounty of nature, but also look for protection". And "connection to the

dead was always a strong tradition around now — people believed it was an inbetween time, when you were more in touch with the supernatural world".

Maybe this explains why Halloween is so beloved by many of us. As "festivals" go, it puts Christmas in the ha'penny place, puts Easter in the shade and even gives St Patrick's Day a good run for its money. And radio is always chock-full of — ahem — frightfully good material.

Our Celtic cousins at BBC Radio Scotland got Halloween off to a perfect start on **Classics Unwrapped** (Sun 7pm). Host Jamie MacDougall marked "summer's end" with a fine selection of spooky tunes: everything from Danny Elfman's *This is Halloween*, Philip Glass's theme for *Candyman* and Bernard Herrmann's classic music for *Psycho* — those shrieking violins still send shivers down your spine — to Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*, Carl Orff's *O Fortuna* and John Carpenter's legendary theme to the greatest

slasher movie of all, *Halloween*. Carpenter himself turned up on **Stuart Maconie's Freak Zone** (BBC Radio 6 Music, Sun 8pm) to discuss "the darkest corners of freaky music" around "two hours of creepy, eerie sounds". The playlist was madly varied and a lot of fun — not to mention genuinely unsettling at times — but the real enjoyment was Carpenter's reminiscences on making *Halloween* in 1978, and how he balanced directing with musical composition.

"There's a saying that Americans don't have second careers — I actually stumbled into one in music," he said, rather modestly. Those chilling piano chords will endure as

long as his equally great films. I also dipped back into last weekend's **Louise McSharry** (2FM, Sat-Sun 9am), which teed us up for "prime scary movie-watching time" by chatting to Dr Sarah Cleary, of Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology. She reckoned the "dark, morbid sense of humour in Ireland fits comfortably in the horror genre".

McSharry (who is *Weekend* magazine's beauty columnist) has just left 2FM, and indeed didn't present her final show this weekend. This smart, zippy, entertaining segment demonstrates that she'll be missed — one of the station's best talents.



Final show on 2FM: Louise McSharry

Books

This week's
Top10
bestsellers



1 Big Shot: Diary of a Wimpy Kid (CH)
Jeff Kinney, Puffin

2 Aisling and the City (OF)
Emer McLysaght and Sarah Breen, Gill

3 A State of Emergency (NF)
Richard Chambers, HarperCollins

4 Better Off Dead (OF)
Lee and Andrew Child, Penguin

5 Fight or Flight (NF)
Keith Earls, Reach Sport

6 Windswept and Interesting (NF)
Billy Connolly, Hachette

7 Your One Wild and Precious Life (NF)
Dr Maureen Gaffney, Penguin

8 Over My Dead Body (OF)
Jeffrey Archer, HarperCollins

9 Vetman (CH)
Noel Fitzpatrick, Hachette

10 Noni and the Great Chaaawklit Mystery (CH)
Dermot Whelan, Gill

OF Original Fiction; **NF** Non-Fiction; **PB** Paperback; **CH** Children's

CHRIS HADFIELD 'I'M ONLY FRIGHTENED WHEN I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING'

Interview
Darragh McManus



The astronaut-turned-author talks about his interplanetary thriller, his love for Ireland and how scuba-diving helped him reach space

The first time Chris Hadfield looked down at Earth from space, in November 1995, he saw Ireland. This was purely down to the vagaries of orbit — his shuttle, en route to helping build Russia's Mir space station, had launched from Cape Canaveral, flew up the Florida coast and across the Atlantic. By the time they reached orbital height, engines were shut down and Hadfield could float to the window, they were crossing over this island.

"I was looking down at Cork and Kerry," the astronaut recalls, "then across to London, then the southern half of Europe. It was overwhelmingly beautiful."

It all feels auspicious from this remove. Born in the small Canadian city of Sarnia, Hadfield has Scottish and English roots, but he has forged a deep and abiding relationship with Ireland; what he calls "a kindred spirit Irish."

In February 2013, he sent the first Irish-language tweet from space — "Tá Éire fíorálainn!" — prompting many of us to muse, "Hey, I didn't realise there was an Irish astronaut..." He has visited here many times, done the *Late Late*, and connected with space-crazy youngster Adam King, who charmed the nation on the *Toy Show*.

His daughter Kristin did her doctoral studies at Trinity College Dublin and now works as assistant professor in its school of psychology. ("It was a dream job to be able to come back around to Trinity," he says. "She and her husband love Dublin as well as anywhere on earth.")

He is talking to Review to promote his debut thriller, *The Apollo Murders*, and it is the day the death of trad music legend Paddy Moloney is announced. "I played with him many times, including from space," Hadfield says. "Such a great spirit. It's a shame."

Now living in Canada again after 26 years travelling the world (and off it), he has not been to Ireland since before Covid, but the ties remain strong. It might, he thinks, have something to do with certain similarities between the two coun-

tries: "Canada and Ireland are similar in being small, proud, capable nations next to slightly overbearing neighbours. There's a natural overlap. I love Ireland, I've been many times and am really looking forward to coming back again."

Hadfield has lived an amazing life. This is a man who learned fluent Russian so he could participate in a Soyuz mission. He also played guitar and sang David Bowie's *Space Oddity* from the International Space Station (ISS).

In conversation, he is sharp, articulate and genial, full of interesting insights into everything from the brute mechanics of "slipping the surly bonds of earth", to the innate human drive to conquer new physical and psychological frontiers, to elemental cultural differences between nations.

The latest stage in Hadfield's life less ordinary is as a novelist. He has previously written the non-fiction *Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth*, pictures-from-space book *You Are Here* and the children's title *The Darkest Dark*.

He had also, since high school, written short stories "with no ability at all." "But I enjoyed writing all of those," he says, "and now, with the experiences I've had, I thought it'd be a fascinating challenge to see if I could write a thriller."

ENTANGLED

The Apollo Murders, which "percolated in my mind for quite a while", is a very well-crafted, engaging thriller, set during a fictitious 1973 Apollo 18 moon landing (in real-life, Nixon pulled the plug after Apollo 17 in 1972). A team of US astronauts and rival USSR cosmonauts get entangled in skulduggery, geopolitics and cutting-edge technology in the frozen blackness of space.

"It's in that vein of space-age, alternative history thrillers," Hadfield explains. "It's hard sci-fi, quite factual — almost everything in the book really happened, and over half the characters are real people. That makes it fun to read: you'll recognise these people, their quirks. Things like Kissinger's strange, measured way of speaking,



'Almost everything in the book really happened, and over half the characters are real people'

I've met him actually — we chatted for a while.

"I read a lot for business reasons, and I'm in a book club which covers a lot of stuff on human-machine interfaces. But sometimes I just want an exciting thriller, with believable characters and an action-filled, suspenseful plotline that really engrosses you. And I wanted to write something like that."

Hadfield cites Frederick Forsyth's *Day of the Jackal* as one of the novel's inspirations — that's probably the closest comparison this reader would make too, which is a big compliment. He is chuffed that Forsyth, in turn, loved his book enough to give a plug for the cover ("that was surreal!").

To prep for writing, he also re-read some favourite thrillers: *Eye of the Needle* by Ken Follett, John D McDonald's Travis McGee series, Arthur Conan Doyle, Jonathan Kellerman's Alex Delaware books, Andy Weir's blockbuster *The Martian* is another favourite: Hadfield read that before its 2011 release and gave a cover testimonial; Weir in turn sings the praises of *The Apollo Murders*, as does James Cameron, director of *Aliens*, *Avatar* and *Terminator 2*, among others.

Outside writing, Hadfield runs "a big space technology incubator" as part of the non-profit Creative Destruction Lab, based in Oxford, Paris and several locations in America and Canada. He's "very happy to be living in Canada"; he and his wife Helene spent over quarter of a century in the US, Russia, London, Venezuela and "about a hundred other countries", but "always intended moving back": "It's the place I most

feel like I'm exhaling more than inhaling. There's a feeling of home."

He remembers deciding to be an astronaut in 1968, when he was nine, and "started doing what I thought I needed to do, gaining the skills to become one". Kubrick's sci-fi classic *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released that year, kindling the spark. The following summer's moon landing fanned those flames.

"That made it seem doable," Hadfield says, "the reality of those Apollo missions — what had seemed fantasy up to then. That gave me confidence it was happening, and maybe I could be part of it. I looked at the people flying in space, what they did up there. What were their backgrounds, how did they get to do those things?"

So he learned to scuba-dive at age 11 "because a lot of the training for space-walking is underwater". He joined the Canadian Air Cadets and got a glider pilot licence at 15 and powered pilot licence at 17. "I could fly airplanes legally before I could drive," he says.

He "needed a good technical education", eventually attending four different universities. Military academy led to the Air Force, where he was a combat pilot during the Cold War and test pilot with the US Air Force and Navy.

"All of that," he recalls, "was interesting, fun, challenging — and gave me a good shot at one day flying into space. In 1990, Canada formed a Space Agency and had a recruitment in 1992. Out of thousands of people, I got picked and began my 21-year career as an astronaut."



Global success: Chris Hadfield today (top), and in his days as an astronaut with Nasa. Photo courtesy of MasterClass

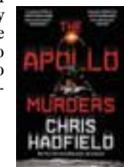
He went into space three times: that maiden voyage in 1995, a visit to the ISS in 2001 and another ISS mission from December 2012 to the following May. As well as space-walks, dozens of scientific experiments and extensive photographic chronicles shared on social media, he flew the Space Shuttle twice and Russian Soyuz once. One question, to us earthbound wimps, is unavoidable: were you ever scared?

"I'm only frightened when I don't know what I'm doing, how to take care of what's happening. It's like any kid learning to cycle: at some point you're afraid and don't know how, then someone teaches you, you fall a few times and finally gain the skills so now you don't fall. The danger hasn't changed — you changed your skill-set."

"It's exactly the same for piloting a spaceship. The danger is high, but I spent decades learning to ride that bicycle. It's not just about bravery — bravery without competence is foolishness. You need to know what you're doing, have something to base your confidence on. That produces professional astronauts, and eventually what looked impossible becomes inevitable."

Now retired, he considers himself hugely fortunate to have made it to orbit. Whirling around the globe 2,650 times, Hadfield adds, "I had lots of time to look out and think. My last orbit was even more special than the first: you get better at knowing where to look, seeing what the planet reveals to you. It's a magnificent, enriching experience."

● *The Apollo Murders*, published by Quercus, is out now



Chambers turns Ireland's Covid story into a pacey page-turner

Larissa Nolan

Around this time last year, I previewed the non-fiction books coming in 2021. Sifting through hundreds of titles, something curious stood out: not one of them dealt with the issue of our time: Covid. Where was the definitive book on it?

It's here now. *A State of Emergency* is Richard Chambers' 320-page comprehensive account of Ireland in the time of a modern plague. He is ideally placed to do it: as Virgin Media television news correspondent, he has covered the story since it began in early 2020.

Chambers has managed to pull off an extraordinary trick here: taking the biggest turn-off of a topic and transforming it into a riveting read. Its pacey style makes it a page-turner — I read it over a long weekend — and his approach of keeping it simple means it never loses its way.

His key skill is condensing this deeply complex story into 21 digestible chapters. It feels like each sentence is backed up by a wealth of research. It's done with creativity and pizzazz, but also huge amounts of humanity.

There's plenty of gossip and behind-the-scenes bitchiness here to keep the politics and news junkies happy, but the main purpose is clear: to remember those people lost to the virus, and those who worked and risked their own lives to care for them.

I was reeled in from the first page. Written like a non-fiction novel, there's a touch of the tabloid to it. Its insider, almost diary-entry style recalls Piers Morgan. The use of the story form to chronicle history reminded me of Ken Follett's blockbusters.

Starting with the scene of a distracted Tony Holohan out having dinner with his family, it depicts the chief medical officer just before Covid changed everything. Place: Dillinger's restaurant in Dublin's Ranelagh. Date: January 10, 2020.

He is distracted, mulling over "clusters of pneumonia of unknown origin in Wuhan, the seafood market, the severe illness, the fact there was nobody in the world with any immunity to this thing". "If something is going to knock us over," he was thinking, "this is it."

I didn't know the first Nphet meeting was convened a few weeks afterwards, on January 27, while the rest of us watched the Chinese build new hospitals in days and people still joked about this new thing called the coronavirus.

Dr Colm Henry, chief clinical officer of the HSE, describes our blindness to what was coming as "magical thinking". "There was a sense of otherness about it — something that was happening

over there. Your thinking evolved to what you wanted it to be."

The access Chambers had to almost all of those involved is impressive. With one notable exception: Stephen Donnelly. The Health Minister gets a rough ride in here from political sources, who portray him as a cross between Ron Burgundy from *Anchorman* and David Brent.

Such snarky ridicule isn't limited to Donnelly. When Leo Varadkar publicly turns on Holohan, a Nphet member remarks that while Leo might be a doctor, "he didn't set the world on fire while in scrubs either". Paul Reid is sneeringly nicknamed 'The Professor' — you're not supposed to be working class and go on to

become the director-general of the HSE. In Chambers' telling, though, he comes across as down-to-earth, no nonsense and unafraid to challenge others.

The writing can occasionally veer into cringe territory. Terms like "FOMO" and "bandwidth" can grind a bit, as can smatterings of virtue signalling. References to himself and his colleagues in media seem a little unnecessary.

But Chambers has a mischievous side. I laughed out loud reading the story of Micheál Martin watching the Munster semi-final from the Taoiseach's office, "kicking back at his desk with a bottle of beer, phoning the fellas he'd usually go to the match with". At the weekend, he "boils a few eggs and packs a salad with chickpeas, sun-dried tomatoes and sheep's cheese". Crazy horse.

FORGOTTEN ASPECTS

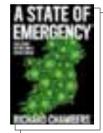
How could we have forgotten so much, so soon? I'd emptied my head entirely of certain significant parts of the story. I had to be reminded of how we were slow to start testing, or how results would take weeks and of the long queues at drive-through testing centres. How Citywest became a field hospital for Covid patients; the panic-buying of groceries; the international battle for PPE for healthcare workers; Simon Harris's existence.

Chambers refreshes our memory, as well as providing previously unknown, key information. I wasn't aware, for example, of how Professor Martin Cormican, the national clinical lead on infection control in Ireland, was overlooked as a member of Nphet. I hadn't known

that Dr Syed Waqqar Ali, the Mater medic who died of Covid, went into work at the hospital one day and never walked out again.

The story of Covid hasn't ended yet, as we see in case numbers this week. This is a vital book, but let's hope there isn't a sequel.

NON-FICTION
A State of Emergency
Richard Chambers
HarperCollins
Ireland,
320 pages,
hardcover
€21; e-book
€6.99



Tabloid touch: Richard Chambers. Photo by Marc O'Sullivan

WriteSide



Novelist **Graeme Macrae Burnet** on being inspired by Salinger and learning of his big break in a ladies' toilet

How did you develop an interest in literature and writing?
I grew up in Kilmarnock in Ayrshire in a household that was not very bookish. I was not a voracious reader. As a teenager I discovered *Catcher in the Rye* [by JD Salinger]. It captured me with its voice which spoke to me as a disaffected teenager. I started writing stories and terrible poems. When I was a student at university I was utterly obsessed with Samuel Beckett — as all young men should be at some point.

At what point did you become a full-time writer?
I taught English as a foreign language and I worked as a researcher for arts documentaries on TV. I was burrowing into archives and pre-interviewing contributors to the documentaries. When I finished working in TV, I set my mind to getting down to what I really wanted to do — write a novel.

If you weren't a writer, a TV researcher or an English teacher what would you be?
I could have been a painter and decorator. On the day I was long-listed for the Booker Prize [for the novel *His Bloody Project*] I was painting a ladies' toilet in Kilmarnock.

How would you describe your new novel Case Study?
It is set in London in 1965. It tells the story of a young woman who believes that a radical psychotherapist called Collins Braithwaite has driven her sister to suicide. In order to find out more about this, she presents herself as a client of Collins Braithwaite. I would like to think this is a book where you are not quite sure what is real and what is not. It is written in the style of a literary biography. In the book we encounter real people such as the psychiatrist RD Laing and the actor Dirk Bogarde.

Which two books would you take to a desert island?
I would definitely take *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. It's a big, baggy, capacious novel that I have already read three times and I am sure I would find more in it. It is compelling. I would also bring *Novels in Three Lines* by Felix Fénelon. It's a weird book that collects stories that are told in just three lines.



● *Case Study* is published by Saraband

Kim Bielenberg

LEAR'S QUEEN GETS A TALE OF HER OWN

She is mentioned just twice in Shakespeare's tragedy, but the outcast is brought to life as a thwarted, vengeful, enraged, grieving, passionate and highly political individual in this debut novel

Martina Devlin

King Lear's queen, mother to one of the most famous triumvirate of sisters in drama, is mentioned just twice in Shakespeare's tragedy. A talented debut novelist has rectified this omission, giving Lear's wife a towering presence where once there was an absence.

If Goneril and Regan are fiercely ambitious and untrustworthy, and Cordelia is too obstinate to flatter her father when he tests their love for him, then their mother can be no shrinking violet. That's JR Thorp's hypothesis with her imaginative novel *Learwife*.

It speculates on why the king and his daughters behave as they do, and creates a thwarted, vengeful, enraged, grieving, passionate and highly political individual in this queen whose voice is missing from the record. In Thorp's hands, she is a force to be reckoned with, even in banishment.

Familiarity with *King Lear* is unnecessary to follow the plot. The novel opens with the queen living in a remote abbey, where she is treated like a guest by the nuns. In reality she is a prisoner, on her husband's orders.

Here we have a woman both dead and not dead; lost to the world, but with a heart that still beats, a memory that still gnaws at her, and a flood of desire for Lear that has not faded, despite the injustice of his behaviour. She has written letters to her husband, but he shuns her pleas to be restored to her place at court. Courtiers who once depended on her favour also ignore her.

Years pass as she waits in the abbey, counting on the king's eventual forgiveness. "I have been so quiet, I have done my penance

FICTION
Learwife
JR Thorp
Canongate, 336 pages, hardcover €21; e-book £8.54



fivefold," says the woman whose name is given only as Learwife — she tells us no one alive now remembers her birth name. "I was a widow, and he thought it had cursed me. Given us daughters and no sons."

Early in the plot, news reaches her by messenger that the king and their three daughters are dead, after Lear's decision to divide his kingdom between the two daughters who claim to love him best goes spectacularly wrong, leading to civil war. Those four deaths suffocate Learwife's hopes for a reunion.

The discarded queen, cast off as Lear was by his two elder daughters, makes plans to visit their graves, and is astonished when the abbess, her friend but also her keeper, tells her she does not have permission to leave. The women confront one another in an outdoor storm scene reminiscent of *King Lear*, deranged and lashed by the elements. "My fury is ancestral," says Learwife. "It feels black and branching in my lungs."

Plague breaks out, social cohesion dwindles in the abbey where the air "grows dank with crosspatch women" and the queen presides over a competition to appoint a new abbess.



World-building: French actor Philippe Girard performs in *King Lear*, and below left, JR Thorp, who takes up the story of Lear's wife who is mentioned just twice in the Shakespeare play. Photo of author by Tristan Hutchinson



Wielding power comes readily to her. She sets the contenders tasks to establish their strengths and weaknesses, and relishes her opportunity to reign here, even in seclusion.

Exiled or not, Learwife behaves like a medieval queen. Autocratic and quick to take offence, she strikes the abbess on the face for perceived insolence, afterwards forcing the nun to kiss her hand in apology. It is clear her relationship

with her daughters must have been imperious more often than tender. Threaded through the novel are her reflections on events that led her to this point. She mulls over her marriage to Lear and court life with their daughters, as well as a brief previous marriage to a king who was a religious fanatic.

We learn how Lear banished her without warning or explanation 15 years earlier when Cordelia was a baby. Through Learwife's eyes, we meet a king with a "spoiled will" who rides a young horse to death trying to break it, yet is a devoted father to his girls and lavishes gifts on them. Red-haired Lear is younger and less experienced than his queen, who teaches him statecraft; but on his orders she is dragged from sleep and bundled away, her breasts leaking milk for Cordelia.

We see Goneril and Regan as children, long before Cordelia is born. Learwife frets over what those little girls, with their pet kittens and romping games, have turned into. The messenger has told her that Goneril poisoned Regan and killed herself, while Cordelia was hanged on their orders. And that's what propels Thorp's narrative — why did Shakespeare's characters behave as they did and what turned them into the tragic figures they became?

Sydney-born Thorp, now living in Cork, has dreamed into being a complex and compelling protagonist and a convincing exploration of a veiled female story. Just as Jean Rhys, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, gave a voice to the first Mrs Rochester from *Jane Eyre*, Thorp has fleshed out King Lear's wife. Previously, the author wrote the libretto for the modern opera *Dear Marie Stopes*, about the pioneering birth control advocate.

Book clubs searching for a novel with a wealth of discussion material need look no further. The prose is seductive, and Thorp has a poetic feel for language, but where she really shines is in her world-building, recreating the day-to-day business of a medieval abbey in careful detail. We encounter novices shorn of their hair, nuns keeping birds and even monkeys as pets, and girls deposited in the abbey by their families whether or not they have a vocation. The abbey is a beehive — and Learwife, not the abbess, is its queen bee.

● Martina Devlin presents the *City of Books* podcast, supported by the Arts Council in partnership with Dublin Unesco City of Literature and MOLI, the Museum of Literature Ireland. Available free on all podcast platforms

COVID'S PROLONGED SAMHAIN INSPIRES SISTERS TO DELVE INTO OUR CELTIC SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

John Connell

The old ways, the Celtic ways, are something that we all might have thought about from time to time. What made this land, what formed it? Who are we really? For sisters Mary Kennedy (of RTÉ fame) and Deirdre Ni Chinnéide, these have been lifelong questions.

They grew up on St Brigid's Road in Clondalkin, Co Dublin, but the old ways were still part of their lives. Indeed, they lived beside a holy well to St Brigid and would help with its upkeep as the saint's feast day approached.

It would seem *Journey to the Well* was born out of the past 20 months of uncertainty, and the authors say we all want to have "hope and light in our hearts, to find meaning and a sense of the spiritual in our redefined, everything lives". They tell us that they have invited Brigid to be their guide through the Celtic seasons,

NON-FICTION
Journey to the Well
Mary Kennedy and Deirdre Ni Chinnéide
Hachette Ireland, 208 pages, hardcover, €21; e-book £8.49



and so the book begins, broken down into the four seasons and what they can tell us. It is filled with insight, poetry and tales from each period of the year.

Starting in Samhain, we begin to understand the start of the Celtic season. The authors inform us that this is a 'threshold time', when there is a thin veil between everyday life and the spirit world. They say that we have all been

cast into a prolonged Samhain because of the coronavirus — and in ways they are right. We have all been forced to rethink our place in the world, and they suggest that it is a time collectively to focus, to lean into the journey and to draw water from our inner well.

Broken into personal reflections from both sisters in each section, we get a glimpse of what the pandemic was like for Mary and Deirdre and the feelings and situations that we will recognise from our own lives. We learn about Deirdre's life on the Aran Islands and hear just how culturally rich life is there.

One line of Mary's sticks with the reader: that we are a reflective, caring people with a spiritual dimension in our lives. That spiritual aspect is something that re-emerges again and again in Irish life.

It is something that we are hooked into and tapped into. It goes beyond organised religion and is rooted in something deeper. Both authors talk of the rural world a lot, and

perhaps it is rural Ireland that holds on to these links best.

In reading the book, one is reminded of the work of the great Celtic spiritual writer John O'Donohue, who in *Anam Cara* opened the world up to Celtic spirituality. His work hit upon a rich vein and the book was lauded in the US and around the world, becoming an international bestseller.

The love for his work has not gone away and his books are still widely bought and read today. Indeed, in lockdown his words were quoted by many on social media as a way to get through the dark times.

Journey to the Well reads as a companion piece to O'Donohue, taking up the work the writer and poet left behind with his untimely passing in 2008. There has been a space in Irish writing for a new writer to take up diggings into the Celtic world.

In reading of missed family get-togethers because of the pandemic, we are reminded of

what it is that we have lived through. That the experience has been a shared one.

The book meanders, covering topics as diverse as orphanages in Belarus, indigenous gods and John Moriarty, the modern-day Irish mystic. The diversions are good but one would like to see more of the mission statement of the book on connecting Celtic ways and wisdom. It is at times a little too much, with too much in the way of anecdotes as opposed to the two writers' wisdom. Though when the wisdom comes though, it is lovely.

The book finishes with a wish from both women that the reader has crossed over the threshold and found nourishment. In a time when that nourishment has been lacking in our lives, it is a boost to read a book that celebrates the coming together of people and shows that we Irish really are a people of community.

● John Connell is author of *The Cow Book* and *The Running Book*

Searing testament to the cruelties of the Famine



Unrelenting style: Author and singer Declan O'Rourke

Eilis O'Hanlon

Singer-songwriter Declan O'Rourke could hardly have chosen a more difficult subject for his debut novel. The scene is Macroom in Co Cork in 1846. The Famine has begun.

O'Rourke holds absolutely nothing back, neither in the story itself, whose great length and weight of detail demand the closest attention, nor the unrelenting style in which it is told. The novel is uncompromisingly brutal in its depiction of suffering.

On the first page, a man is climbing a hill with the last of his strength, his heart "bursting", his lungs "wheezing", his tongue "like a spent horse panting". Readers can hardly claim they don't know what they are getting into.

It's a theme that O'Rourke has, of course, explored before in song, not least on his celebrated album *Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine*.

That reportedly took him 15 years to assemble, and he admits himself he thought he was finished with the subject when it was released in 2017. But the true story behind the song *Poor Boy's Shoes*, about a father whose children die in the workhouse and who then carries his wife home, where she also dies, drew him back. It is Pádraig and Cait Ua Buacalla through whose eyes the Famine unfolds in all its inhumanity.

Pádraig is brilliantly realised. Through his innocence, the readers see Macroom as it must have looked at that time to a poor country dweller without a word of English — "a giant hive full of bustle and bother... a gaping eyecore of clamour and haste... he couldn't understand the attraction".

The other central character is Cornelius Creed, the pawnbroker of the title, who acts as a focal point in the town. The poor come to him when in need of money, and his own wealth allows him to move in more exalted social circles.

It's not an easy read by any means. Some of the more graphic depictions of the atrocities of the period are hard to bear. It's no criticism to say this is a novel I doubt I'll ever want to read again. What makes it even more tragic is that the novel ends in December 1846. The worse horrors of 'Black 47' are, unimaginably, still ahead.

Cornelius tries to do his best to help those who are suffering, but he has no power either. His perspective gives the novel added poignancy as he comes to realise that "any good I do outside of this place is undone by what I do here, in the shop... I feel like I'm up against thick old walls, sandwiched somewhere uselessly in the middle, between the rich and the poor, like a cog in the teeth of a wheel".

The *Pawnbroker's Reward* works both as a novel and as a testament to the documented cruelties of the day. Indeed, O'Rourke dedicates it to "those historians, archivists,

researchers and sharers of lore, who gift to us the past," without whom this book would not have been possible.

It's a searing indictment of the cruelties of Poor Law relief which demanded that "inmates are to be worse fed, worse clothed and worse accommodated than

that of the lowest peasant outside the walls of the workhouse", even as they were literally dying.

Pádraig soon comes to know "the draining effort of walking upwards of 13 miles a day in cold weather and putting in a full shift of gruelling manual labour on top, all on the strength afforded him by a single daily meal".

Two weeks in, and the men are finally paid for their work, only to receive less than they are owed. Their complaints are stilled by "the fear of being replaced for being troublesome or ungrateful".

At a time when so many of those who are known in other fields seem to be opportunistically trying their hand at fiction, in the manner of dilettantes, it's admirable to see someone who takes the craft of novel writing seriously.

It's not an easy read by any means. Some of the more graphic depictions of the atrocities of the period are hard to bear. It's no criticism to say this is a novel I doubt I'll ever want to read again.

What makes it even more tragic is that the novel ends in December 1846. The worse horrors of 'Black 47' are, unimaginably, still ahead.

FICTION
The Pawnbroker's Reward
Declan O'Rourke
Gill Books, 499 pages, hardcover €22



BIOGRAPHY
A Furious Devotion
Richard Balls

Omnibus Press, 384 pages, hardcover €21.99; e-book €12.29



Once upon a time, the rock biography was an excuse to string together as many outlandish anecdotes as possible, offered up with the bare minimum of reflection or due diligence. Following Samuel Goldwyn's dictum about printing the myth rather than the facts, these books enjoyed fairly casual relationships with reality. Thankfully, perhaps, things have changed. Nowadays, music biographies are often serious-minded affairs, weighing up the cost — paid by the subject, as well as their associates — of all that sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. The rascals of yore have become today's psychological case studies and cautionary tales.

As you might expect, given what we already know of the tempestuous life of Pogues singer Shane MacGowan, *A Furious Devotion* is not lacking examples of extreme behaviour. There are episodes involving hallucinogenic drugs during which our hero paints himself blue and slashes a room to ribbons with a samurai sword. He eats a Beach Boys vinyl record — the blood pouring from his cut mouth — as a comment on American cultural inferiority. On tour, his baggage consists of a bin bag with a knot tied in it, filled with "half-drunk bottles of wine, bits of Greek food, broken CD players".

But baggage comes in many forms. Beneath the colourful vignettes, biographer Richard Balls embarks on a credible and sincere attempt to map the bewildering dance between MacGowan's creative genius and a painfully damaged existence. Having previously written books on Ian Dury and Stiff Records, Balls knows the musical terrain well. Better still, he knows his subject personally. He has stayed chez Shane and spent time with his sister, father and extended family. This close access pays off as he traces MacGowan from his beloved Tipperary roots to teenage tearaway in London, fame with the Pogues and three decades of decline.

REBEL SPIRIT

MacGowan was born "in exile" on Christmas Day 1957, four months after his parents moved to England. This rebel spirit was educated at English fee-paying schools. From an early age, he exhibited an exceptional literary mind. MacGowan was reading Dostoevsky at 11, while his English teacher has kept hold of his weird and wonderful creative stories for half a century.

He was expelled from Westminster School for taking and dealing drugs. In 1975, at 17, he suffered a mental health breakdown that led to hospitalisation. Liberated by punk, MacGowan

AN UNFLINCHING PORTRAIT OF SHANE MacGOWAN

From his tearaway teenage years to fame and physical decline, this biography charts the bewildering dance between the Pogues frontman's creative genius and his painfully damaged existence, writes **Graeme Thomson**



Contradictions: MacGowan is portrayed as a shy man who craves company

Occasionally, a painful

realisation of his circumstances seeps through the battered bravado

evolved from a face on the scene to music-maker.

His best songs with the Pogues infused the Celtic tradition with a grimy urban romance and an irreverent spirit that remains electrifying. Feted by Tom Waits, Nick Cave and Bruce Springsteen, MacGowan's reputation rests on the songs he wrote in the 1980s, released on the Pogues albums *Red Roses for Me*, *Rum, Sodomy & the Lash* and *If I Should Fall from Grace with God* and on the *Poguetry in Motion* EP.

This is not a Pogues biography. Balls keeps his eye trained on MacGowan, which makes sense, but a little more insight and analysis of the work would have been welcome.

Yet if MacGowan's genius is largely taken at face value, Balls gently refuses to take the singer at his own estimation, allowing his contradictions to stand. A prize fighter in his own imagination, in reality MacGowan loathes confrontation. He's a shy man who craves company. A stubborn soul, but generous to a fault. Occa-

sionally, a painful realisation of his circumstances seeps through the battered bravado. Such a fragile character was never suited to the rigours of touring, or fame. Playing live with the Pogues became so fraught, on and off stage, that finally he was asked to leave the band, to the relief of everyone. In the 90s, MacGowan slipped into heroin addiction. For a dark spell, death seemed to follow him around. In 1999, Sinéad O'Connor reported him to the police in London when she feared that both he and his partner were in mortal danger.

In terms of scaring MacGowan off heroin, it seemed to do the trick, but the man's demons are manifold. Pogues producer Steve Lillywhite calls him one of only two "absolute Bohemians" he has met — the other being Keith Richards. "Shane... had absolutely no need for order in his life," says Lillywhite. While Richards remains creatively active and apparently in reasonable health at 77, MacGowan seems broken, struggling to create anything of substance in the past 25 years. A fractured pelvis and broken hip suffered after a fall in Dublin have made him reliant on a wheelchair since 2015.

As the book unwinds, the sense of the subject as a solid entity slips away not just from the reader, but also the author and those closest to him. MacGowan appears lost even to himself. Balls joins him in his two-bedroom apartment in Dublin, where Shane drinks, watches gangster films and sleeps without routine. He likes people around him but doesn't necessarily want to talk to them.

"Remove the wine, e-cigarettes and other accessories laid out on his little white table, and he will panic," writes Balls. "There, on that small plastic surface, is everything he materially wants from life and its continual replenishment gives him peace of mind."

Far from a rock 'n' roll carnival, this is a sensitive yet unflinching portrait of a romantic, vulnerable and deeply complicated man whose talent burned fast and bright — and burned out. The heartfelt 60th birthday celebrations at the National Concert Hall in Dublin in 2018 felt valedictory. "Shane MacGowan is not done yet," Balls concludes. You hope he's right, but fear he's probably wrong.

BookBrief
with Myles McWeeny

THRILLER

The Stoning

Peter Papathanasiou
MacLehose Press, 320 pages, hardcover €18.50; e-book €6.99



The small outback Australian town of Cobb has known better times. Detective Sergeant Giorgios 'George' Manolis, who is mourning the recent death of his Greek immigrant father and the break-up of his marriage, was born and bred there before his dad had hurriedly relocated the family to the coast before he was a teenager.

Manolis is sent to Cobb to investigate the murder of a highly regarded young widow, Molly Abbot, the local primary school teacher who had been killed in an act of almost medieval savagery.

He is shocked at what he finds when he arrives. The bustling and prosperous town he remembered has become a dusty, flyblown and litter-strewn community full of boarded-up businesses and tumbledown shacks. The remaining white population has been decimated by alcoholism and drugs and they display aggressive racism towards the indigenous Australian residents and the desperate asylum seekers in the recently built government Immigrant Reception Centre on the edge of town.

The local senior policeman, Sergeant Fyfe, has long since lost interest in anything but grog. He is convinced, because of the fact that Molly Abbot had been tied to a tree and stoned to death, that one or more of the Muslim residents in what Cobb's residents call the Brown House is responsible.

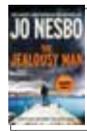
Only policewoman Kate Kerr and Sparrow, an aboriginal constable, show any interest in trying to mount a proper investigation to find the killer, but they too resent Manolis's presence in their town.

As he begins to dig into Molly's death, shadowy ghosts of his past begin to flicker to life, and the more he begins to question why he had been uprooted all those years ago. Brilliant and unsettling from start to finish.

SHORT STORIES

The Jealousy Man

Jo Nesbo
Harvill Secker, 528 pages, hardcover €14.99; e-book €7.99



Who knew that Jo Nesbo, the Norwegian master of Nordic noir and one of the world's bestselling crime writers, would also turn out to be an accomplished master of the short story? *The Jealousy Man* is his first collection, and what makes all 12 of them stand out is their sheer invention and variety of topic.

There's a Greek detective who has become an expert in jealousy, solving crimes through hard lessons from his own past; a woman on a flight to London to end her life because of her husband's affair with her best friend; the Norwegian taxi driver who finds his wife's earring in a car belonging to his boss and attempts to find out how it got there. Smarter and more complex than many crime shorts.

Ask Adrian



Technology
Adrian Weckler

Question

Do you have any advice on a pay-as-you-go network for my elderly father who is mainly a landline user? He only needs mobile for emergencies, such as his landline being down. But unless we keep topping up, the network will disable the phone until I top up again. As a result there's often credit in there that is not used.

— *Nuala O'Connor*

Answer

As it's clear that your elderly father doesn't need it for 4G data services or social media, I'd go with the cheapest one available. That means one of two options: 48 (€11 a month), which is owned by and runs on the network of Three, or Lycamobile (€10 a month).

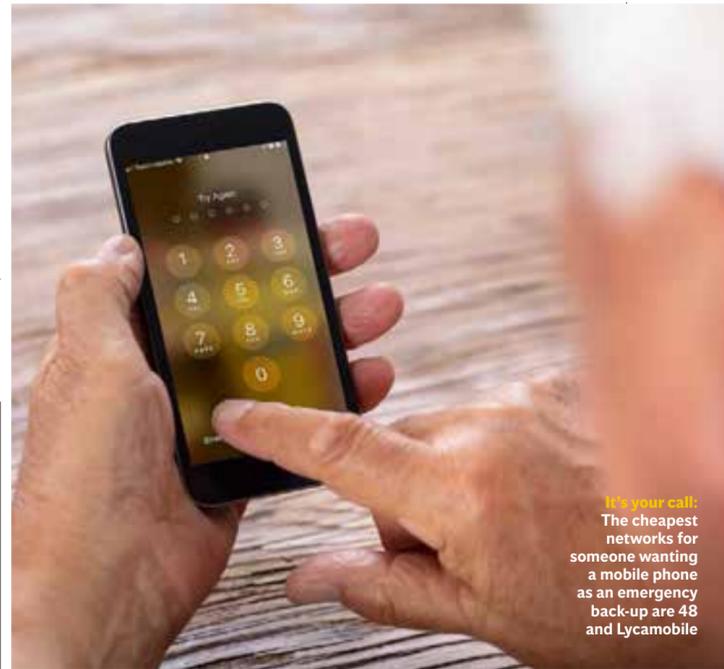
There's a big disparity in data and calls you get between these two, with 48 giving you much more. But either is fine for very basic use in case of emergencies.

One other main difference is availability. 48 is ordered and activated completely online and uses a credit card that debits the €11 from your account each month. That's very handy in terms of not having to worry about manually topping it up all the time.

On the other hand, it means that if you have any customer support issues, it's all online or on the phone — there's no physical shop to take it to. (Parent company Three won't deal with it in their shops.) By contrast, Lycamobile is a more basic pre-pay model, handled through convenience shops such as Spar, Londis, Mace, Gala and SuperValu.

The only other factor is signal coverage. If your father is living in a town or an urban area, there shouldn't be any real problem with any mainstream mobile plan he buys, including 48 and Lycamobile (which both use the same Three network).

If he lives in a rural location, it may be that one or other of the networks is stronger or



It's your call: The cheapest networks for someone wanting a mobile phone as an emergency back-up are 48 and Lycamobile

weaker in that exact spot. For example, if you know someone who has a Three mobile plan, make sure that the signal there is decent. If that is not the case, it may be that a Vodafone or Eir mobile signal is adequate. If Vodafone, your father should get a Clear Mobile plan (€15 a month).

If it's Eir, he should get a GoMo plan (€15 a month). I always advise people living in areas like this to look past the marginal feature advantages in favour of making sure there's a decent signal in the first place. Otherwise it's no use as an emergency fallback option.

In terms of these plans qualifying as 'pay as you go', the idea is that they'll keep debiting from your account on a monthly basis until you cancel the plan. The good news is that there's no minimum contract beyond each month's billing period. And it goes without saying that there's no subsidised handset with any of these plans either — it's just a SIM card and credit for a month's use. Your father needs to have his own unlocked mobile phone.

● *Recommendation: 48 (€10.99 per month from 48.ie)*

Question

I want to get my grandson an iPad for Christmas but even the entry model is above my budget. I see that some shops sell them second hand. Are they reliable?

— *Gerard Monahan*

Answer

I'd always look for a warranty, even if it's just for six months. My experience with outfits such as Mint and others is that they're fairly reliable as the second-hand stuff they sell is usually tested adequately.

The big thing to look out for is battery life — a two-year-old smartphone or iPad will have significantly less battery life than a new one. In terms of what to get, I'm not sure how old your grandson is.

But if he's under 10, I wouldn't worry about any iPad from 2018 on. If he wants to use things like *Minecraft* or Roblox or YouTube, any of the models from the last couple of years will be completely fine.

Email your questions to aweckler@independent.ie

Tech two



Oppo Find X3 Lite
€409 from Currys

If you're looking for a very solid, impressive budget (ish) smartphone, this is a great deal for the money. You get a really good, bright screen, a lot of power and storage, 5G, decent battery life and a fairly good camera system. It's also a simple, slim, light device that's easy to pocket and to handle.



OneSonic MXS-HDI
€129 from OneSonic.com

OneSonic is an Irish hardware firm known for good budget earphones. Its latest offering adds some higher-end features such as active noise cancellation, touch-sensitive controls on the exterior casing of the buds and being splash- and sweat-proof to an IPX4 standard. They fit snugly into your ears too.

‘Does it glamorise crime? I don’t think it even glamorises diamonds’

Simone Kirby on starring in new RTÉ drama *Hidden Assets*.

READ MORE IN LIFE, EXCLUSIVELY IN TOMORROW'S

Sunday Independent



I've fallen for dating shows — and they are no guilty pleasure

Last call

Kirsty Blake Knox

My heart skipped a beat this week when I saw yet another dating show has made its way on to our TV screens.

The most recent addition is Channel 4's *The Love Trap* which appears to ask that age-old question — would you be prepared to tumble through a panto trapdoor and risk breaking an arm for love? Of course you would, you hopeless romantic!

In the year 2021, there are roughly a zillion dating shows on TV and streaming services and I am here for just about all of them. In the pantheon of reality TV, dating shows can often be dismissed as candyfloss — fun, frothy but lacking any substance. There's none of the social and psychological experimentation that featured in *Big Brother* and short-lived series like *Eden*.

They don't have the floury wholesomeness of *The Great British Bake Off*, or the crafty integrity of *The Great British Sewing Bee*. Dating shows don't insist on participants having any discernible skill like *The Voice* or our very own *Last Singer Standing*. Got Talent? Buddy, there's no need here.

And so dating programmes tend to be bundled into 'guilty pleasure' TV. I can't count how many times I have read think pieces where people have 'confessed' to watching *Love Island* as if it were some sort of sin.

But what is there to feel guilty about? There are a reason millions of people tune in and why it remains 'event TV'. People who scorn such shows are modern-day moralists — best to avoid them as they tend to be zero craic.

Aside from the sheer entertainment factor, dating shows are also packed with nuggets of astute and often surprising insights into relationships.

In fact, I have gleaned pretty much everything I know about relationships from reality dating shows. Who needs a

therapist, I ask you, when you can watch five hours of *First Dates Hotel* and *90 Day Fiancé* back to back?

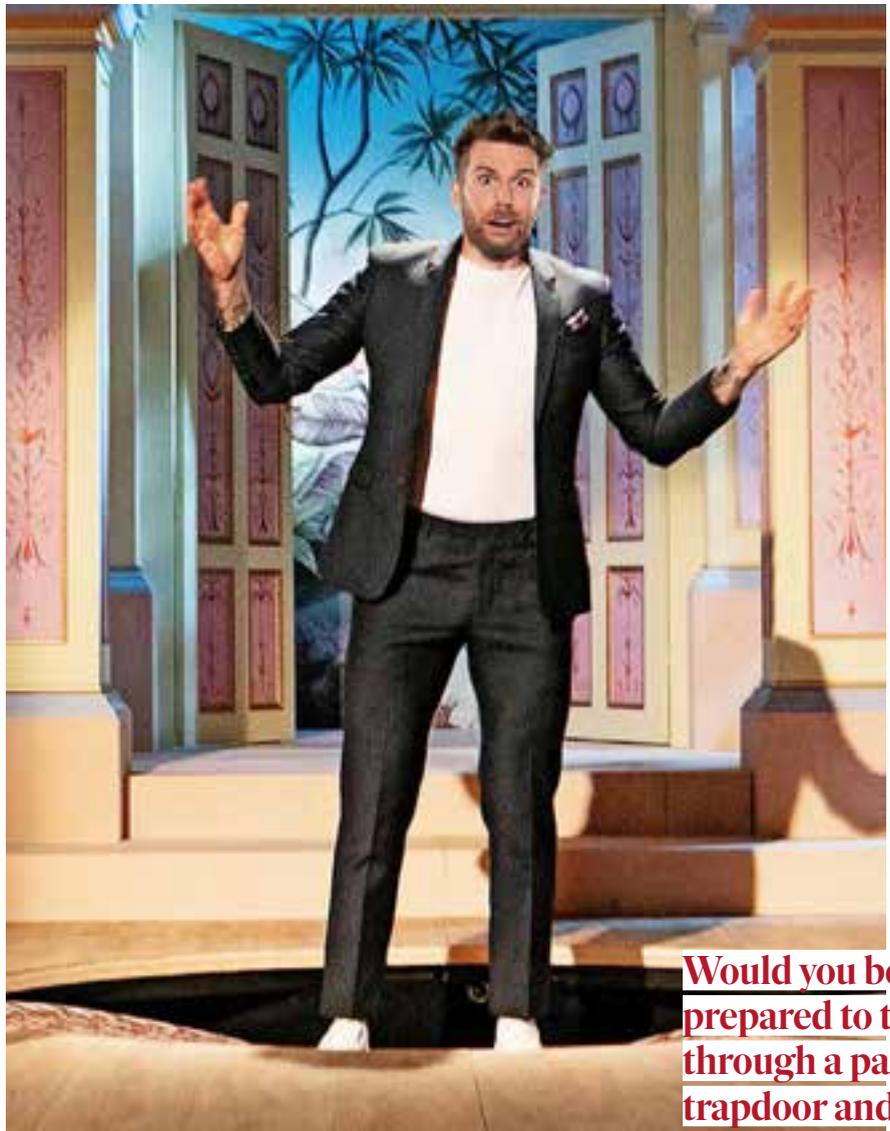
You may think I'm joking but the underlying messages buried in these slick and glossy formats often hit home. I gasped in awe when reality TV favourite Jack Fowler told *Celebs Go Dating* coach Paul C Brunson that while he had met plenty of individuals "to go places and do things with, I've never met someone I can do nothing with". I mean c'mon — who knew the man had such depth?

And who could forget his iconic moments when retired grid-girl turned feminist icon Maura Higgins taught women everywhere to listen to what their bodies are telling them when she first laid eyes on Tommy Fury and proudly cried "he gives me fanny flutters™".

First Dates — and its many iterations — remains my all-time favourite dating show. It showed me how to appreciate the electricity in silence — and also to recognise how patient and tactful some waiters can be.

Even the most gimmicky of dating shows have heart. *Sexy Beasts* — a show where participants strap on two tonnes of prosthetics and go on dates dressed as aliens, tigers and porpoises — held on to the favourite dating show principle: that character is ultimately a better indicator of relationship compatibility than looks. In one scene, a man called James, dressed in a giant beaver head, realises that it may be time to revise his approach to dating which has historically been "ass first, personality second" and focus on "connection" instead.

Of course, it's possible to go to the other extreme. *Love is Blind* — a show that placed contestants in giant pods and got them



Taking the plunge: Joel Dommett, host of the new Channel 4 dating show *The Love Trap*

Would you be prepared to tumble through a panto trapdoor and risk breaking an arm for love? Of course you would

to propose in one of the most cringe-inducing spectacles I have ever witnessed — exposed the limitations of that idea.

While some of the couples couldn't keep their hands to themselves, others failed to light any fires — to paraphrase Lulu. Then we have all the layers of deception that went into *Married at First Sight Australia* (side note: are Australian reality TV participants the most entertaining?). It was such delicious drama.

I guess the appeal of all the above is twofold. The first is that it is so incredibly exciting to potentially witness the moment when two people fall hopelessly head over heels in love.

We're all rooting for those lovesick puppies. It also allows us to vicariously experience the excitement

of a first date without any of the heartache. That may be the reason why dating shows are the most versatile of reality programmes.

Singing and talent-based shows can only have so many permutations. Person auditions, person sings, judges comment, big finale, fin. Unless you can convince Mel B to dress up as a seahorse and do karaoke (à la *The Masked Singer*) then it can all feel a bit samey.

And how many of us can relate to becoming a world-class singer? That's probably why the *X Factor* producers had to shoe-horn in so many back stories while playing the instrumental version of *Someone Like You* on repeat.

But because dating shows are based on finding love and settling down — which despite all the bells, whistles and giant trap doors — is quite a safe, stable, relatable and above all sweet concept, we stick with them. While other reality TV subcategories fall by the wayside, this one is evergreen.

It takes two: Sally Rooney's audio sex scenes need a helping hand

Hello! This is an appeal to publishers worldwide. I have been listening to Sally Rooney's latest novel *Beautiful World Where Are You*. If you haven't heard of her then mark my words; she's going places.

I'm listening to *BWWAY* rather than reading it because there are only so

many hours in the day. Plus, it means I can do other fun things at the same time like spy on my neighbours' pet dog and make sandwiches.

I love audiobooks, but Rooney's is not good. And that is because there sometimes needs to be more than one person narrating a book. That's true if there are multiple characters in the novel,

and it's especially true if those characters are regularly having sex.

This book is narrated by Aoife McMahon, who has narrated all of Rooney's books — so she must be doing something right. But listening to someone describe sex, while simultaneously taking on the roles of the two people involved in that, ahem, activity? No thank you, madam!

Rooney's sex scenes, which are rightly described as being cerebral, intense and sensual, become confusing ("Wait. Who is saying that now? Yer man or yer wan?").

The producers also clearly didn't want the narration to become too heated. So

when detailing what the couples are getting up to, the lines are delivered with the clinical detachment of a doctor giving a medical exam. I don't know why they have stuck with a strict one-narrator policy for this book — I mean *BWWAY* has sold over 3.5 million copies — surely there's enough wiggle room in the budget to stump up for a second actor. For Rooney's next book I ask that this wrong please be righted. We're doing her writing a disservice. Let's invest in these audio sex scenes for the betterment of the literary world. Yours respectfully, perverts everywhere.





JIMMY SAVILE A CHAMELEON IN IRELAND

How the serial sexual predator wielded his influence here — and what happened when he was challenged on air by an Irish journalist

Fuel to the fire
What to do about Russian gas?

IN DEPTH, PAGES 8-9



Alexander Skarsgård
Swedish star on the real face of Vikings

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Ziggy Stardust at 50
Celebrating Bowie's legendary album

MUSIC, PAGES 14-15

ICYMI* with Chris Wasser
*In case you missed it



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In depth



Best buds: Russian president Vladimir Putin with Steven Seagal. Photo by Alexei Nikolsky/AFP via Getty

1. Steven Seagal hearts Vladimir Putin

Former Hollywood action man-turned-special US-Russia envoy Steven Seagal celebrated his 70th birthday this week with a slap-up meal in Moscow. A report in *The Times* tells us Seagal's bash was attended by Putin's allies — including Russian state broadcaster Vladimir Soloviev and journalist Margarita Simonyan (they're both on EU sanctions lists) — and that the *Under Siege* star gave a speech thanking his Russian "family". "I love all of you and we stand together, through thick and through thin," said Stevie. I don't think there is any way back from this.



2. The power of Sam Elliott's better-late-than-never apology

It only took him six weeks, but Sam Elliott has finally apologised for calling Jane Campion's Oscar-winning Western *The*



Power of the Dog a "piece of s****" with "allusions to homosexuality". One of the more bizarre, pre-Slap (that's how we measure time now) awards-season controversies, Elliott's remarks caused quite the ruckus. Now the moustachioed screen veteran admits he "wasn't very articulate" on the matter. "I can only say that I'm sorry and I am," explained Elliott (77). "And I said some things that hurt people and I feel terrible about that. The gay community has been incredible to me my entire career. Friends on every level and every job description up until today. I'm sorry I hurt any of those friends."

3. Osman quits *Pointless* quiz show for a life of crime writing

It was devastating week for fans of BBC's daytime quiz show *Pointless*, as presenter Richard Osman announced he was leaving the programme after 13 years. Don't worry, he'll be

back for the celebrity specials. In the meantime, Osman's co-host Alexander Armstrong will be joined by various guest presenters for future seasons, and Osman will focus on his crime-writing career following the huge success of *The Thursday Murder Club*. We'll miss you, pal.

4. Is breá linn gnéas in Éirinn

Ireland has been named the second-most "sex-obsessed" nation in the world, the *Irish Mirror* reported (the UK came first, but let's not fret over that). The results were compiled by the Global Sex Index — an organisation we have only just discovered exists — examining saucy search data (uh-oh) to find out which countries had Googled a "curated list" of sex toys and online sex shops (oo-er). The Index findings indicate "an average monthly search volume of 2,002 per 100,000 people" in the Republic of Ireland. Oh, and we spent more time Googling the missionary position than any other. We'll need to be more ambitious if we're to take the gold next year, lads.

5. Warner Bros fumble *Dumbledore* cut for China

Warner Bros has removed a snippet of footage from *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* for the film's release in China. The "missing" dialogue references a romantic history between good male wizard Dumbledore (Jude Law) and bad male wizard Grindelwald (Mads Mikkelsen). The studio confirmed that a "six-second cut was requested", and that they had "accepted those changes to comply with local requirements". But don't worry, they insist that "the spirit of the film remains intact" and that they "want audiences everywhere in the world to see and enjoy" the movie. Yep, it's 2022, and a major film company is removing gay references from a billion-dollar franchise to enhance box-office revenue. The mind boggles.

The 'missing' dialogue references a romantic history between Dumbledore and Grindelwald



Crowd-puller: Jimmy Savile at Baldoyle Racecourse in 1973 during the CRC Walk. Photo from the NPA and Independent Newspapers collection

'So many people were taken in': Jimmy Savile's Irish connections

The British broadcaster was a serial predator whose long history of sexual abuse only came to light after his death. **John Meagher** revisits his frequent Irish trips and what happened when he was confronted on air with rumours of his crimes

Celebrity was in short supply in the Ireland of 1968. The country was still an insular one and visiting dignitaries were worthy of considerable curiosity. When Jimmy Savile arrived in Dublin that year, there was a frenzy of media attention and the eccentric English broadcaster seemed to capture the public imagination. He was already a star back home, his fame rising in tandem with the great pop bands of the era. He cut a flamboyant figure too: his bright, flashy clothes and exotic hairstyle set him apart from other household names at the BBC. Savile was in Ireland that May to raise funds for a new hospital, the Central Remedial Clinic (CRC). He was no stranger to fundraising drives in Britain, and was to become a regular fixture in this country. He was in the city on the invitation of local aristocrat Lady Valerie Goulding, a tireless disability campaigner who, as a Fianna Fáil politician, would serve as a senator between 1977 and 1981. She had met Savile in a London restaurant and the pair forged an immediate connection. Savile was a star on both radio and TV and for the limited number of households here who could watch the BBC in their living rooms, he was synonymous with *Top of the Pops*, which had been running since 1964.

He would go on to have a career of remarkable longevity and his fame would reach a whole new level from 1975 when he started hosting one of the most popular family programmes in British TV history, *Jim'll Fix It*. It ran until 1994, but he continued to be a regular on the airwaves until his death at 84 in 2012. He went to his grave having wrecked the lives of hundreds of people. A serial sexual abuser who favoured young girls, his heinous deeds were finally uncovered shortly after his death, although it had long been rumoured that he was a paedophile. A new two-part Netflix documentary *Jimmy Savile: A British Horror Story* documents the extent of his abuse and how he hid his crimes in plain sight for half a century. It makes for har-

rowing viewing, especially when victims talk about how he used his fame to gain their trust when, in fact, he was grooming them for abuse. In one especially grim section, we hear how self-described devout Catholic Savile molested a girl during mass. In footage of primetime TV shows, he gropes girls in the studio audience. The documentary is centred on Britain and the access he got to children through his BBC work, his fundraising drives for Stoke Mandeville hospital, his involvement with Broadmoor psychiatric hospital and his roles as several institutions and schools. He seemed to have time for everyone and many found themselves gravitating to his Pied Piper-like figure. A devoted fundraiser, his method of choice was to take part in 'fun runs',

Before his first visit to Ireland, he was already something of a legendary figure in British philanthropic circles. When Goulding convinced him to import his unique style of fundraising to Ireland, she was certain that he could help her raise the enormous sums needed to make the CRC a reality. So, in May 1968, thousands joined Savile in a 10-mile expedition from the centre of Dublin to Baldoyle Racecourse in the north of the county. For practically every year up to 1981, Savile would return to the capital for the fundraiser, which in later years went to the RDS, Ballsbridge. The media lapped it up — several of the events were run with the support of the *Evening Herald* and started outside the newspaper's then offices on Middle Abbey Street. It made for quite a sight. Savile would usually jog at the front, his tracksuit top open to the navel, shiny gold jewellery around his neck, his fingers encrusted with rings. He chatted incessantly, despite the cigar that seemed to be perpetually lodged in his mouth. Lady Goulding rode behind on a child's bicycle and, until her death in 1972, Savile's mother Agnes — a woman of Irish extraction, whom he called the Duchess — would be chauffeured

The day Savile teased and charmed me on Jim'll Fix It

Garth Murray

It was 40 years ago and was always a story to drop into conversation if Jimmy Savile was mentioned. It's not an anecdote I often tell these days. It was the day I sat on the couch next to Savile as he reached into the secret compartment on his red armchair and took out six Jim'll Fix It medals for me and my five classmates. I was nine.

We had asked Jim to fix it for us to be rescued by a lifeboat. At the time, I lived on the small Channel Island of Herm, less than 40km off the French coast. The island is just 2km long by a 1km wide, and had a population of 40, including six primary school pupils.

I remember my schoolteacher's wide grin as she appeared outside my cottage one summer evening to break the news that we were going to be on the show. Within weeks, we were being filmed lolling on a small boat, drifting out to sea. The father of one of my classmates fired a flare before the Guernsey lifeboat raced into action and we all clambered aboard to be taken for a spin around the picturesque island that was our home.

The lifeboat dropped us off at the harbour, our parents waiting to greet us with warm blankets and hot flasks. Major Wood, the World War II veteran who leased and ran the island, was also waiting but less than impressed by my lack of enthusiasm at waving off our rescuers — but as someone who had passed out after being violently seasick during the staged rescue, I was not on the best form. Thankfully, that bit was not filmed.

Four months later we were sampling the Christmas lights of London. We had flown to England to film our bit in the studio, or in this case a West End theatre. I remember getting lost in the labyrinth of the backstage with my mum. There it was that I first met Savile, appearing out of a side door. We asked him for directions and he was full of charm and swagger, saying he was always happy to help “a brainbox” like myself.

Shortly after I joined by classmates and assembled on a collection of bean bags at the side of the stage with the other guests who had also asked Jimmy to make one of their dreams come true. Savile greeted us all, his larger-than-life persona capturing our attention.

Then ‘action’, and the show started. First up, Phil Lynott and Thin Lizzy stepped up to help a granny who wanted to play keyboard for a rock band. Later we saw a pig being trained by the Dublin-born dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse.

Next was our turn. The video of our rescue was played to the audience, and we took to the sofa beside Savile. He chatted to us about our day, revealed that “a little birdie” told him that I'd been seasick and generally teased and charmed us before awarding us with our square silver medals laced with red ribbon.

Then a month later, in January 1982, we had our moment of fame on BBC1. Jim had fixed it for us, an experience full of fond memories until the litany of horrific abuse committed by Jimmy Savile was exposed shortly after his death. I still have the medal, but it is packed away in the attic.

● **Garth Murray works on production for ‘Review’**



‘He talked a lot about sex in a suggestive way... I wasn’t used, frankly, to hearing adults talk this way. It was difficult to know whether he was joking, but I found it creepy’

Continued from Page 3

along the route in a Rolls-Royce. Behind them walked thousands of people, mostly children.

One of them was David Blake Knox. The future RTE and BBC producer had just finished school when he was invited to take part in one of the Dublin walks.

“The dad of a friend of mine was involved in the charity he was doing it for and he asked me if I would accompany Savile the night before and on the day of the event,” he recalls.

Unlike many of his peers at the time, Blake Knox was not star-struck. “I was never a fan of his,” he says. “I found it difficult to understand why he was so popular. He was a kind of showman I guess. He certainly generated a lot of excitement.”

“When I first met him, one of the things that surprised me, and made me feel uncomfortable, was that he talked a lot about sex in a suggestive way, rather than straight up. I was a teenager and I wasn’t used, frankly, to hearing adults talk this way. It was difficult to know whether he was joking or not, but I found it creepy.”

Now that the full extent of Savile’s decades-long abuse of children is widely known, other memories of the event give Blake Knox pause for thought. “Afterwards, in a marquee where they served tea and sandwiches, I saw the power of celebrity for the first time — people were completely awed by him. They wanted photos with him and often they wanted their children to be photographed with him. I remember these young girls sitting on his knee and him bouncing them up and down and making quasi-suggestive comments — and this was in front of the parents.”

From his earliest days in broadcasting, Savile courted the attention of powerful people. And as his fame grew, connections were reciprocated. The Netflix documentary demonstrates the extent of his friendship with Prince Charles and Princess Diana and with Margaret Thatcher. For years, the former prime minister championed him for a knighthood. He would receive one in 1990.

In this country, Savile and Charles Haughey became close. Not only did the future taoiseach take part in several of the CRC fun runs but he also invited Savile to his stately home, Abbeyville, in Kinsealy, Co Dublin.

HAUGHEY FRIENDSHIP

Gary Murphy, author of *Haughey*, an exhaustive history of the controversial taoiseach published last year, says the men seemed to admire the other. “The relationship was based on Savile’s friendship with Lady Goulding and Haughey had been a fundraiser for CRC when he was on his comeback trail after the Arms Crisis,” Murphy says. “He first met Savile on these sponsored walks — which became known in Dublin as the Jimmy Savile Walk — and he also hosted him in Government Buildings.”

Haughey became taoiseach in 1979 — the same year that Thatcher became PM — and it has been suggested that he wanted to use his Savile connection to foster closer relations with his British counterpart, especially as the Northern Ireland question was becoming more pronounced in the early 1980s.

Murphy, professor of history at Dublin City University, isn’t so sure. “I think it’s pretty far-fetched, to be honest, but there’s no doubt that Haughey had a lot of time for him. I mean, he was taken in by Savile, as so many people were,” he says. “We continue to strongly urge anyone who

has any suspicions, allegations, complaints or knowledge of incidents involving inappropriate or criminal behaviour concerning Jimmy Savile to contact the relevant authorities immediately.” For many of those who suffered abuse at Savile’s hands, there is great pain in the knowledge that he went to his grave a free man. In the Netflix documentary, the veteran journalist and broadcaster Andrew Neil says the absence of justice during Savile’s life is both a profound failing of media and British society.

Yet Savile seemed to hint at his paedophilia on air time and again. He kept joking about his attraction to young girls, being a danger to those in school and suggesting that he risked losing everything if caught. Always one for innuendo and lewd language, he was fond of joking that “my case is coming up next Thursday”.

In a BBC Radio 4 interview with the famed Irish psychiatrist Anthony Clare, he seemed to allude to murky secrets deep within. Savile even boasted on air of his escape plans should he ever be caught out in a major career-ending scandal.

When Clare inquired about his feelings, Savile quipped: “I haven’t found them yet.” Years after that 1991 interview, Clare concluded that Savile was calculating and materialistic. He noted a profound psychological disturbance in the man, which seemed to be rooted in a deprived and emotionally indifferent childhood.

Savile also insisted that his gravestone bear the words “It was good while it lasted” — and his wish was granted — but when the revelations



On the run: Lady Valerie Goulding on her bicycle with Jimmy Savile on the 1973 CRC Walk; and above, with Dickie Rock after reaching their destination at Baldoyle Racecourse; and right, with Lady Goulding collecting their Evening Herald badges at Middle Abbey Street before the 1974 walk. Photos part of the NPA and Independent Newspapers



came to light, the monument was removed and destroyed. In 2007, Irish broadcaster Orla Barry, then a Newstalk presenter, asked him to address the damning rumours. He denied hearing any and appeared to laugh off the suggestion.

Now Europe correspondent with the public radio global news programme *The World*, Barry says it would have been remiss of her not to put the question to Savile. “I remember at the time being taken aback that he didn’t get angry, that he didn’t immediately deny it, that he almost immediately asked the question which allowed you to ask him more questions. That isn’t something you want to do when trying to shut down an interviewer,” she says. “I’m still surprised that he didn’t immediately say, ‘These are grounds for defamation’.”

“My reading of it now, thinking back, is that he felt sure that he would be believed, that my question would be taken as just someone who was stirring for the sake of controversy. I really believe he felt that he was above it, that he was untouchable, that he had friends in high places and he had gotten away with it for so long that nobody could get him for this.”

If Barry was hoping that her encounter with Savile would provoke other media outlets to delve deeper, she was to be disappointed. “It didn’t make the papers the next day. For a lot of people who heard the radio item when it was first broadcast, their only response was to take umbrage. The typical response was, ‘I can’t believe you asked him that question?’



‘He felt he was untouchable’: Orla Barry asked Savile to address the damning rumours about him



Launch: A woman passes Abercrombie & Fitch models before the opening of its Dublin flagship store on College Green in 2012. Photo by Gareth Chaney

How Abercrombie & Fitch bet its shirt on being cool... and lost

Katie Byrne

Michael Jeffries’ foot was never far from his mouth during his tenure as Abercrombie & Fitch chief executive. But there’s one quote in particular that stands out in the trailer for new Netflix documentary *White Hot*, and it epitomises the rise and fall of the teen fashion brand.

“In every school, there are the cool and popular kids, and then there are the not-so-cool kids,” Jeffries famously told a *Salon* reporter in 2006. “Candidly, we go after the cool kids.”

Debating on April 19, *White Hot* explores the phenomenal success of Abercrombie & Fitch during the late 1990s and early 2000s. With a tone-deaf boss at its helm, the casualwear brand thrived on excluding the uncool kids, before growing criticism about its sexualised marketing and allegedly discriminatory hiring practices almost brought the fashion empire to its knees.

The Alison Klayman-directed documentary will bring these scandals into sharper focus, drawing minds back to an absurdly gauche era when fake tan, low-slung waistbands and size-zero dresses loomed large. Back then, the preppy “all-American look” that Abercrombie & Fitch personified still had a sliver of cultural cachet. Today, it’s considered a codeword for “white person”.

Abercrombie & Fitch made lots of mistakes during its reign, but the brand’s exacting aesthetic standards were perhaps the biggest. “A lot of people don’t belong [in our clothes],” Jeffries told *Salon* in that infamous interview. “That’s why we hire good-looking people in our stores. Good-looking people attract other good-looking people, and we want to market to cool, good-looking people. We don’t market to anyone other than that.”

The brand famously recruited topless male models and lifeguards for store openings and presented employees with a forensically detailed ‘look policy’, which outlined what was hot and what was not. Those who made the cut were invited to have a certain hairstyle (“sun-kissed” natural highlighting was OK; “two-tone colour and chunks of unnatural colour” were not) and to avoid certain hues and cuts.

Shirts had to feature the “easy side tuck” or “easy front tuck”. Fingernails had to be “clean and presentable” and “should not extend more than one quarter-inch beyond the tip of the finger”. Dreadlocks were prohibited.

The ‘look policy’ soon led to multiple class-action suits, while a discrimination case involving a young Muslim woman who was denied a job because she wore a headscarf ended up in the US Supreme Court. It ruled in her favour. *White Hot* recalls Abercrombie & Fitch’s

downfall, when almost every headline was steeped in controversy, but it also brings viewers back to a time when the brand’s moose logo was a status symbol and the stock was priced at around \$80 per share. (It’s now about \$30, having dropped as low as \$14.64 in November 2008.)

At the peak of its success, Abercrombie & Fitch was able to sell its lacrosse-playing, Ivy League aesthetic in dozens of culturally diverse countries, including Ireland.

It opened a flagship store on College Green, Dublin in 2012, for which 50 topless male models were hired to stand outside the store in single-digit October temperatures.

PERMA-GRIFFING STAFF

Inside, the 27,000sq ft store was fitted with the brand’s trademark dark and mysterious interiors, designed to make shoppers feel like they were in a club. Lights were used only to illuminate products, supersonic speakers pumped out four-on-the-floor beats and perma-grinning staff regularly spritzed the air with the brand’s cloyingly sweet Fierce cologne.

The reception to the brand’s arrival in Ireland was, in most quarters, lukewarm. But for another section of society, the Dublin store was manna from heaven. They paired the preppy apparel with their Leinster jerseys, Dubarry shoes and a general glow of entitlement and, for a short time anyway, they bought into the jocks-and-cheerleaders marketing. For young men especially, the brand represented a chest-thumping vision of hetero masculinity (they might have missed the homoerotic football-fondling in the nude campaigns shot by photographer Bruce Weber).

Were they the “cool kids” that Jeffries and his team expressly targeted? Not really. Like all of Abercrombie & Fitch’s then customers, they were kids who desperately wanted to belong.

The brand has since closed the College Green store as part of a wider restructuring, and a move away from bricks-and-mortar retail. The shutters have also been pulled down on flagship stores in London, Paris, Madrid, Brussels, Munich and Dusseldorf.

Meanwhile, they have rebranded as an online retailer that embraces inclusion, introducing a popular plus-size collection that has sparked investor confidence and increased the stock price. Therein lies the magic of the Abercrombie & Fitch formula. Just as they were doing influencer marketing — albeit with sales staff — before the rise of Instagram, they’re now sniffing the wind once again and packaging a touchy-feely brand of radical inclusion.

White Hot focuses on the “rise and fall” of the chequered brand, yet it seems highly likely that it will rise all over again.

Wrong time, wrong place: the factors that made the Vanishing Triangle possible

These eight women disappeared just before CCTV, mobile phones and DNA detection became commonplace. But society's attitudes played a part in their tragic cases too, writes **Claire McGowan**



Almost 30 years ago, a young woman set out for a walk on a March afternoon near Dublin. Having phoned several friends to see if anyone wanted to join her, she went alone to catch a bus or perhaps arranged to meet someone else. The next night, some friends turned up to her house for dinner as planned but found nobody there. Since this was 1993 and they didn't have mobiles, they had to simply go home, confused and worried. Soon, it became clear that she had never returned from her walk.

Two years later, another young woman ducked into a phone box on a lonely road near the village of Moone in Co Kildare. It was a dark and cold November night, and she was trying to hitch her way back home after missing her bus. After calling a friend to explain her situation, she broke off for a moment, then came back saying she had a lift and needed to go. She was never seen or heard from again.

Another three years on, in 1998, a student teacher headed into town in the middle of a summer's day to get a money order for her next term's tuition fees. She was seen on CCTV walking down the high street, then somehow went missing on the short walk home, probably within sight of her own front door. She too was never seen again.

Could these disappearances, part of the so-called Vanishing Triangle cases, women who went missing in the mid-1990s, happen now, and remain unsolved for so long? Surely Annie McCarrick, the first to disappear, would have texted her friends with her plans for a walk. There would have been CCTV of her on the bus, then later from a pub she may have gone to. Other drinkers might have captured her in the background of photos they took, or even posted to social media. Perhaps a trail of Instagram posts might have marked her last steps.

Like Jo Jo Dullard, who went missing in 1995, would have been able to let her family know what had happened with her bus, and who it was who gave her a lift. Deirdre Jacob, the student teacher, might have appeared on dash-cams or door-cams as she walked past. Someone might have seen what happened to her on the road and called the police from a mobile, or snapped a picture, or noted the num-

berplate of someone acting strangely, which could then be easily traced. All the women would probably have had mobiles that could have given clues to their final locations, and maybe left message threads to indicate if they had gone to meet someone.

As it was, to go missing right before the widespread use of mobile phones, CCTV and even DNA testing was tragically unlucky. There was a snippet of CCTV of Annie McCarrick in a bank earlier that day, and the same for Deirdre Jacob. There is nothing for Jo Jo Dullard or any of the others missing in the 'triangle', since at the time banks were one of the few places to have security cameras. Imelda Keenan, for example, was another young woman who went missing from the centre of Waterford in 1994. Nowadays, there would surely be multiple images of her walking through town in the middle of the day. As it was, she vanished without a trace.

COLD CASE SOLVED

Even in the early 1990s, modern investigative techniques were not available to gardaí. The first case to be solved with DNA in Ireland was not until 1995, that of another woman who was murdered in Dublin, Marilyn Rynn. There was no lab in the country that could handle it, so samples had to be sent to England.

In 1999, DNA was used again to solve a cold case from 1979, also within the Vanishing Triangle. Phyllis Murphy's killer had given a blood sample at the time, and a far-sighted garda had kept it safe until it could be used. The DNA was clear — a false alibi had allowed this man to escape conviction for 20 years.

Of course, there were no bodies in the triangle cases to yield DNA, but perhaps the scenes of the disappearances might have offered some clues, or predators might have been convicted and taken off the streets earlier. There are numerous cases of women being murdered in the 1990s by men with previous criminal charges, who either served no prison time or were out in just a few years to do it again.

The ability of technology to solve crimes only grows — last year in Greece a woman's FitBit was able to record her time of death, and this helped convict her husband of her murder. It seems likely that all these new resources might have at least offered some leads in the triangle cases, were they to happen now.

A 2018 case of a woman snatched from the same village where Annie McCarrick was last seen illustrates how much things have changed. Jastine Valdez was abducted after getting off a bus. A passing driver saw it happen and was able to call the police immediately from her mobile. CCTV from the bus quickly gave the make of car driven by her attacker, and the police were then rapidly able to trace all the owners of such vehicles, while automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) allowed them to track their chief suspect. Tragically, Jastine was already dead, probably within 45 minutes of being taken. The case at least does not remain unsolved, her body never found, like those of the triangle women.

In 2012, another high-profile murder, that of Elaine O'Hara, was solved in part thanks to mobile phone data and geolocation. Her body was not discovered for over a year after her murder, and had the evidence not been found, her death may well have been put down to suicide. (Her killer, Graham Dwyer, has challenged the use of such data. In a ruling with significant implications, this month the Court of Justice for the European Union said EU law precludes the general and indiscriminate retention of phone metadata for combating serious crime.)

The impact of new technology is just one factor I examine in my book on the Irish cases from the 1990s, *The Vanishing Triangle*. Another key reason why the disappearances may have happened in the first place, and then remained unsolved for so long, is the historical context. The mid-1990s were a time of colossal change in Ireland, socially and politically. It's possible the disappearances were overshadowed by momentous events such as the X case, the divorce referendum, the decriminalisation of homosexual acts, the Troubles.

Growing up just over the Border in the North, I don't recall ever hearing about the missing women, although one, Ciara Breen, was just a year older than me and living less than 20 miles away; we even went to some of the same discos. Conversely, we heard endless stories about the Troubles, every in-and-out of the peace process in the time between 1994 and 1998, as ceasefires



Fiona Pender



Deirdre Jacob

Fiona Sinnott's house seemed to have been cleared out before gardaí searched it. A farmer found her possessions on his land and burned them



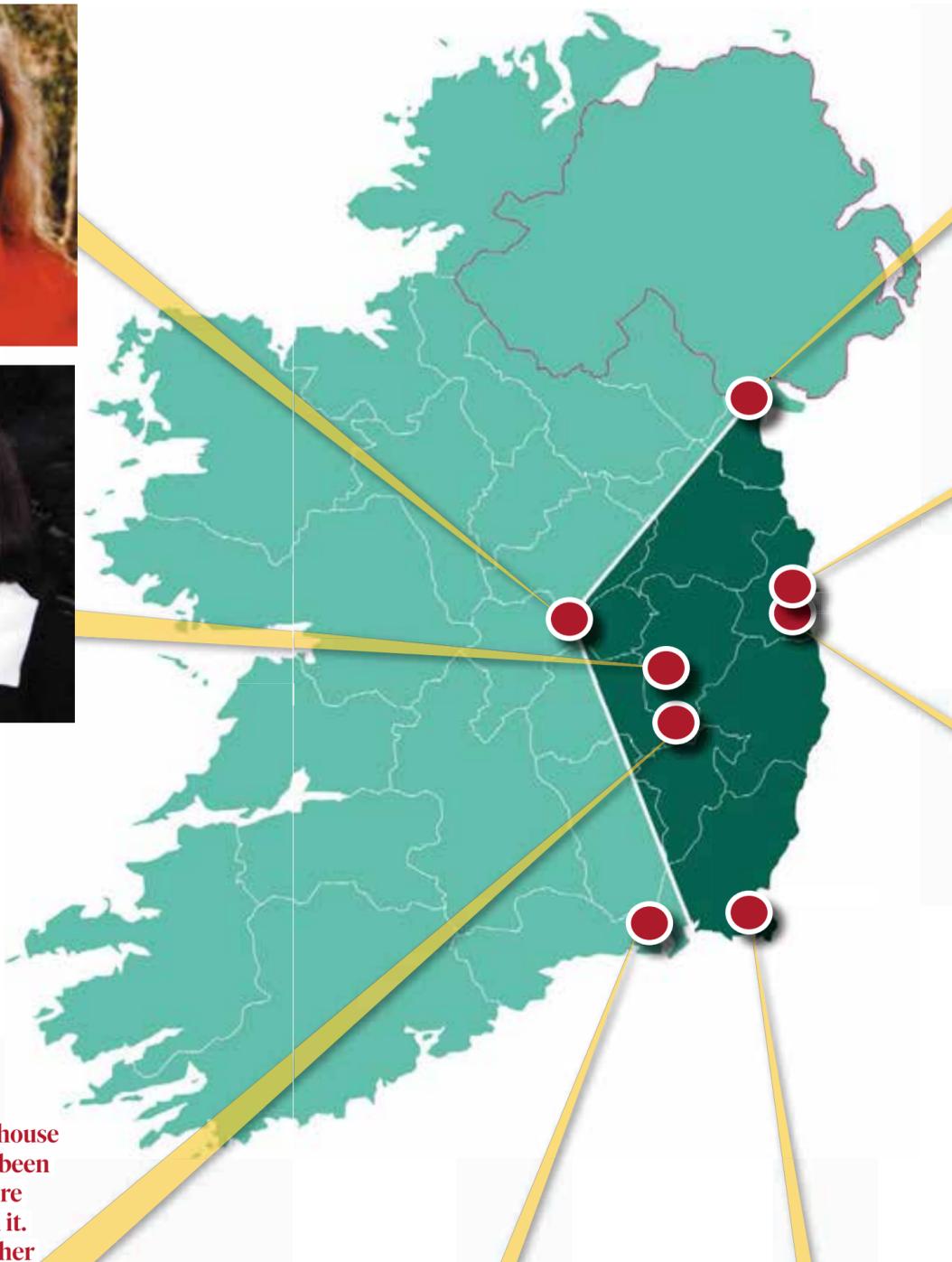
Jo Jo Dullard



Imelda Keenan



Fiona Sinnott



Ciara Breen



Eva Brennan



Annie McCarrick

and peace talks stumbled and fell apart time after time.

Again, technology plays a part in this: with social media and rolling news, it seems unthinkable now that people wouldn't have known every detail of the disappearances, and perhaps connections would have been made sooner.

When Eva Brennan went missing in 1993, four months after Annie McCarrick's disappearance, her family were aware of the similarities, and mentioned the earlier case to gardaí. They said they were dismissed out of hand and claimed the force seemed to have made up their minds that Eva had taken her own life, having been depressed in the past. Fiona Pender was another young woman who vanished in the triangle in 1996, while heavily pregnant, from her Tullamore flat. She was 25.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

Since writing my book, I've been contacted by several women who wanted to tell me about frightening experiences they had had in the 1990s within the triangle, such as being followed by a car on a lonely road, or getting into what they thought was a taxi and being driven the wrong way. Often, they didn't report it because it didn't seem important enough, or they felt in some way it was their own fault. Hopefully, attitudes have changed to the point that this wouldn't happen now.

Lack of knowledge about the cases is one reason people didn't report things they saw. In the case of Fiona Sinnott, a young mother who went missing apparently from her own home in 1998, her house seemed to have been cleared out when gardaí searched it. Later, it emerged

that a farmer had found bags of her possessions dumped on his land and, thinking they were part of a trend of illegal dumping, burned them. Surely, nowadays, there would be widespread awareness that a woman was missing, and any evidence would be handed in.

Another reason for people not reporting information seems to have been distrust of gardaí, or perhaps fear that they would get in trouble, or that what they had seen couldn't possibly be significant, that they wouldn't be taken seriously.

Indeed, possible witnesses in several of the cases claimed they did report what they saw, but it was not followed up. In the Jo Jo Dullard case, a number of people allegedly came forward after the incident to say they had seen suspicious things that night — a girl in a forest with two men, a barefoot woman being dragged into a car by her hair. Sometimes, however, these sightings were not reported for almost a year afterwards.

Certainly, in Northern Ireland people were unlikely to approach the police in the 1990s, as this could have had drastic consequences in certain communities. Has this distrust of the authorities, or diffidence, or refusal to get involved, changed? A 2019 survey revealed that over 90pc of Irish people felt trust in the gardaí, with the figure rising year on year.

'WAYWARD' GIRL

Attitudes to women are also likely to have played a role in how the cases were handled. As with Eva Brennan, assumptions were made by gardaí at crucial early stages in several of the investigations. A story went about that Jo Jo Dullard had had an abortion in England before she vanished, attributing her disappearance to the fact she must have been depressed as a result, though her family insisted she wasn't.

In the case of young mother Fiona Sinnott, who wasn't married, her past relationships seemed to have been a factor in how her case was managed. With Ciara Breen, just 17 when she went missing in Dundalk, a retired garda informed me she was seen as a "wayward" girl, who had probably run away. I was also amazed when watching a documentary about the Annie McCarrick case to hear an expert say that "of course" Annie should not have gone walking alone — at three o'clock in the afternoon.

One fact that became clear to me as I researched the book was that in four of the eight cases, there was a credible suspect, known to the victim. Many of the women had also experienced domestic violence. Nowadays, there is a better understanding of the nature of coercion and the idea of femicide. Women's Aid Ireland has started cataloguing the violent deaths of women in the country, revealing the stark truth that almost 90pc of women murdered are killed by someone they know, usually a partner or family member.

So could these cases happen today? The sad answer is yes — women continue to be murdered both by strangers and people they know, and there is evidence that domestic violence increased during lockdown by a third. Horrific murders still occur. There are almost a thousand people considered long-term missing in Ireland.

However, I like to hope that, nowadays, so many women could not disappear without someone making connections, that it wouldn't take five years to even look into the possibility they were linked. That we understand better how sexual offenders escalate and reoffend. That the nature of coercion within relationships is more widely known. That attitudes among the gardaí, and even the general public, have changed to the point where they would take the views of families seriously, and report things they had seen, and not make assumptions or blame the victims.

All this change may not prevent violent crimes, but hopefully we could not now have a situation where so many women went missing in such a short space of time, and 30 years later nothing has come to light about any of them.

• *The Vanishing Triangle* by Claire McGowan is published by Little A on May 1



Thomas Piketty: ‘We are not doing enough to target the oligarchs’

The radical French economist tells **J.P. O'Malley** the Ukraine war is helping Putin distract his compatriots from how he and his cronies impoverished their country — and why the West should halt Russian fossil fuel imports immediately

Vladimir Putin last month demanded that foreign buyers pay for Russian gas in roubles or they would have their supplies cut off indefinitely. Many conservative economic experts claimed the Russian president's blackmail would leave Europe in dire straits.

Thomas Piketty is not among them. “The west should cut all Russian gas imports straight away,” the radical French economist tells *Review* from his book-lined Paris living room. “This is very doable. For a country like, say, Germany, it would cost between 2–3pc of their GDP. If we don't cut our reliance on Russian gas in the West, we will continue to send money every day to the Putin regime, which is intent on destroying Ukraine. In years to come, we will look back and regret this.”

The academic and multimillion-selling author believes learning lessons from history is essential to keep up progress towards a more egalitarian global society. That was the main theme of his 2014 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which sold more than 2.5 million copies. The 50-year-old has published a number of books since, including *Capital and Ideology* (2019) and *Time for Socialism* (2021). His latest, *A Brief History of Equality*, is out next week. Optimistic in tone and content, its argument is built around a simple message: there has been a general trend towards global equality — particularly in Europe — between the end of the 18th century and today.

“The move towards equality during that time frame is not a natural phenomenon,” he says. “It's a long-running trend which begins with the demise of aristocratic privileges during the French Revolution and the slave revolt in St Domingue in Haiti: both events represent the beginning of the end for aristocratic slave-owning colonial societies.”

That trend towards more even wealth distribution continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, he says, as the benefits of social security and progressive taxation narrowed the gap between rich and poor in the western world. So too did social movements, the rise of trade unions and the establishment of new power relationships between capital and labour.

It all sounds rather utopian. But the his-

tory of equality is neither peaceful nor linear, Piketty stresses. Revolts, revolutions, social upheavals, political crises and bloody wars all played a vital role too. This long-running trend towards a fairer egalitarian society can and should continue, he believes. But we first need to take stock of how and why it worked.

It wasn't until after World War I that progressive high taxes were adopted in most western countries. In the US, for instance, the top tax rate for the federal income rose from 7pc in 1913 to an astounding 77pc in 1918.

“Before World War I, the top 10pc of society owned between 80 or 90pc of total wealth. This was certainly true in countries like France, Britain and the US,” he says. “That has declined to the top 10pc owning about 60pc of wealth today [in the US it is about 70pc], so we're definitely not there yet in this movement towards more and more equality, although we have made great progress.”

Piketty cites the aftermath of World War II as another example of a global crisis that eventually brought about fairer economic conditions for middle- and working-class people. Take Britain. When the Labour Party won by a landslide in the 1945 election, it set up the National Health Service (NHS) and a vast system of social welfare insurance followed.

“I'm not saying all you need is a big crisis, a rev-

olution, and equality will immediately follow: that would be stupid,” Piketty says. “But you definitely need to have big mobilisation to break the balance of power. Because the elite will always try to protect their position. This was as true with the aristocratic class during the French Revolution as it is with billionaires today.”

It's especially true in Russia in 2022. “Russia's political and economic development, or rather its lack of it, since the fall of the Soviet Union three decades ago is a big drama,” he says. “The same country that pretended to abolish private property during the 20th century suddenly became the world capital of tax oligarchs and kleptocrats.”

The invasion of Ukraine is “to some extent, a nice distraction for Putin,” he says, because it allows him to “cover up the fact that people close to him in his autocratic regime have been stealing resources away from ordinary Russian people for decades.”

Piketty claims the West's sanctions against Russia don't go far enough. “We're not putting enough effort to actually target all of the oligarchs,” he says. “[In the West] we have largely taken symbolic measures, which only target a few wealthy Russian [billionaires], whereas it should actually be thousands of Russian millionaires that are targeted.”

He points out that there are roughly

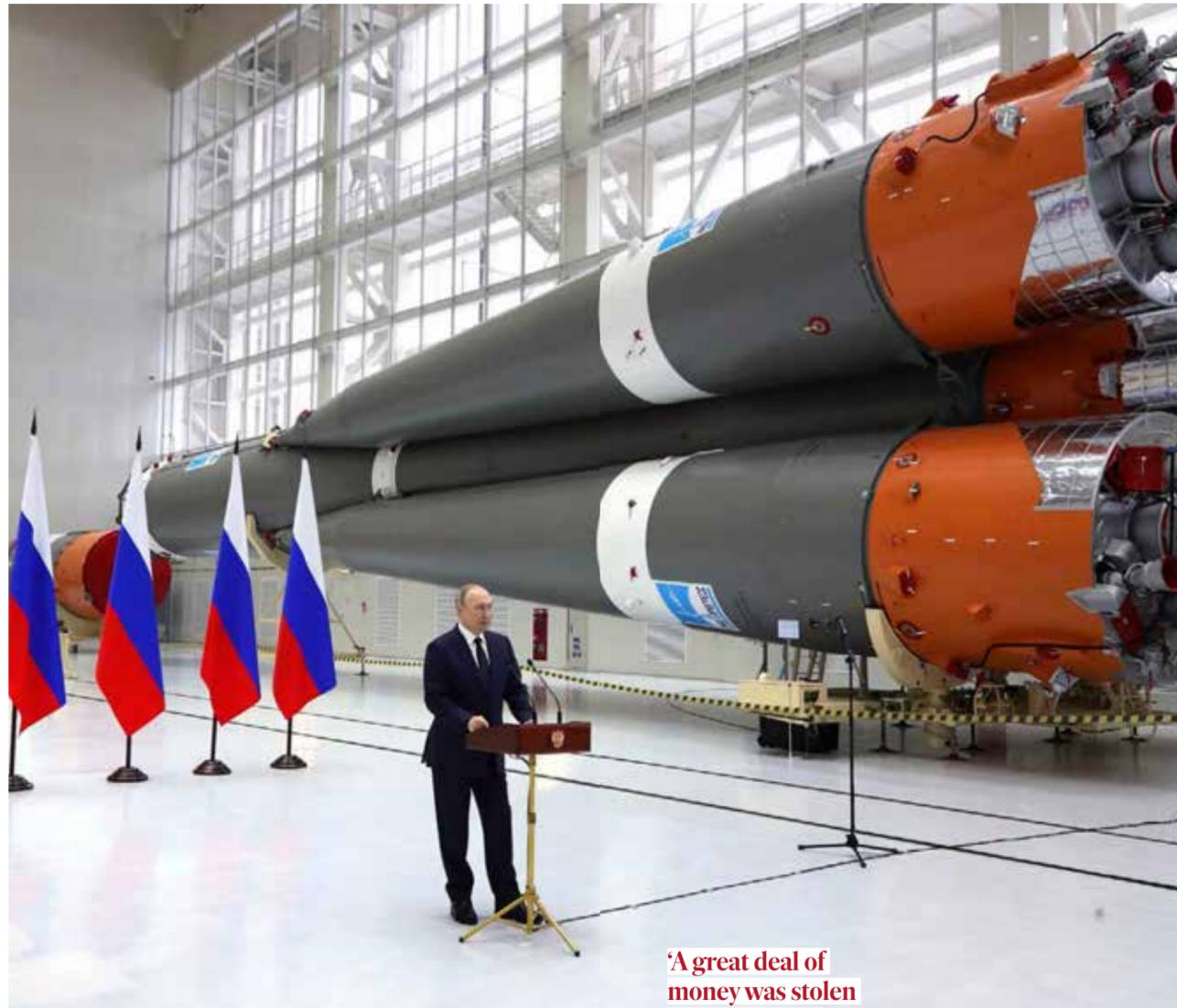
20,000 Russians today whose net worth is more than €10m each. “If the West really wanted to target the oligarchic class that has benefited from the Putin regime in Russia,” he says, “they would need to target this group of wealthy individuals.”

“Targeting the Russian millionaires with proper sanctions could make a big difference in putting pressure on the Putin regime because it would show that the international [community] is serious about social justice, democracy and transparency.”

Piketty says Russia's war in Ukraine is a serious wake-up call to western governments, which have been complicit in laundering dirty Russian money for decades.

“There is a lot of hypocrisy around this issue because a great deal of money [and assets] were stolen from ordinary Russian people following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991,” he says. “This money was then invested in western financial institutions, and real estate markets in Paris, London and New York. And then suddenly when there is a war, we say: ‘Oh, we need to do something about this.’”

Western governments have not just given Russian oligarchs financial security, they have protected their public reputations with the rule of law. The British legal system has been particularly accommodating. In 2012, for instance, Chelsea FC owner Roman Abramovich won a court battle in a London commercial court



‘A great deal of money was stolen from ordinary Russians following the collapse of the Soviet Union and it was invested in western financial institutions’

against another exiled Russian oligarch, Boris Beresovsky. Legal costs reached £100m.

Court cases like these, between filthy-rich Russian oligarchs, visibly display how “we have built a legal system [in the West] that protects the wealthy,

but which does not protect ordinary people,” Piketty says.

“If you are a normal Russian, and lose half of your wage because of the depreciation of the rouble or because of inflation coming from western sanctions, there is no court you can turn to and complain,” he says. “But if you have £100m in London, and someone tries to take away half of your wealth, then you can go to court, and nothing will be taken away from you. We are so accustomed to this asymmetry in legal protection that we think it's normal, but it's not.”

“This war in Ukraine is crazy, and a human disaster, but it should, ideally, help us accelerate the movement towards more transparency in asset ownership.”

● *‘A Brief History of Equality’ by Thomas Piketty is published on April 19 by Harvard University Press*

‘Stealing resources’: Vladimir Putin at a rocket assembly factory this week. Photo by Evgeny Biyatov, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP



Germany's mistake: why did Merkel decide to import more Russian gas?

Edgar Morgenroth

When Otto von Bismarck resigned as German leader in 1890, his departure was likened to a maritime pilot leaving a ship. Without him, a series of decisions and events occurred that ultimately led to World War I. When Angela Merkel stood down in December after 16 years in power, there were many comparisons with the Iron Chancellor. Now, with her handling of the German-Russian relationship under renewed scrutiny in light of the war in Ukraine, it is worth asking whether she steered her country into difficult waters.

Merkel earned her international reputation during the financial crisis of 2009/10 and the refugee crisis of 2015, but also for her focus on diplomacy, treaties and international economic integration. She also tackled many domestic issues such as energy, the integration of migrants, internal security and economic policy. Many of these areas have influenced Germany's reaction to the expanded Russo-Ukrainian war, a response seen by many as slow.

One of the most obvious issues is Germany's reliance on Russian gas. It began importing it during the Cold War, back in 1973. This was part of the détente policy of Social Democrat chancellor Willy Brandt, who sought to normalise relations between the West and the East. This approach was followed to different degrees by successive German governments, and it formed the basis for Merkel's policy of de-escalation through closer economic ties.

Economic ties cut both ways. While Russia is dependent on German payments for gas as well as oil and coal sales, Germany has become dependent on Russian gas, which accounts for more than 50pc of its gas imports. Additionally, about 40pc of Germany's crude oil imports come from Russia. Continued gas imports from Russia to Germany are supporting Putin's regime in the tune of hundreds of millions of euro a day.

The dependence on Russian gas needs to be understood in the context of Merkel's other energy policy decisions. In 2009, she and her coalition partners agreed to extend the use of nuclear power. In the wake of the Fukushima nuclear accident, this move was reversed in 2011. The implication was to make Germany more reliant on fossil fuels, particularly gas, while trying to increase the use of renewable electricity.

A number of pipelines are used to transport the gas from Russia to other European countries, including Germany. Until 2011, all pipelines from Russia to central and western Europe crossed Ukraine or Belarus and on through Poland and Slovakia. Just before Merkel became chancellor, her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, signed a contract to lay a pipeline through the Baltic Sea directly from Russia to Germany. The project, Nord Stream 1, went into operation in 2011.

In the meantime, there had been a number of disputes between Russia's Gazprom and the Ukrainian gas company Naftogaz over pricing and debts, which culminated

in reduced supply to a number of countries including Hungary, Romania and Poland.

In 2015, contracts were signed to build a second direct pipeline, Nord Stream 2, which would allow all Germany's gas imports from Russia to bypass Ukraine, which would deprive that country of the gas transport fees for using its part of the Yamal pipeline. It would also allow Russia to stop supplying gas to Ukraine and would keep Russian gas exports secure in case of war with that country. Thus, Nord Stream 2 had clear geopolitical implications. It gave Russia a freer hand to attack Ukraine more broadly, having already annexed Crimea and parts of the Ukrainian Donbas in 2014.

It is not surprising that EU countries, notably the Baltic states and Poland, as well as the US warned Germany against proceeding with Nord Stream 2. Despite the growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, Russian war crimes in Syria, the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2015 and the killing of Selimchan Changoschwili in Berlin 2019 by the Russian secret services, Merkel did not stop Nord Stream 2. The project was completed last year, but an operating licence

has been denied in the wake of the Ukraine war, and the Nord Stream 2 company has suspended all business operations.

Apart from relying on Russian fossil fuel imports, German industry was also encouraged to export to and invest in Russia. Russia accounts for about 2pc of German goods exports, which makes it Germany's 15th largest export partner. In addition, there are still some 3,500 German companies with branches in Russia (down from 6,500 in 2011), including VW and agricultural machinery firm Claas, which both have large plants in Russia.

In the wake of the Russian war on Ukraine, it is clear that becoming reliant on Russian fossil fuels was a mistake. While it is easy to blame Merkel alone for all the mistakes, it is important to recognise that her governments were all coalitions. Three of her four governments were so-called grand coalitions between her party and the Social Democrat Party (SPD). There is a shared responsibility.

SPD politicians like Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who was foreign minister from 2009 to 2013 and is now president, persisted with their benign policy towards Russia and Putin despite the obvious dangers. Steinmeier this week cancelled a trip to Ukraine, admitting he would not be welcome. Even in recent months, some in the SPD have praised Russian officials and downplayed the potential danger of a war in Ukraine.

Indeed, the initial response by the new government under SPD chancellor Olaf Scholz to the Russian aggression against Ukraine was very slow. Germany was reluctant to commit to weapons deliveries, prevented Estonia from sending old East German artillery to Ukraine and did not want to impose full sanctions immediately. Overall, support for Ukraine has been less than that from much smaller countries such as Sweden and even Estonia — and, of course,

Germany continues to pay for Russian gas.

● *Edgar Morgenroth is professor of economics at Dublin City University Business School*

The deal for the new pipeline gave Russia a freer hand to attack Ukraine

Key energy policy decisions: Angela Merkel



‘Great progress’: Thomas Piketty says the move to greater equality is a long-running trend



Meet the creatives who found their inspiration in direct provision

Tanya Sweeney talks to a group of refugees who have overcome hardships in the asylum system — from lack of space to scraping together funds for materials — to find an outlet for their artistic side

Morenike Ajayi was obsessed with fashion from a young age. Growing up in Nigeria, she would watch runway models showcasing new collections on TV “and imagine being the designer.”

“I learned lots from my next-door neighbour who had an industrial sewing machine, fascinated at how it worked,” she says.

In 2014, Ajayi moved to Ireland and was reunited with her brother in direct provision (DP) after two years of living apart.

“I was 16 and confused when I entered the system,” she says. “Honestly, all I cared about when I got to the centre was being with my brother. With him there, I knew we’d get through whatever hardships together.”

Four years later, her creative dreams were finally back on track after she got her own sewing machine.

“In 2018, while in direct provision, stuck on my bed, recovering from surgery, I was thinking of my passion and what I could do after recovering to keep me happy, as there was no access to third-level education and work,” she says.

“I started being creative again. However, it wasn’t an easy start due to lack of space and insufficient income to purchase the necessary equipment. We received €19.10 a week (the current weekly welfare payment in DP is €38.80 per adult and €29.80 per child); I had to man-

age my money prudently. You can imagine how hard it must have been to purchase materials when I needed them.”

Many people who have been through DP will attest that it is a stressful, anxious and stifling experience; qualities that are not conducive to creativity. Research by University College Cork has stated that “direct provision is a key contributor to and has caused serious mental and physical health deterioration in people seeking asylum; it fails to recognise people’s most basic social, cultural, gender, ethnic and religious needs... it systematically isolates those seeking asylum, and enforces institutionalisation and powerlessness”.

OPTIMISM

Yet a wellspring of creative energy and optimism lies within the system. There are several initiatives to give these impulses an outlet. Scoop Foundation, a charity, runs music production programmes in DP centres in partnership with tutors at CreateSound.ie. In Cork, the Glucksman Gallery offers projects to nurture self-expression and build social inclusion. In 2018, the Song Seeking Project was a collaboration between the Irish Refugee Council, Mary Immaculate College and Sing Ireland; its goal was “to connect and integrate through the collective power of music”. In Galway, Croí Na Gaillimhe offers several social and creative activities, with a focus on DP.



‘Most people in direct provision have skills and would like to show them to the nation, if not the world’

“One of the centres I lived in was Mosney in Meath, the largest direct provision centre in Ireland. It is full of young creative people that people outside the centre maybe aren’t aware of,” Ajayi says. “I respect creative people living in direct provision because despite the hardships of uncertainty, instability and all the emotions they might be experiencing, they are strong people who are hungry to make a great life for themselves and they are doing what it takes to achieve that.”

In Ajayi’s case, there was nothing to do but improvise on such a small budget, upcycling old garments or buying equipment and accessories from discount outlets such as Dealz or EuroGiant. She learned about branding and marketing online and began contacting others in the fashion industry.

Her ingenuity has paid off, and her online design/fashion brand This Creative Fiend is gathering pace, online and off (@thiscreativefiend on Instagram). Her eye-catching hats, luxurious Ankara-silk masks, head wraps and dresses, all made with African print fabrics, have found a devoted following.

Similarly, Janet Ifi, who arrived in the system in December 2019 from Nigeria, has created an enterprise from her meagre welfare payment. She received her labour permit nine months after arriving and now sells waist beads and anklets (@robertzjenny.fit on Instagram).

“I saved [the welfare payment] every week,” she says. “I started ordering online and made 120 strands of beads. I sold 96 the first week I told the residents about my business, which was then in Baleskin Reception Centre [Dublin]. I posted on Facebook Market and I got a lot of people who were interested, but when I gave them my address for pick-up and they saw that I live in direct provision, no one [would] show up.”

She nevertheless has big plans. “I’m presently studying applied social care in TUD level 8, but I also want to grow my business,” she says. “Most people in direct provision have skills and would like to show it to the nation, if not the world, but they have no idea where to start from and fear of not being accepted in society.”

In Westport, Insaf Yalcinkaya (49), who arrived in the DP system in 2017 from Kurdistan, had to think creatively to get his projects over the line. He hopes to publish his poetry, based largely on his own experiences, but in the meantime has kept busy. He runs a souk/bazaar project with the visual artist collective Art Nomads, with support from the Arts Council, and created another project for the Mother Tongue Festival.

“At the DP centre I wrote a lot of poems and paintings,” he says. “I sold my paint-



Morenike Ajayi: ‘At the time, we received €19.10 a week; I had to manage my money prudently.’ Photo from Instagram by Eire Vybez

ings to buy a train ticket to Dublin to join a writers’ group to share my poems. I had applied a lot of times for a traveling allowance to join the group meeting in Dublin because my weekly allowance of €19.20 was nothing.

“Unfortunately, they always refused my application so I collected some wood and pinecones in a forest and created my art pieces to raise money.”

In Killarney, visual artist Rejoice Nkala recalls arriving in DP from Zimbabwe.

“My first impressions were just mixed emotions,” she recalls. “I was feeling good to finally be here. Being given free accommodation, food and taken care of was a blessing for me. On the other hand, I was depressed, stressed and missed my family so much, so that was not easy for me. I stayed with five other girls in the same room, which was not easy for us as we were coming from different backgrounds.

“Also, not having privacy and freedom to go out as you like made me more stressed. So I either paint when my roommate is not around or I have to go outside.”

Nevertheless, she persevered and now creates boldly coloured landscapes and still life paintings. She recently displayed work at an art show at the



From far left: Visual artist Rejoice Nkala; waist-beads maker Janet Ifi; and musician Mncedisi Phondo (aka O.Syn). Photos by Dominic Walsh, Steve Humphreys and Dylan Vaughan

Dublin premises of Akidwa, a national network of migrant women (her Instagram is @artwithrejoy).

“I really wish one day to find myself in my own art studio, able to inspire other people who are into art, to be able to teach others,” she says. “Art is therapeutic, I feel like it’s really needed in people’s lives and, yes, I do love to put smiles on people’s faces through art.”

Mncedisi Promise Phondo, a digital illustrator/electronic musician who records under the name O.Syn (@prodbyo.syn on Instagram), arrived in Waterford in February 2020 from Zimbabwe, and the DP experience fed into his work.

“Compared to my past experiences with humanity, it was comforting to find people that were welcoming and accepting of who I was, so all in all, my first impressions of the system was good,” he says.

ALONE AND DEPRESSED

“As I was alone and depressed at the start, I ironically found myself in a good creative space as I used my depression as a muse to create something that is melodically beautiful,” he adds. “At the start, I had problems as I did not have any equipment to create my art, but luckily I found an organisation that not only gave me the chance to showcase my talent but it also supplied me with equipment and lessons that sharpened my skillset, thus making me a better artist.”

“I used to borrow a laptop from the potter that works at my centre, and I would create my art through that method; that was until CreateSound.ie enrolled me into their programme and gave me all the tools I needed to create my art.”

Louth-based artist Joe Odiboh, who arrived in DP from South Africa in 2011, says the system “made me the artist, writer and man I am today”. Raised in Nigeria (he moved to South Africa in 1994), he was a gifted high school art teacher. Since arriving in Ireland, he has written nine books — all available on Amazon — exhibited in spaces and at festivals across the country, and started a YouTube channel.

“DP inspired me and created enabling circumstances and conditions for my arts practice and self-development,” he says.

Still, he paints a different picture of his first impression of the system.

“My first impression of direct provision was to eat and sleep, the culture of depression, and laziness and moral laxity, culminating into mental illness or stress disorder,” he says. “The problems of artists in direct provision is demoralisation. They’re depressed and lack synergy. They’re mostly interested in getting their residency or papers more than developing their skills and potential. Interest and focus go hand in hand.”

Diary of a Ukrainian refugee



Ksenia Samotiy: ‘My next move will be difficult.’ Photo by Damien Eagers

‘I’ll never be able to explain how the war has changed people’

Ksenia Samotiy (19) and her family fled Lviv in late February. Her mum and two siblings are based in Warsaw while she has just moved in with her third Irish host family

I’ve been in Ireland for one month now and I recently moved in with a new host family in Carrickmines in south Dublin. My last host was an older woman in Rathgar but this is a young couple, with three children. I’m still working remotely for a Ukrainian company, although this is my last week. I’ve had job offers to work in audit firms here in Ireland so now I have to choose which one. I think I’d like an office-based job, at least initially. It will give me an opportunity to meet more people.

My family is getting life figured out in Poland and my dad is still in Ukraine, hosting people who need shelter in our home. I think the fact that I’m doing great, and that my family in Poland is doing OK, keeps him going.

Is my dad thinking about joining us? I think it’s a constant thought but no actions have been taken so far, and I don’t think they will be. My dad is safe, but what is happening in Ukraine is real genocide, and what people are going through is extremely terrifying. For example, when a friend from Mariupol was fleeing the city recently, she and her family found a 10-year-old boy whose parents were killed in the bombings. They picked him up and have been taking care of him ever since.

Those who are still there have undergone real psychological changes. They don’t really understand what’s safe and what’s not safe any more. We see a lot of people going back home, even though it’s obviously not safe. And people who are stuck there, they’re just... they have changed.

You can hear it in the conversation with them. I don’t think they’ll ever be the people that we knew before it happened... And I don’t think I’ll ever be able to explain it, because I wasn’t there.

I’ve started to meet up with Ukrainian people in Dublin at social events and protests. And even if we don’t talk, it’s just nice to be around them. One of my Irish friends took me to Cork recently and I spent the weekend on a farm. It was so calm and yet still close to civilisation.

I find it funny how Irish people have a different understanding of distance in comparison to other parts of Europe. They say, “It’s so far!” when it’s only, like, 280km. In Ukraine, we’re used to driving distances. Like, for example, from my city to the capital, it would be 500km.

I might stay in Carrickmines until the end of spring, but I’m not sure yet. It depends on how the search for my own place goes.

I’m trying not to think too far into the future but I’m aware that the next move will be difficult. I’ve noticed that after having to leave home, then leave my family in Poland, that moving feels different now.

I never had problems moving before but it has definitely become more psychologically difficult. To get attached to something and then have it gone... it’s just like another kind of effort than it was before.

● In conversation with Katie Byrne

Culture

ALEXANDER SKARSGÅRD 'VIKING CULTURE HAS BEEN GLORIFIED IN A DANGEROUS WAY'

Interview

Paul Whittington



The Swedish actor talks about his demanding role in *The Northman*, Robert Eggers' brutal and brilliant new film about the legend of Amleth

When you see the longships coming, you know you're in trouble. At the start of Robert Eggers' extraordinary new film *The Northman*, they sweep into a Viking port, bearing a warrior king Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke), who is wounded, and surrounded by enemies. His twitchy brother Fjölfnir (Claes Bang) has designs on his kingdom and his willowy queen, Gudrún (Nicole Kidman). Fjölfnir will kill the king, take his wife – and Aurvandil's son will have to avenge him.



Sounds like *Hamlet*, right? So it is, or rather the Nordic legend that Shakespeare borrowed to create his most famous play. *The Northman* brings the misty world of the Vikings terrifyingly to life and stars Alexander Skarsgård as Amleth, son of Aurvandil, who grows up full of bile and hell-bent on a single purpose – killing Fjölfnir and rescuing his mother. In an intensely physical role, a bulked-up Skarsgård lays waste to all around him.

It's a powerful performance, seething and hate-fuelled. When I talk to him, Skarsgård tells me he felt "very emotional, and slightly overwhelmed" when he first watched the film. Was he familiar with the legend of Amleth? "Not really. Growing up in Sweden, you're familiar with the Icelandic sagas, but it wasn't like everyone had heard of Prince Amleth of Jutland," he says.

"I moved to the States about 20 years ago and I noticed that people outside of Sweden are way more fascinated by Vikings than Swedish people are. In Sweden, you're literally surrounded by rune stones, so maybe it's too close, it's literally in your DNA and the soil you stand on. So for most of my childhood, it wasn't a big part of our culture or how we saw ourselves."

In *The Northman*, Amleth is brutalised as a young boy by seeing his father murdered in front of him and grows into a seething tower of rage. Was he a difficult character to get inside?

"I had to do a lot of research in order to understand Amleth and what drives him, what motivates him," Skarsgård says. "The source of the story is the 12th century *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus, but it's probably based on

an Icelandic saga that's even older, from the 10th century. A big part of the preparation involved educating myself on his relationship to the spiritual world, to the gods and to fate, which is a big theme in this movie.

"And with the supernatural elements of the story, it was imperative to make those feel real: Amleth never questions them – it might seem like a fever dream to an audience today, but to him, it's 100pc real. So in terms of research, it was a combination of just learning more about Viking history, Norse mythology, and about life on a Viking farm."

Eggers, one of the most original directors currently working, cloaks his epic story in an atmosphere of visceral dread. It's an extraordinary film, but also a violent one, involving all manner of blade-related unpleasantness.

"We didn't want to shy away from that," Skarsgård says. "The old Icelandic sagas are incredibly violent stories. They often revolve around family feuds, a revenge story, there's a real brutality to them, so it was important to have that in the movie and to not shy away from it. We wanted those big battle sequences and fight sequences to feel visceral, and almost uncomfortable to watch."

Alexander is the eldest son of Stellan Skarsgård, the great Swedish character actor. Three

Ultimate warrior: Alexander Skarsgård quit acting at 13 before taking it up again at 21 and (right) on the rampage in *The Northman*



'This history has been co-opted by the far right...'

We wanted to show what their expeditions would really have looked like'

"Sometimes Viking culture is glorified and portrayed in a way that's incredibly heroic, and in a very dangerous way, it's also been co-opted by the far right. It's become this national pride thing, as though these Vikings sail off to protect or expand the borders of Sweden or Norway or Denmark, which absolutely wasn't true. We wanted to show what their expeditions would really have looked like."

If the coastlines and headlands where Amleth does battle look familiar, that's no coincidence. "We shot most of it in Northern Ireland and some in the Republic, in Donegal. And then we went to Iceland for about two weeks to shoot some of the thermal areas," he says. "But the rolling hills of Ireland look quite a lot like Iceland, and also with the harsh rocky shores – a lot of it reminded me of Iceland."

BIG FIGHT SCENES

The Northman is not all blood and thunder. A budding romance between Amleth and a slave called Olga (Anya Taylor-Joy) is a major subplot. "It's such a privilege when you get to work on a massive action movie," Skarsgård says. "But with a film-maker like Robert Eggers steering the longship, and when you can do weeks or months of big big fight scenes and then you're in a small room with Nicole Kidman, one of the finest actors on the planet, and work on a four or five-page long beautifully written dialogue scene, that's special."

Alexander is the eldest son of Stellan Skarsgård, the great Swedish character actor. Three

of his brothers (Bill, Valter and Gustav) are actors, but Alexander has the biggest profile, having made his name on the TV series *True Blood*, starred in big budget Hollywood movies such as *Tarzan* and *Godzilla vs. Kong*, and more recently showed his impressive range by playing complex and even unpleasant characters in Rebecca Hall's film *Passing*, and the hit TV show *Big Little Lies*.

I tell Alexander that I interviewed his dad a few years back and found him to be one of the most refreshingly candid and unaffected people I've met. He even told me about his vasectomy. (Alexander is one of eight Skarsgård's.) "Yeah," he says, laughing. "Not much of a filter there!" Did his father encourage or push him and his brothers towards acting?

"My dad is pretty amazing," he says. "I think I'm an actor today because of him, but not because he pushed me into it. I was a child actor, but when I was 13, I quit. I was in this small Swedish film that got a bit of attention: 13 is an awkward age to begin with, and then to be in the spotlight and recognised, and have journalists write about you or talk about you, it was just very uncomfortable."

"And my dad has always been incredibly hands-off in his approach to our careers, he's always said well, if you don't love it, if you don't want to do it, go do something else. Or if you don't know what to do, then take some time off and figure it out. And for eight years, I actively stayed away from the film industry. I



Like father like son: Alexander says his dad, Stellan, did not push him into acting

went to school and I moved to Leeds for a while and I did my military service in Sweden, and then when I was 21, I came to a point where I realised that I kind of missed it.

"And again he was very supportive. I wanted to go to theatre school in New York, he supported that. But Dad's approach to all of us, all the kids, he's always been, he's in the kitchen, drinking red wine, cooking food and he's always there if you want advice or guidance or help, or just have a glass of wine and a chat about anything, but he also leaves us alone and lets us explore on our own path."

Skarsgård is not scared of playing villains either, like the racist in *Passing* or the abusive husband in *Big Little Lies*. "It's a challenge, isn't it," he says. "I think it's interesting to play characters that are very dark, but then to somehow try to find a shred of humanity in there. For example, when I worked with Nicole on *Big Little Lies*, that character was so beautifully written because when abusive husbands are portrayed on TV or film, it's usually, you know, the guy on the couch drinking beer, watching football, screaming at the wife: that's a cliché and there's rarely any nuance."

"What was so interesting about that character was that he could be charming, he was a great dad. Celeste and Perry had a real connection, you could see why she had fallen in love with him. That made it more real and I think it gave more respect to her character because you weren't going, 'what is she thinking, why is she with this horrible human being?'"

● *The Northman* is in cinemas now

Theatre Katy Hayes



'Utterly punk': Anne Gildea. Photo by Shane McCarthy

Wall of silence around female body dismantled with hilarity

Anne Gildea surveys her audience, mainly made up of menopause-adjacent women, and says: "There's great heat coming off you, you could fry an egg on it, if you had an egg." Cue big laughs.

Gildea's new show, a mixture of stand-up and songs, is pretty outrageous. Never has the female body been put under such a hilarious microscope. Apart from its primary aim of being funny, the show also tells the story of Irish women born in the 1960s and 70s, and the giant wall of silence that surrounded the body. That silence is dismantled by Gildea's relaxed approach to anatomy, as she traces a gag-laden journey through the hormonal changes of later life. The material is also, surprisingly, full of useful information. This makes it sound pious and improving, which it definitely isn't.

Much audience interaction occurs, including an exchange with a woman who is heading for breast cancer surgery in the morning. Part of Gildea's show deals with this subject, as she has been through that particular medical wringer herself. These difficult moments of candid intimacy are perfectly handled. The pre-surgery woman gets a round of applause to wish her luck.

After the interval, Gildea returns wearing golden trousers and a sparkly necklace. Her

How to Catch the Menopause & Enjoy it

Viking Theatre. Clontarf until tonight, then national tour including Wexford Arts Centre, May 21; Whale Theatre, Greystones, May 27

story goes backwards to the experience of puberty, and the nun at school called "Sister Shush" who dealt with girls' requests for sanitary products. She invokes a "mother" character whose voice is in her head, full of eternally familiar Irish-mother typical behaviour, chiding her daughter for drawing attention to herself. "HRT makes you live longer, why would you want to do that?" says this imaginary mother.

There is something utterly punk about Gildea's stage energy. She captures perfectly the dilemma of Irish women of her generation, hobbled by the micro-oppressions of conservative Catholicism, and engaging in a lifetime of micro-battles against this force. I am definitely the target audience for this show, and it spoke directly to me. But if any young people want to know what's really going on in their mums' and aunts' secret lives, this funny and taboo-busting work blasts the lid right off.

A charming portrait of friendship

The Five Lamps Arts Festival presents this neat drama set in a day care centre in Dublin's Sheriff Street. Philo is a local hero: running the bingo nights, rustling up the meals on wheels and leading the community from within.

Her boss, Sister Rosaleen, is that rare persona in an Irish story: a nun who is kind and decent. Philo is struggling to control her joyriding 15-year-old son and deal with an alcoholic husband. Rosaleen has found a route to personal fulfilment via a life of service. The play charts the development of a deep bond of friendship between the two women.

Florentina Burcea's set, involving stained glass and statuary, has a serene eloquence. Nelli Conroy is a perfect Philo; bravado jostles with heart in this touching

Philo *Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin* until April 23

performance of a big personality. Karen McCartney brings subtlety and depth to the more low-key character of Rosaleen.

Writer/director Peter Sheridan has a forensic ear for the speech patterns of the north inner-city and the play has many great one-liners. There is a backstory about child abuse, a topic that has become an over-used dramatic device in recent Irish plays.

Other themes on the subtlety and variety of loves are more interesting and original. This is a charming and entertaining portrait of two very different women, picking their way through the stepping stones of life.



ListenUp
with John Meagher

ALBUM OF THE WEEK

Wet Leg
Wet Leg

Domino

Freighted with considerable expectation thanks to the excellence of singles *Chaise Longue* and *Wet Dream*, the Isle of Wight duo's debut album comfortably lives up to the hype. Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers deliver one killer track

after another — short, purposeful, lo-fi, playful, anthemic songs that are rooted in the existence of being a twentysomething in these fraught times. Everything that's special about *Wet Leg* is captured on the sub-three-minute *Convincing*, a future indie classic that looks back to a teenage wasteland. Fontaines DC's producer of choice Dan Carey comes up trumps once more.



ALTERNATIVE

Father John Misty
Chloë and the Next 20th Century

Bella Union

Josh Tillman's storytelling gifts have long been apparent and this fifth album is already drawing comparisons to Harry Nilsson and Randy Newman in their pomp. The gorgeous *Goodbye Mr Blue* sounds

so similar to the former master that you have to pinch yourself it's not him. The album draws heavily from big-band tunes and jazz standards, and Tillman's croon is a compelling presence throughout. At times it can feel as though he is teetering close to pastiche, but the singer's regard for vintage genres seems sincere and the bittersweet songs get under your skin, as only the best can.

HOW ZIGGY MADE A SUPERSTAR OUT OF BOWIE

Music

John Meagher



Ziggy Stardust may not be David Bowie's best album but it is his most important, and its alien alter ego sent his career stratospheric. So why, after just one year, did he kill his darling?

‘Everybody was convincing me that I was the messiah. I got hopelessly lost in the fantasy.’ They are the words of David Bowie, years after he created — and then killed off — his most celebrated alter ego. The *Ziggy Stardust* character, album and tour took him from critically acclaimed fringe attraction to mainstream sensation. Even if the whole thing threatened to drive him off the rails, it ultimately made him an ever-changing artist whose extraordinary body of work will live as long as music is loved.

The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars may not be Bowie's best album, and chances are most aficionados wouldn't name it as their favourite, but it is surely his most important. It took him to a completely new level and made him part of the zeitgeist.

The moment that turned Bowie into a superstar arrived with a *Top of the Pops* performance of *Starman*, a month after the album's release. Already noted for his gender-bending theatrics and playfulness around his sexuality, Bowie — garbed and coiffed like an alien rock star — draped an arm around the shoulder of Spiders from Mars guitarist Mick Ronson and looked coyly into the camera.

It would come to be seen as a seminal TV moment of the 1970s and continues to inspire: last year, the Dublin band Thewlis released a debut single, *The Boy Behind Bowie*, which was inspired by that *Top of the Pops* performance.

Ziggy is also the theme of this year's Dublin Bowie Festival, which returns as an in-person event post-pandemic. John Brereton, its director of the festival, says the album's importance should not be underestimated.

“It was the album that made Bowie,” he says. “He'd been around [making music] since 1963 and while he had a hit with *Space Oddity*, that was looked upon as a gimmicky single, especially when it was matched up with the moon landing. But it felt as though he was back to

square one, despite making such brilliant albums as *The Man Who Sold the World* and *Hunky Dory*. They were commercial flops. But something special was brewing under the surface and he started working on *Ziggy* as soon as *Hunky Dory* was released. I think he knew this was going to be the one.”

Gone was the fey, dress-wearing, long-haired dandy and in his place came an androgynous, orange-haired, futuristically attired figure. British pop had never seen the like and Bowie was determined to enthrall and provoke. He had the songs for it too.

MOMENTUM
“When the *Ziggy* tour started, he was playing to small crowds, but very quickly he was selling out venues, and getting regular radio play and becoming a star. The momentum just built and built.”

Brereton was just about old enough to remember the excitement generated by *Ziggy*, although at the time he didn't like glam rock. The appreciation for that aspect of Bowie's career would come later. “It's astonishing to think back to 1972 and to realise just how creative and productive he was. He was writing songs that would be hits for others, and he [alongside Ronson] produced [Lou Reed's] *Transformer*, which is one of the defining albums of that time.”

The Dublin-based collective Salty Dog No Stars will perform both *Ziggy Stardust* and *Transformer* albums at a show in Whelan's as part of the festival next weekend.

Liam Mulvaney, from the band, believes Bowie's creatively fertile early 1970s should be regarded in the whole. “To me, it's sort of Bowie #2. He had made some very interesting music before that. But I can't divorce *Hunky Dory*, *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane* from each other.”



Ziggy seemed to chime with the times and songs like Five Years and Rock 'n' Roll Suicide have a dark undercurrent to them

but there's something a bit more baroque in the storytelling on *Ziggy Stardust*. If you gave me a choice, I'd go for *Hunky Dory* every time — but nobody bought *Hunky Dory*. *Ziggy* seemed to chime with the times, somehow, and songs like *Five Years* and *Rock 'n' Roll Suicide* have a dark undercurrent to them.”

Flower power was well and truly over by 1972 and music reflected a more troubled, complicated era. For all the glamour and theatrics, Bowie did that through the *Ziggy* character too.

Shane O'Brien — aka Shobsy — cut his teeth as frontman of the Dublin band State Lights but is now determined to forge his own path as a solo artist. He has long been obsessed with the work of David Bowie and, together with Soda Blonde, he made a film, *Turn and Face the Strange*, in which he reinterprets Bowie's early '70s songs. It will be shown at the Light House Cinema, Dublin, on Wednesday.

“For me, *Ziggy Stardust* is in the top three of Bowie's albums,” he says. “That transition from *Hunky Dory* to *Ziggy* was one of the most important cultural moments in music. It was a concept album, but unlike *Sgt Pepper*, for instance, there was also a live component, a show that you could go and see. Bowie was attainable, and although it started small, it grew quickly. There was a sense that he knew this was his moment and he was going to go for it.”



Seminal: Bowie as Ziggy and Mick Ronson on *Top of the Pops* in 1972

There were 191 shows over the course of 12 months — a prodigious touring schedule — and on July 3, 1973, Bowie effectively killed off *Ziggy* at the Hammersmith Apollo. The show was filmed by the king of rock documentary-makers, DA Pennebaker, and is essential viewing for any Bowie fan.

For Shobsy, Bowie's willingness to kill his darling is the mark of a daring artist with boundless self-confidence. “He could have stayed doing that for a lot longer — the audience was there and growing all the time — but instead he wants to burn it down and start again. And soon we get another incarnation, *Aladdin Sane*.”

“As a young artist, I find that willingness to change and try new things incredibly inspiring. If I want to be a new person tomorrow, musically or artistically, I can do that. That's something that's been afforded to me and all artists because of people like David Bowie.”

‘OUT THERE’

Cork musician Stephanie Rainey, who is in the midst of an Irish tour this month, says *Ziggy Stardust* is an album that first grabbed her as a teenager and continues to weave its spell.

“The album is dreamy and concept-driven and despite being ‘out there’, it's also super-accessible,” she says. “Songs like *Starman* and *Suffragette City* are great songs and easily allow you to become a David Bowie fan.”

Rainey says Bowie came of age at a time when mainstream pop could be esoteric and risk-taking. “What we're missing in today's music are artists like David Bowie, and people who will stand the test of time. Maybe that sounds really negative, but how many times today do you hear something new and think, ‘This is important. People will be listening to this and talking about this in 50 years' time.’”

Rainey's Cork compatriot Rob Carlile is similarly enthused. He has just released his debut album, *Mentally Illmatic*. “*Ziggy Stardust* is a very inspiring work and it fuses an accessibility with concept and quirkiness,” he says.

“It was the album that was the real gateway to Bowie for me. I'd heard the hits, of course, and after buying *Hunky Dory* and loving it, *Ziggy* was the natural next step. What's thrilling even all these years later is to see a really talented artist reinvent himself and, of course, that's something he continued to do for his entire career.”

“It was very hard to put Bowie into a box — he was always looking for the next thing. *Ziggy* may capture him in a moment of time, but people still fall in love with it today because the songs were so good. Ultimately, that's the most important thing.”

● *The Dublin Bowie Festival is on now. Its theme is ‘Celebrating 50 Years of Ziggy’ and includes performances, talks and much more*



POP

Camila Cabello
Familia

Epic

The Cuban-American — one of contemporary pop's superstars — treads a fine line on this third album: she wants to pay homage to her heritage while also satisfying the demands of mainstream pop. For the most part, she succeeds. There's sass

and high energy to the Latin-tinged songs and on *Don't Go Yet* she delivers the sort of global hit that Gloria Estefan enjoyed back in the day. Several of the tracks tackle the end of her relationship with Shawn Mendes — he has also returned the favour on new songs — while the best track, *Psychofreak*, is a fresh look at anxiety issues.

Classic Talk
George Hamilton



Classic: Placido Domingo as Turiddu and Pauline Tinsley as Santuzza

Mascagni serves up a musical Easter feast of love and lust

The Italian went from conservatory drop-out to one of opera's major composers with his masterpiece *Cavalleria Rusticana*

The sounds of Easter are clearly defined. Top of the list, the *Pasissions* of Johann Sebastian Bach, composed for the Christmas season, but its vast sweep takes in the whole of the liturgical calendar.

It was, after all, on a Tuesday lunchtime following an earlier Easter in 1742 that the great oratorio was first heard, in the New Music Hall in Fishamble Street just behind Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. The 280th anniversary of that particular performance fell on Wednesday, April 13.

On the secular side of things, Pietro Mascagni's one-act opera *Cavalleria Rusticana* — a tale of lust and passion — is firmly rooted in the time of year, with the action taking place in a Sicilian village on Easter morning.

The famous orchestral intermezzo is played as the cast has left the stage to go to church, the tension of the moment eased in this calm before the storm.

The story centres on the return of Turiddu, a young soldier from the village, and a bit of a lad as it turns out. On discovering that his girlfriend, Lola, has married someone else in his absence, he finds himself a new lover. A young woman called Santuzza fits the bill.

Lola can't bear the fact that Turiddu is with another woman and sets about rekindling her old relationship. Turiddu is only too happy to oblige. Not surprisingly, Santuzza gets in a strop and tells Lola's husband, Alfio, just what is going on.

All this comes to a head as the

congregation is making its way into the church. The intermezzo plays.

When they all return, Turiddu acts his usual self, suggesting they go for a drink. But Alfio is having none of it and challenges him to a duel. This is accepted with an embrace, Turiddu biting Alfio on the ear, drawing blood, signifying a fight to the death.

They leave the stage for the confrontation, and the action ends with a female voice crying that Turiddu has been killed. *Cavalleria Rusticana* was the making of Mascagni. A drop-out — expelled from the conservatory in Milan — he was supporting himself by giving piano lessons, playing the double bass in one of the city's theatres and conducting whenever he got the chance.

RUSTIC CHIVALRY

He wrote *Cavalleria* as his entry to a competition for composers who had never had an opera performed on stage. Riven by doubts, though — he'd had to complete it in a matter of weeks — he was on the point of submitting another of his compositions when he discovered his wife had gone ahead and sent in *Cavalleria*.

Out of 73 operas entered, Mascagni's made the final three, and brought the house down when it got its first airing alongside the other two finalists.

Within a year of its premiere in 1890, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (which translates as “rustic chivalry”) had played around the world. Mascagni went on to compose 15 musical dramas, securing his place as one of the major names of opera.

● *George Hamilton presents ‘The Hamilton Scores’ on RTE lyric fm from 10am each Saturday and Sunday.*

SILLY, SHALLOW, ALL OVER THE SHOP... MUST BE NETFLIX'S NEXT HIT

Television
Chris Wasser



Anatomy of a Scandal squanders A-list talent on a messy soap opera about troublesome Tories. It's just as well *Derry Girls* is back to save the day

Is *Anatomy of a Scandal* (Netflix) supposed to make us laugh? I don't think so. It is, essentially, a drama about a fictional rape trial in which a fictional Tory minister is accused of sexually assaulting one of his aides in a Westminster elevator. That is not appropriate material for comedy.

And yet, here we are, trying to make sense of a comical scene where James Whitehouse (the accused minister, played by Rupert Friend), is charged with the alleged assault. Out of nowhere, *Anatomy of a Scandal* indulges itself in slippery, soapy surrealism, a phenomenon that occurs when TV's most extravagant melodramas develop ideas way above their station.

Basically, the news hits Whitehouse like a punch to the stomach, and we know this because an invisible force then, eh, punches Whitehouse in the stomach, sending him flying through the air like some greasy troublemaker in a superhero film. That's not all, folks.

At the end of episode two, after Sienna Miller's Sophie — Whitehouse's wife — learns that her husband's accuser was in love with him (they

had been having an affair before the alleged rape took place), she flees the courtroom and ends up smack bang in the middle of some highfalutin' dream-like sequence involving another unfortunate case of Major Characters Flying Through the Air Syndrome. I cannot wait to see who soars next.

Taking its cue from Sarah Vaughan's bestseller, *Anatomy of a Scandal* will probably be huge. It was co-developed by prolific US television writer David E. Kelley. It arms itself with some genuine A-List talent: Michelle Dockery plays a lawyer; Naomi Scott is the victim. And — this is important, apparently — it's very expensive-looking. That goes a long way these days.

But that doesn't change the fact that it's rubbish — silly, shallow, unadulterated, bottom-of-the-skip rubbish. True, Kelley is a dab hand at spinning popular mini-series out of twisty, salacious page-turners, especially those that involve troublesome high-earners. In *Big Little Lies*, with Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman, it was rich mothers and murder in sunny California. In *The Undoing*, with Nicole Kidman and Hugh Grant, it was

rich doctors and murder in grimy New York.

With *Anatomy of a Scandal*, Kelley and his team head to merry old England for another series about problematic rich people we couldn't possibly relate to, and hey, that bit is fine. Heck, *Succession* boasts some of the most irredeemable rich folks in contemporary television, and it's a gem. But that's because *Succession* is slick, smart, funny and knows exactly what it's at. *Anatomy of a Scandal*, meanwhile, is all over the shop.

For a series about an alleged rape, its tone is spectacularly, almost offensively messy, veering from ham-fisted attempts at satire (Joshua McGuire's foul-mouthed, Malcolm Tucker-esque spin doctor has no business being in this thing) to hilariously misguided bouts of experimental drama. The fictional prime minister looks like David Cameron. There are far too many bazy, ugly flashbacks to Whitehouse's time in a

depraved university boys' club (hmmm, I wonder what that's supposed to be about).

The dull courtroom sequences occasionally slip into stagey reconstructions of what happened between defendant and accused. At no point does Kelley's series pause to consider what it is it's trying to say about, um, well, anything.

The dialogue, too, is atrocious. "If the future doesn't include you, Sophie Whitehouse," a panicked James tells his wife over lunch, "the future is shite." I believe the reaction you're looking for here is: "Jaysus."

Again, this abysmal, asinine soap opera will probably be massive, so it's a good thing *Derry Girls* (Channel 4) is back to relieve the pain. There is so much goodwill behind this, the long-awaited third and final season of Lisa McGee's beloved sitcom, that I went into Tuesday's opening instalment, hoping — nay, praying — that it would live up to expectations.



Abysmal: Rupert Friend and Sienna Miller as James and Sophie Whitehouse in *Anatomy of a Scandal*. Photo from Netflix

For a series about an alleged rape, its tone is almost offensively messy, veering from ham-fisted satire to misguided experimental drama

This is what you need to know: *Derry Girls* is just as sweet, simple and funny as you remember.

There are hints already that the series will incorporate the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, but we have a while to go before then. In the first episode, Clare (Nicola Coughlan) and her pals land themselves in trouble after accidentally assisting in a robbery at their school. Enter DC Byers (an on-form Liam Neeson, surprising the hell out of everyone) to read the girls — and James — their rights.

Elsewhere, Granda Joe (Ian McElhinney) and Gerry (Tommy Tiernan) quarrel over a murderous house cat. Business as usual, then, and perhaps a tad more cartoonish and repetitive than it needs to be — but did I laugh? Yes, I did. Will I miss *Derry Girls* when it's gone? Yes, I will.

Finally, a word on *Julia* (Sky Atlantic), in which the always reliable Sarah Lancashire portrays

one of America's most celebrated television chefs, the late, great Julia Child. Here's the thing: I learned what I know about Julia Child from Nora Ephron's delightful 2009 dramedy, *Julie & Julia*, starring Meryl Streep. She is the Californian cook who brought French cuisine to the American public in the 1960s via a celebrated recipe book and her award-winning television show, *The French Chef*.

Daniel Goldfarb's mini-series shows us how, exactly, Julia's television career came about. But here's another thing: I'm glad I learned what I did from Ephron's film, because Julia doesn't appear to be interested in newcomers. Lancashire is terrific, as is David Hyde Pierce as Child's artist husband, Paul. But this otherwise handsome offering requires some tightening, and it needs to get better at establishing who's who, what's what and why we should be interested. The food looks fabulous all the same.

Radio Darragh McManus

Get away from it all with a new job in sunny Antarctica

Ever feel like you want to get away from your life? Really, really get away? Yeah, sure you have (to be honest, I think everyone has during the last two years of *Alice in Wonderland* madness).

And now you can get away to just about the most remote spot on the planet: Port Lockroy in the British Antarctic Territory.

On **Moncrieff** (Newstalk, Mon-Fri, 2pm) we learned that this tiny place is recruiting a team — base leader, shop manager, general assistant — to run its post office from October to next March: their summer. It's an actual post office, with stamps and all, but there ends any similarities with your local An Post counter.

As explained by Lauren Luscombe of UK Antarctic Heritage, there are no showers or running water, no phone or internet. The food is "mostly canned". Staffers live in a bunk room. Temperatures in summer go down to -5C — colder with wind chill.

It is, Lauren added with wonderful English understatement, "a bit basic" and "not the most glamorous job in the world".

But it's not quite as "life in outer space" as it seems: remarkably, Port Lockroy gets thousands of tourists. So your mission, should you choose to accept, includes "tours of the museum, briefings about the site's history and running the gift shop" as well as penguin wildlife surveys.

So, a varied workload. Besides, if you're going to indulge in dreams of leaving — they might as well be big ones.

Things Fell Apart (BBC Sounds), wherein Jon

Ronson sought out the root cause of various "culture war" battlegrounds, ended by chatting to Louis Theroux — a meeting so metatextual it felt almost hallucinatory.

Ronson and Theroux are essentially the same person, aren't they, in broadcasting or documentary terms? They both explore a certain sector of society that lies slightly outside the norm. They have that faux-naïve way of interviewing and ferreting out information, putting people off their guard. They even talk in a similar, softly spoken way.

In one sense, then, the mind might have been forgiven for thinking this was one or other man chatting to himself — a suitably surreal conclusion, given the sheer weirdness of much of their subject matter.

Even more strangely, we heard Ronson and Theroux once had a feud of sorts. Isn't the first sign of madness when you're arguing with yourself?

CountryWide (Radio 1, Sat, 8.10am) continued its work as one of the most intelligent and interesting shows on Irish radio with a piece on the future of food. The magnificently named Jack

Bobo — really — a US "food futurist" — really, again — spoke to Damien O'Reilly about the global trade in crops, disruption of supply lines,

diversification, population rise, smarter methods of production and "snacking culture", in a wide-ranging conversation that was, well, intelligent and interesting — as always with this fine show.



Surreal chat: Louis Theroux talked about 'culture wars'

Podcast of the Week

DEAD EYES: ACTOR 'FIRED ON ORDERS OF TOM HANKS' CAPTURES HIS WHITE WHALE

Jennifer Gannon

On the surface *Dead Eyes*, might seem utterly glib: a record of one man's account of being fired 20 years ago that has been exaggerated to a farcical level. It has been described by a contributor as "Serial but about something utterly unimportant". Over three seasons, comedian Connor Ratliff forensically examines his worst professional moment: the time he auditioned for a bit-part in the hit TV show *Band of Brothers* but was fired because the always genial Tom Hanks thought he had "dead eyes" — something that was relayed to Ratliff by his agent's assistant.

What could be an exercise in bitterness turns out to be anything but as the intensely likeable Ratliff goes about excavating his past. He shares how this disappointment caused him to reconsider acting as a career and how he

hunkered down as a bookseller for 12 years with the shame of being shunned by the Nicest Guy in Hollywood.

In one memorable episode, he tracks down the actor who replaced him to compare notes. He also interviews friends and colleagues such as *Mad Men*'s Jon Hamm, who reminisces about how the former head of broadcaster CBS told the actor's agent that "Jon Hamm will never be a television star".

Throughout its riveting three seasons, the show exposes the nebulous nature of talent, success and luck. It also uncovers the strange cruelties of the entertainment industry. *Dead Eyes* at its best is a meditation on failure. It investigates

events that are not openly discussed, that do not fit into our perfectly curated Instagram lives or idea of linear career progression.

The subject matter may seem miserable but *Dead Eyes* is always extremely funny. In one episode, Ratliff tracks down the assistant who supposedly delivered that hammer blow to his ego only for them to deny ever uttering the phrase. Ratliff is left wondering if he centred this lifetime of disappointment and despondency on something that never occurred.

Ultimately, the goal of *Dead Eyes* was always for Ratliff to capture his white whale, to have a proper conversation with Tom Hanks. He meets Colin Hanks, who talks about suffering under the weight of being the son of



Closure: Tom Hanks talks about the ruthless nature of Tinseltown

America's Dad and the effect it has had on his career and his relationship with his father. It's an open, sometimes brutal, searingly honest, self-deprecating confessional.

Finally, three weeks ago, Hanks senior took up the offer to converse with Ratliff after almost three years. The hour-long conversation sets the record straight about eyes, dead or otherwise, and the cut-throat nature of Tinseltown. It also evolves into a reminder about the effect that we have on people as we travel through the world; how something we can perceive as a minor moment can be life-changing to others.

Full of poignancy and pathos, this full stop to a 20-year monologue-turned-conversation is a true triumph. What should have been an elongated comedic 'bit' is transformed into something thought provoking and moving. *Dead Eyes*, the finale — a chat between an acting icon and a comedian searching for meaning — is an unforgettable human moment.

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Books

This week's
**Top10
bestsellers**



1 Journey's End (NF)
Colm Keane, Capel Island

2 Again, Rachel (OF)
Marian Keyes, Michael Joseph

3 It Ends With Us (PB)
Colleen Hoover, Simon & Schuster

4 Lessons in Chemistry (OF)
Bonnie Garmus, Penguin RH

5 The Paris Apartment (OF)
Lucy Foley, HarperCollins

6 Rachel's Holiday (PB)
Marian Keyes, Penguin

7 Putin's People (PB)
Catherine Belton, William Collins

8 Manifest (NF)
Roxie Nafousi, Michael Joseph

9 Let's Talk (NF)
Richie Sadler, Gill Books

10 How To Make Your Money Work (NF)
Eoin McGee, Gill Books

OF Original Fiction; **NF** Non-Fiction;
PB Paperback; **CH** Children's

The bestseller list covering books in all formats both paperback and hardback, is compiled by Eason, Ireland's leading wholesale and retail bookseller, and is based on sales figures from Easons.com for the week ending Sunday, April 10

TARA M STRINGFELLOW 'I HAD TO WRITE THIS NOVEL OR SET FIRE TO MY COUNTRY'

Interview

Meadhbh McGrath



The US author gave up her marriage and law career to study poetry – until her anger at racism and MAGA hats compelled her to write a novel celebrating black culture

At 30, Tara M Stringfellow was a successful attorney in Chicago, married and living in a penthouse apartment. "And I hated every moment of it," she says now, six years later, from her home in Memphis. "Every second. I said, 'Why aren't I writing? So this is life? I'm just supposed to push paper, working 70- to 80-hour weeks for money? To come home to some white man eating his greasy American food looking at the Bears game?' I said, 'Oh my God, I can't do it.'"

She decided to go back to university, undertaking a master's in poetry. On graduating, she got a job as a high-school English teacher in Memphis and ended her marriage – she would sign her divorce papers the same day she signed with her literary agent.

"I gave up financial security. I sold everything and I moved into a little one-bedroom. It had mice in it," she recalls in horror. "Everyone said I was crazy. My whole family was like, 'You just finished law school, you're gonna go back in debt for a degree in poetry? No one reads poetry! The only black woman poet who's made it is Maya Angelou!' My family didn't understand, but I knew: I can't live this kind of American life. It just isn't for me."

During her studies, Stringfellow wrote a poem, *Origins*, about a woman and her young children fleeing an abusive relationship. "My professor slid that poem back to me and he said, 'That shit right there should be a novel.' I started writing Christmas Day, in my mom's house, at her kitchen table, and I went from there."

That novel, titled *Memphis*, was published this month. Spanning seven decades, it follows three generations of the North family, beginning with Miriam and her daughters Joan and Mya arriving at her sister August's home after leaving her abusive husband, while flashback chapters paint a fuller picture of the family's history.

Stringfellow notes that she is a poet first – "This fiction thing is just like a new hobby for

me," she laughs – and that background carefully honed her writing.

"I think, how can I make this line sing? Is it musical? Is it the most beautiful sentence ever written? If the answer to those things is no, then I don't write it. I try to get my point across sparingly – usually, as a poet, you only have a page; with fiction, you can get your point across in a whole chapter, which is nice, more space, but I still want all of my sentences to mean something, to have a purpose."

Stringfellow was born on a military base in Kansas City – her father was a Marine – yet her parents let her know she was "made in Memphis". After her family was stationed in Japan, she moved back to Tennessee aged 10. "Those streets raised me and I fell in love with the city," she says.

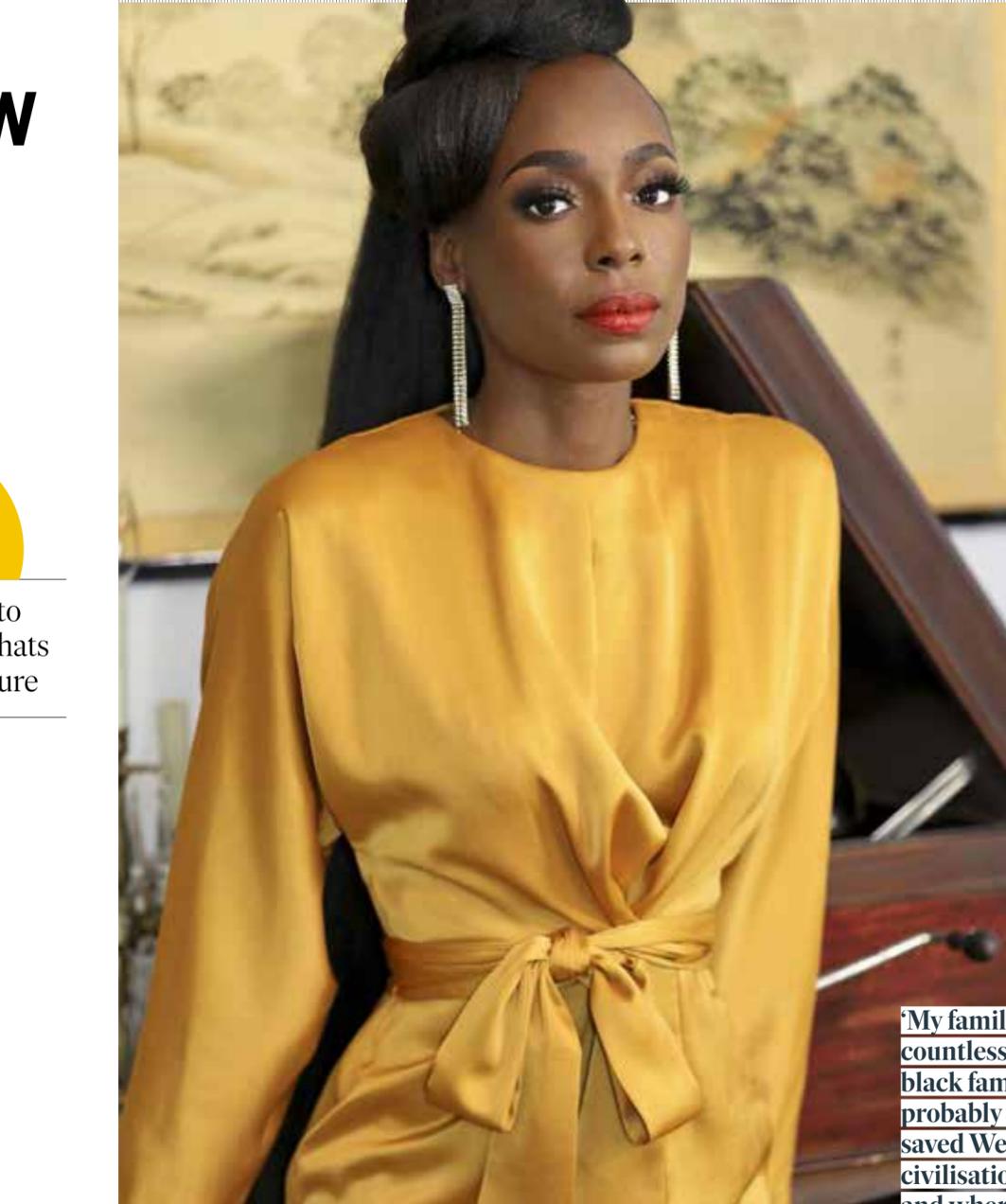
The novel draws much from her own family history – an idea, she explains, triggered by the 2016 election of Donald Trump.

BIGGEST FARCE

"I was angry, and I needed the space to write something longer than a poem," she says. "I was really sick of the MAGA hats – I was sick of racist white folk telling me and mine who made this country great when I know damn well, it's black women. That is the biggest farce and lie that I live in. I was sick of looking at all these Confederate monuments, and I wanted to make a monument to my family. And so I decided to write a book about my family."

Like Hazel and Myron – Miriam and August's parents in Memphis – Stringfellow's grandmother was the first black nurse at the city's Mount Zion Baptist Hospital, and her grandfather had been a World War II hero, part of the battalion that liberated the children's camp at Buchenwald in 1945. Its captives included Elie Wiesel, who would grow up to write the memoir *Night* and win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Stringfellow quotes Martin Luther King, Jr: "When the history books are written in the future, the historians will have to look back and



'My family and countless other black families probably saved Western civilisation – and where are the monuments to them?'

say, 'There lived a great people, a people with fleecy locks and black complexion, but a people who injected new meaning into the veins of civilisation, a people which stood up with dignity and honour and saved Western civilisation in her darkest hour.'"

"I think about that all the time," she says. "My family and countless other black families probably saved Western civilisation – and where are the monuments to them? We have to live in this country with white folk wearing these hats telling us, basically, to go back to Africa, that the last time this country was great was when we were enslaved. It was maddening. I didn't know what else to do: it was written *Memphis* or set fire to my country."

Stringfellow used her summer breaks from teaching to work on the novel, exploring her genealogy on *Ancestry.com*, delving into archi-

val newspapers and interviewing people who had known her grandparents.

Growing up, Stringfellow had known her grandfather was the first black homicide detective in Memphis, but it wasn't until she began her research that she confirmed a long-held suspicion about his tragic death. "We've always suspected that my grandfather was lynched here by his own squad. I found all of the articles about his death – it made front-page news in the black publications: the *Tri-State Defender*, *Jet* magazine, the *Memphis World*: all of the black papers talked about it but, of course, none of the white papers did," she says.

"I went back for the whole year of 1960, and I noticed that in every single black paper, there was an instance of police brutality, and nothing reported in *The Commercial Appeal* [newspaper]. I was very angry, so I put the police

brutality scenes into the book, because those happened on a daily basis here in Memphis."

There are frequent instances of police violence and systemic racism in the novel, along with a harrowing rape. It makes for heavy reading, and surely heavy writing, but Stringfellow explains: "I'm a black woman. I don't have the luxury of switching off. I was writing this poor, in a mice-infested one-bedroom, and I needed to get it done. I'm not a white woman. I don't have the luxury to sit around in my house and cry," she says. "Of course I was emotional writing it, but I had to write it; who else but me could have? I felt like I had a duty to my city, to my family, to myself."

Despite – or perhaps because of – the pain her characters inflict on each other, themes of forgiveness and redemption are central to the novel, something that holds a particular fascination for Stringfellow.

FORGIVENESS

"I'm always interested in what it takes to forgive another human and why. We can be really cruel, but there are times in which human beings can rise to the status of angels. And I'm not sure why we do that. After the AME Church shooting, when Dylann Roof killed all those black people at church, a woman [Felicia Sanders] got up on the stand – she had lost her son – and she said, 'I forgive you.'"

I was just thinking, 'Wow, what would it take for me to forgive someone for something like that?'" she says. "Forgiveness to me is always so fascinating – we are capable of such cruelty and then of such grace at the same time. It's beautiful."

Stringfellow observes that while there is great suffering in her book, there is also "so much joy and resilience". *Memphis* is chiefly a novel that celebrates black women, which comes across powerfully in the scenes set in August's hair salon, where "the framed record covers on the walls shook with laughter. Laughter that was, in and of itself, Black... A cacophony of Black female joy in a language private to them."

Hair, Stringfellow says, was essential to the novel. "Black hair is just so important. We communicate with each other in hair. When I lived in Ghana, I found out certain braid styles mean certain things: if you wear box braids up high in a top knot on your head, and you wear all white, it means you've just had a baby, so people are much nicer, and they open up doors for you – you don't even have to have the baby with you."

It's a beautiful way to communicate. "Even certain styles I wear, especially when I have braids on, they make me feel like a queen. I'm wearing a style that's thousands of years old, so I know as I'm getting my hair done, I'm participating in something my ancestors have done. It makes me feel black for forever, like I'm connecting to my diaspora."

She hopes that *Memphis*, too, can connect black girls and women, much like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* did for her as a young girl. "I hope that black girls – even little black girls who can't read yet – know that there's a story for them, and that long after I'm gone, this book will be here, this gift for black women will be on a shelf for the end of time and no one can take it from us."

Stringfellow will next be putting the finishing touches to a poetry collection, *Magic Enough*, due for publication in 2024. Then she is heading to Italy for the summer to work on her second novel.

"It's top secret," she says. "But it'll be about black joy and black women – I think everything I've done is about black joy and a gift for black women."

● *'Memphis'*, published by John Murray, is out now



Our tangled 800 years of history unpicked with style and insight

Darragh McManus

As the heavyweight boxer apocryphally declared of his opponent pre-fight: "We're gonna get it on, 'cause we don't get along". So it has been, seemingly forever, between Ireland and Britain.

The two islands endured a simmering hostility for centuries until Irish independence 100 years ago; it continued, at a lower heat setting throughout the 20th century, while the Troubles turned up the gas once more from the 1970s.

These days, partly exacerbated by Brexit – plus a decade and more of Tory rule over there – anti-British (in truth, anti-English) antipathy is increasingly fashionable among our gilded elites. Some of the prejudiced tirades you hear from our politicians or read from columnists would cause outrage in the reverse: "It's like something from *Punch* magazine, Joe! English bigotry rears its ugly head again."

Of course, this is almost all one-way. And as Fergal Tobin points out in *The Irish Difference*, it has been from the start. A thousand years ago, the British were vaguely aware of this island; but it was so far from their centre of power, and held such little evident treasures (mineral, security and others) that they essentially didn't bother with it.

And there's a modern echo of that: Boris Johnson's government seemed genuinely caught by surprise when the not-insignificant matter of the Irish Border and the peace process came up during Brexit negotiations. It wasn't so much a conscious desire to harm Ireland, more that it simply hadn't occurred to them – which hurts just a little bit. One wonders if this British indifference to Ireland makes our green-flag-waving heroes angrier than outright enmity would. At least that would show they noticed us.

Tobin's book carries the humorous subtitle *A Tumultuous History of Ireland's Breakup With Britain*, and that's what it's always been like: we're the partner in a failed relationship who can't move on. I hate him but still need him. I want her to leave but am furious when she does. Why won't they pay me attention any more? "We may be different," Tobin writes, "but we are still cousins. Irish people need to reflect on the historical and strategic imperatives that drive British indifference towards Ireland: they are not just being bad-minded. A little mutual knowledge and understanding will cut both ways. That is the primary purpose of this book."

An admirable philosophy, all but the most narrow-minded could agree. The English/British did some terrible things here, for sure; but that was in the past. Nowadays, as Tobin notes, we share many of the same cultural touchstones – "fish and chips, double-decker buses and Manchester United". For me, these are the ties that bind people; in the end, these are

the important things in life, not political grandstanding, economic blathering and all the rest of those dismal sciences.

A writer and historian, Tobin has previously (under the pen name Richard Killeen) produced a number of well-received books such as *Ireland in Brick and Stone*. He's a beautiful writer, with a graceful prose style, and he takes a contemplative and nuanced approach to an incredibly tangled story.

It moves from 1169, when an ill-advised invite to the Normans to help settle a Leinster-based dynastic dispute turned into, well, the timeworn "800 years of oppression". Those initial invaders – Tobin labels them Old English – became, famously, "more Irish than the Irish themselves"; while they retained vestigial loyalty to the English monarch, they remained Catholic and became a sort of hybrid grouping: Hiberno-Norman.

For centuries, England (Great Britain wouldn't officially come into being until the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland) took a laissez-faire approach to Ireland. Irish vassals ran the island for the king, taxes were paid, everyone lumped along happily enough.

That changed when Henry VIII forcibly converted much of England to Protestantism. A series of rebellions followed and the Crown sent in the shock troops, a group Tobin calls New English: "Elizabethan and Stuart adventurers and conquistadores". These took over most of Leinster and

Munster; Anglo-Scottish planters took care of Ulster. Connacht, notoriously, was left to its own devices.

He identifies a third group of interlopers, "Creoles": Cromwellian settlers from the mid-17th century on, who also claimed land in Leinster and Munster and would eventually become the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The rest, you know: Penal Laws, Daniel O'Connell, Fenians, Young Irelanders, Parnell, the Land League, the Easter Rising, nascent nationalism expressed in the Irish language and Gaelic games... But the beauty of this book is in the telling: *The Irish Difference* lays out its themes and chronologies with impeccable clarity, and is full of fascinating detail, a lot of it unknown to me.

For instance, the ultimate losers, economically and politically, of the Famine were Protestant landlords, bankrupted by the bald fact that dead or emigrated tenants can't pay rent; the winners were Catholic farmers who had survived and, supported by Crown funds, bought their own land. Many of these property holdings endure to the present day; a reminder that, while it may be a foreign country, the past can exert an influence on us today. This exemplary book opens up that past with finesse and insight.

● Darragh McManus's books include *'The Driving Force'* and *'Pretend We're Dead'*

NON-FICTION The Irish Difference

Fergal Tobin
Atlantic, 302 pages, hardcover €18.99; e-book €6.02



Nuanced approach: Fergal Tobin. Photo by Anthony Georgieff

You Must Read This

Jamie O'Connell on Tongues of Fire, a poetry collection that softly lingers



In the early 2010s, I was part of the PQ Writing Group who met in the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork City. The noted poet Marie Coveney was a member and I was always keen to hear her feedback on my fiction. Her insights were a revelation; as a poet she experienced words in a different way to me.

Words for her were objects laden with history and they contained a musical pitch. They were alive. They were to be held to the light and examined, like fine porcelain, before being either discarded or placed in their correct position. There was something in the way she experienced language that reminded me of a recording of Virginia Woolf on YouTube, where she analyses the nature of words. She begins: "Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations..."

I have always been interested in how writers approach language across different genres. All are driven by the same 'curious impulse' to create but each try to find the lane that best suits their style, like runners figuring out if they are best suited to the hundred-metre sprint or marathons.

I am enamoured by how a poet views language in a way I can only glimpse, how they can draw something profound out of a handful of carefully selected words. To this day, I often recall lines from poems I studied for my Leaving Certificate by the likes of John Keats, Philip Larkin and Elizabeth Bishop. I would not consider myself to be a frequent reader of poetry, but there is something about these works that have softly lingered in my mind.

Most recently, a collection that has stayed with me is *Tongues of Fire* by Seán Hewitt. It combines words in luminous, tender and sacred ways. In the space around the words there is a solitude, a resonance, the ache of the living. It draws out quieter, deeper aspects of myself.

My favourite poem is *Dryad*, where Hewitt infuses the heady woodland at night with a deep profane eroticism, where acts of kneeling, of 'secret worship' take place. Words in the *Tree of Jesse*, a poem about the grief of a son for his father, flicker and shift between images of nature and Christian symbolism. With each new reading, the poem reveals more of itself.

Many varied readers, I am certain, will have a similar experience reading *Tongues of Fire* because Hewitt understands what Woolf said about words, that "the truth they capture is many-sided and they convey it by being many sided". It is because Hewitt's words are not static forms, but signposts by which the reader takes a journey inward, "through undergrowth and into the woods, like a deer plummeting through the wet branches", that this collection, like Keats or Bishop, has softly lingered in my mind.

● *Diving for Pearls* by Jamie O'Connell (Penguin) is out now in paperback

FLAVOURS GALORE IN TV COOK'S BATTLE WITH PATRIARCHY

This expansive and cheesy saga beginning in the 1950s is at times implausible but always charming and full of warmth, writes **Niamh Donnelly**

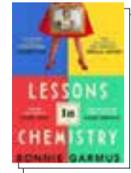
Lessons in Chemistry, the debut novel by Bonnie Garmus — due to be published in 32 languages and made into an Apple TV show — is in essence, a cheesy story about resisting the patriarchy in 1950s America. Its plot is slightly outlandish, its protagonist endowed with an implausibly modern-day sensibility, yet it has a spirit and warmth that will win over many readers.

So, what is it that makes *Lessons in Chemistry* so charming?

Elizabeth Zott is a female chemist at a time when female chemists are unheard of. She works with an all-male team at Hastings Research Institute in southern California. Sexism blights her every move. From trying to get taken seriously, to accessing the most basic of supplies, to avoiding the advances of lecherous men and getting the blame when one of these men assaults her, Elizabeth's life is impeded in small and large ways by a society that hasn't even begun to get to grips with equality. As the luminous opening paragraph tells us, this was back "when women wore shirtwaist dresses and joined garden clubs and drove legions of children around in seatbeltless cars," back "before anyone knew there'd even be a sixties movement [...] when the big wars were over and the secret wars had just begun".

The only person who takes Zott seriously is a Nobel-prize nominated fellow chemist, Calvin Evans. He finds her "the most intelligent, insightful, intriguing — and yes — the most

FICTION
Lessons in Chemistry
Bonnie Garmus
Doubleday, 400 pages, hardcover €21; e-book £7.99



alarmingly attractive woman" he has ever met. Needless to say, chemistry ensues. The book is part love story, but that's only the start of it. We are told in the opening (which is set a decade after most of the action in the book), that Elizabeth is a single parent and reluctant host of a cooking show, *Supper at Six*. Much of the narrative thrust lies in the question: "how did she get to such a point?", and the answer contains no small amount of fortuity, adversity and tragedy.

The wide span of the book's storyline is part of what makes it compelling. It's expansive and detailed in a way that had been going out of fashion, but seems to be worming back into popularity (Jonathan Franzen's *Crossroads* last year perhaps heralded the return of the big book).

You could call *Lessons in Chemistry* a family saga, except that it has no truck with the idea of the nuclear family. Elizabeth, single-minded in her disdain for the "patriarchal society founded on the idea that women [are] less" sees mar-

riage as a sort of erasure, and refuses to submit to it. What's more, neither Elizabeth nor Calvin has a relationship with their parents. It is as though they have made a clean break from the past and are free to shape the future. But their independence leaves them lonely and isolated, an affliction that seems to go hand-in-hand with trailblazing.

SEXIST ATTITUDES

A lot happens in this book, with subplots about rowing, industrial schools, a former sniffer dog, failing marriages, and more, along with the larger plot about the rise in popularity of Elizabeth's cooking show and with it, a changing consciousness across America. We get a picture of the 1950s and 1960s that feels at times a little fanciful — I find it hard to believe Zott wouldn't have been infected by the sexist attitudes those around her possess. But a bit like a set design, this world is furnished so carefully

Valiant feminist narrative: Bonnie Garmus. Photo by Serena Bolton

The protagonist is beautiful, intelligent, stubborn, a little weird. She might as well go around wearing a 'loveable oddball' sign

it feels almost better than the real thing. In short, the book has style.

The metaphor of science as a way to navigate the world (to Elizabeth "cooking is science" and "rowing is a simple matter of kinetic energy versus boat drag and centre of mass") comes off cleverly. So too does the device of omniscient third-person narrator. We move from viewpoint to viewpoint, allowing a three-dimensional take, but there is also a separate consciousness at play, a narration that sounds like the voiceover of a 1960s American TV show. "[T]he weather was warm but not too warm, and the sky was mostly blue, but not too blue, and the air was clean just because air just was back then", goes its dreamy tone. It's cheesy in a way that validates some of the other cheesiness we encounter. The somewhat over-the-top plot points feel more deliberate alongside it.

The characters are likewise larger-than-life.

Elizabeth's pluckiness is played up to such an extent it's almost cartoonish. She is "someone so forthright, so no-nonsense that people [don't] know what to make of her". She is beautiful, intelligent, stubborn, a little weird. She might as well go around wearing a sign that reads "love-

able oddball".

Then again, that is how compelling protagonists are made. If there were a formula, this book would have it down. Oppress them greatly, add some personal toil, then infuse them with godlike levels of resilience and bravery until they triumph. And despite the fact this valiant feminist narrative, in the context of contemporary culture, felt a little "done", I couldn't help but fall for these characters. The formula worked. Let's call it a lesson in chemistry.

BookBrief

On the day Dora Condrion discovers that her 17-year-old daughter Ellie disappeared, she is alone. Her husband Eamon, a lorry driver, is en route to pick up a trailer in Rotterdam.

When Ellie does not come home from the party she said she was going to, Dora assumes she stayed at her friend Amy's house. She hadn't, and Amy is evasive about the party that had been held in a heavily wooded area. Now thoroughly panicked, Dora rings all Ellie's friends, but nobody has any information; nor do the local hospitals or the art school where she was a student. Then the police arrive at her door, saying Ellie's distinctive handbag has been discovered in a layby. Now terrified

THRILLER
The Empty Room
Brian McGilloway
Constable, 368 pages, trade paperback €23.79; e-book £9.99



dormouse, as Eamon once described her, becomes Dora the tigress who begins to aggressively investigate those closest to her and find out what has happened to her only child. An utterly gripping and propulsive read, as one would expect from one of Ireland's finest thriller writers.

Myles McWeeney

FICTION
Holding Her Breath
Eimear Ryan
Penguin, 256 pages, paperback €12.60; e-book £4.99



The debut novel from Tipperary writer Eimear Ryan centres on competitive swimmer Beth Crowe. Beyond her romantic entanglements and a punishing training regimen in the pool, she is seeking to uncover the secrets of her late grandfather, the famous poet Benjamin Crowe, and those of his formidable wife, the very-much-alive Lydia. *Holding Her Breath* is a coming-of-age novel set in hallowed halls of Trinity College Dublin, and Ryan — writer-at-residence at University College Cork — skilfully brings young Beth to life. The author herself has played high-level sport — inter-county camogie — and captures the pleasures and pains of pursuing one's talents while trying to enjoy a full, rounded life.

John Meagher

FICTION
The Island of Missing Trees
Elif Shafak
Penguin, 368 pages, paperback €12.60; e-book £5.99



Rob, mother of two young daughters, is trapped in a loveless marriage to the controlling Irving. Her eldest daughter Callie is Irving's favourite, but she is a deeply disturbed child with some horrifying pastimes. Rob sees strong echoes of her own troubled past in Callie's behaviour and, in a desperate attempt to exorcise the child's terrors, takes her back to her childhood home, a remote ranch deep in the Mojave desert.

The visit brings the blocked secrets of her early life back into sharp focus and threatens to derail Rob's hopes of anything like a normal life. This is one of the most masterful, if deeply disturbing and truly scary, psychological thrillers you are likely to read this year.

Myles McWeeney

THRILLER
Sundial
Catriona Ward
Viper, 352 pages, hardcover €20.99; e-book £4.74



Cyprus has long been riven by ethnic and religious differences and British-Turkish writer Elif Shafak captures the humanity that can withstand fractures in society. It's 1974, just before war breaks out, and two teenagers from opposite sides of a divided land meet in secret at a tavern under the branches of a fig tree that grows through a cavity in the roof. He is Kostas, Greek and Christian; she is Defne, Turkish and Muslim. For a few hours, they can leave the cares of the world outside the tavern's doors. But war, when it arrives, drives them apart. Decades later, in London, Ada is looking for answers and keen to visit the country where her parents were born; a fig tree in the garden provides a clue.

John Meagher

A Northern Irish love story as real and deeply felt as life itself

Eilis O'Hanlon

There has been controversy lately about whether Northern Irish writers should still be writing about the Troubles. Louise Kennedy's debut novel is a quiet but resounding riposte to the argument that they should not.

The Laverys are a Catholic family in an overwhelmingly Protestant town in the North in the early years of the Troubles. Cushla is a primary teacher who works three nights a week in the family's bar, now run by her brother Eamonn after the death of their father. It's a place where Protestants and soldiers from the nearby barracks regularly come to drink, and the Laverys have learned to keep their heads down and their mouths shut.

One night in the bar, Cushla notices Michael, who is older and married, a friend of her late father whom she idealised. He is a liberal Protestant barrister who takes on civil rights cases and says he loves Ireland but doesn't think it's worth killing for. Catholic friends say he's "all right". They embark on an affair, though he doesn't call it that. As for Cushla, she doesn't know what to call their "relationship, if that's what it was; mostly it felt like a situation".

The word "situation", often used in the North as a euphemism for the violence, is subtly suggestive.

The title of the novel works likewise. It recalls the Lord's Prayer ("Forgive us our trespasses") as the pair transgress against what is deemed to be decent; but it's also rich with the broader idea of straying into the wrong territory.

Cushla does that in various ways, as she finds herself in a relationship with a married man who can offer her nothing more than nights in his flat in Belfast and snatched weekends in a hotel in Dublin. There is also the obvious, tense overlap between the contrasting experiences of Catholics and Protestants occupying the same geographical, but not psychological, space.

Then there's the equally fractious divisions of class. Cushla feels awkward among Michael's friends in leafy south Belfast; they're doctors, artists, media people. At a party, she "spoke when she was spoken to", and is acutely aware of the Catholic woman, a cleaner for many of them, serving food when the others don't even notice her.

Back home, meanwhile, the mother of a young boy in whom Cushla has taken an interest of care is equally awkward in the presence of this well-read teacher whose more comfortable life contrasts with theirs on a council estate.

The presence of alcohol is just as crucial. Cushla's

largely housebound mother has become an alcoholic but fools herself that nobody knows; Cushla has taken on the burden of caring for her, while her brother uses the excuse of the family's bar to get out of doing his bit.

She starts to notice that Michael drinks too much as well. So does his wife. People use alcohol to blur the edges of personal pain caused by the traumatic times that they're living through.

It's a testament to Kennedy's skill as a writer that none of these underlying themes and connections feel forced. Indeed, it's easy to forget them entirely and simply lose oneself in the love story as it unfolds with intricate patience.

This may be her first novel, but the author is a leading light in the revival of short story writing that has come out of Northern Ireland. It has allowed her to hone her craftsmanship to the point where *Trespases* was possible.

As someone who grew up as a Catholic in the mainly Protestant town of Hollywood near Belfast, on which the setting of this novel is based, Kennedy knows this environment well. She augments it with a spare but evocative use of period detail, noting what's on TV and what's in the music charts, as well as the increasingly quotidian violence that is happening around the characters, some

so precise that it's possible to pinpoint events in the novel almost to the day.

It would be a shame if *Trespases* was pigeonholed as a Troubles novel. For one thing, the violence is still so recent, so raw, so woven into what it means to be from Northern Ireland, that to ignore it would be the odder decision.

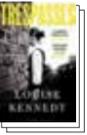
More than that, though, the novel transcends time and place by focussing in intimate detail on the deeply felt, unfulfilled lives of its characters.

Early in the story, Cushla watches a TV version of Harold Pinter's play *The Conversation*. Pinter's use of pauses and silences, with ever a threat and shadow of violence behind every word, feels significant. In Northern Ireland too, it's the things that are not said which are dangerous, so, when tragedy does strike, it feels as inevitable as it is shocking. Nobody says what they mean. Afterwards, all they have is regret.

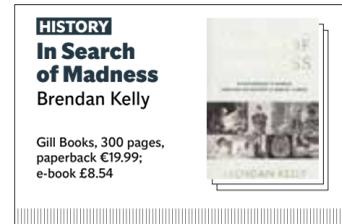
The quality of a novel is ineffable. It can feel like artifice, however finely written, or as faithful as real life itself, as if the things that happen in its pages had to be that way. *Trespases* feels so authentic it's as if nobody wrote it at all; it always existed.

You believe totally in these people and their lives. Finishing the last page is bittersweet because the circle is complete, but now it's closed, and you'll no longer be hearing their voices.

FICTION
Trespases
Louise Kennedy
Bloomsbury Circus, 309 pages, hardcover €21; e-book £7.13



Authentic voice: Louise Kennedy



HISTORY
In Search of Madness
Brendan Kelly

Gill Books, 300 pages, paperback €19.99; e-book €8.54

A word of caution for those approaching Professor Brendan Kelly's latest book, *In Search of Madness*. If your self-esteem has recently taken a pummelling, do not attempt to read his mini-biography on the back book jacket where his numerous academic degrees and doctorates are listed. The psychiatrist is also a researcher with hundreds of peer-reviewed publications to his credit, as well as a prolific author. You may have heard one of his regular contributions on daytime radio and, if you didn't catch the name, thought to yourself "who is that voice of reason among the chaos?"

In this book, the good doctor manages to incorporate all of his interests, both professional and personal — history, travel and the speciality he clearly holds so dear. Indeed, his thirst for knowledge is matched only by his wanderlust; he travels to Belgium, Italy, Germany, India and the US as part of his research. "Most of us secretly worry about our sanity, at least from time to time," he writes. He's not wrong. And when he writes that the criteria for mental illness "have never been more negotiable", we realise that the progress made in the past half century when it comes to how society acknowledges and deals with serious mental illness is shaky and insufficient.



Stripping away preconceptions: Professor Brendan Kelly warns that 'broccoli, jogging and mindfulness' are not the cure-all for anxiety and depression

When it comes to mental illness, the medical mantra of "first, do no harm" has not always been applied in practice. Kelly tells us eloquently that much harm has been done to those with mental illness in the not too distant past and that cruelty, no matter how unintentional, continues to be inflicted upon them even in these enlightened times.

As he takes us with him on his travels, Kelly illustrates how our understanding of mental illness changes dramatically with time and geography. In India, we learn that the mentally unwell are "neglected, chained or beaten" in rural villages, echoing historical practices of confinement. Other more gruesome and distressing "treatments" included blood-letting and purging using laxatives and emetics, as well as forced bathing, "the continuous bath". Lobotomy was "without doubt the single greatest mistake in the history of psychiatry", he states unequivocally.

Taking a deep dive into the social history of the topic, he covers this barbarism doled out in the 19th century "lunatic asylums" and laments the "great injustice" of the institutionalisation proffered by the psychiatric hospitals throughout much of the 20th century.

Kelly admits he remains troubled by long-

stay psychiatric facilities: "While kindness is good, freedom is better". By 2003, there were fewer than 3,700 psychiatric inpatients in Ireland, a more than 80pc decrease in four decades, but dismantling the psychiatric hospital system does not mean these people have disappeared — Kelly maintains that people with serious mental illness are often neglected, homeless or confined to inappropriate settings such as prisons.

On a brighter note, he writes enthusiastically about how many of the old asylums and institutions have been creatively reimagined. His description of the "mid-range hotel" in Sligo that was once St Columba's Mental Hospital gave me shivers — I stayed in this hotel and the high windows of the claustrophobic room left me in no doubt what this majestic building had once served as, even knowing none of the history. I later found out it was the one depicted in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*.

In the meat of the book, Kelly strips away our preconceptions and presumptions. For example, he says that there is "no logical division between mental and physical phenomena", yet

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE HISTORY OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Lunatic asylums and lobotomies may be consigned to the past, but psychiatrist Brendan Kelly reflects on how our understanding of the brain is still shaky and insufficient, writes **Danielle Barron**

Kelly is dismissive of the impact of neuroscience on psychiatry, calling it 'neurobabble'

the language of biology is ultimately "currently inadequate" in its understanding and description of depression. "We simply do not know fully how the human brain works, even when it is having a good day, let alone when a person is depressed or suicidal," he writes.

Schizophrenia is still widely misrepresented and misunderstood; all mental illness is, "sometimes deliberately so", he muses. And for most people of a certain vintage, their understanding of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) comes from the Jack Nicholson movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Portrayed as punitive, it is now a mainstream therapy for depression with a solid evidence base. This may still be news to some.

Kelly is dismissive of the impact of neuroscience on psychiatry, calling it "neurobabble" and saying it has not delivered on its promise when it comes to mental illness, resulting in no appreciable improvements in the management of any condition. He is even more dismissive of what he calls "broccoli, jogging and mindfulness" as a cure-all for anxiety and depression — you know who you are.

As humble as he is, Kelly is the expert here and vignettes depicting some of his own patients bookend each chapter, illustrating in practice what he is at pains to explain to us about manic depression, schizophrenia and one particularly distressing case of postpartum psychosis.

This is a man at the pinnacle of his chosen field of expertise but clearly always seeking to give it context, whether social, historical or personal. He retains an insatiable curiosity for his speciality and one senses the books come almost as an offshoot or byproduct of the vast amount of reading and research he does for his own satisfaction, not for continuing professional development. Indeed, it is a massive understatement to say Kelly reads widely — one of his many reading recommendations is an article from *Elle* magazine.

At one point, he describes sitting in a beautiful square in the Belgian city of Antwerp enjoying some burgers and drinks with a colleague after a conference. As they munch and sip, they discuss challenging cases — a topic he admits is incongruent with their surroundings. He simply says: "We are psychiatrists. This is what we do."

WriteSide with Kim Bielenberg



Clare O'Dea on her novel set on a day when Swiss women were denied the right to vote

What is your first novel about?
The story is set on one day in Switzerland in 1959 when men were voting in a referendum to decide whether to grant women the vote. They voted 67pc 'No'. The novel goes through the day from the perspective of four women of different backgrounds.

That makes Ireland seem like a feminist paradise. When did Swiss women get the vote?
It wasn't until 1971 and that was when they were allowed to stand in elections. Until 1988, a woman needed her husband's permission to get a job or have a bank account. In the 1950s, women were likely to have had more access to contraception than in Ireland, but there were also state and religious-run institutions for single mothers. The Swiss also had forced sterilisation of women.

What is the status of women in Swiss society now?
It depends on the area. I live in the Canton of Fribourg, which is still conservative. I find that an older generation of women are less confident than members of my family in Ireland. Here, there is still an expectation that women stick to traditional roles. My novel is set in the 1950s, but the themes are universal. No matter how things have improved, we keep coming up against the same issues of the abandoned single mother, the downtrodden housewife, the bitter older campaigner and the ingénue who realises that life isn't a bed of roses.

How did you develop a love of books and writing?
My grandmother was a Montessori teacher and she lived with us growing up. She used to read to us books by Dickens like *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*, or stories like *The Wind in the Willows* [by Kenneth Grahame]. I read anything that I could get my hands on through my teenage years. It wasn't until I was in my thirties that I thought I would like to be an author myself. It took ages before I could write more than a first chapter. I had loads of ideas, but I didn't pursue them until the end.

You previously worked in RTÉ. How did you get on there?
I was a researcher on *Nationwide* and I did night shifts reading the news from midnight until 6am on RTÉ Radio 1 and 2FM. I found the night shifts gruelling. It played havoc with my body clock and my diet.

● 'Voting Day' is published by Fairlight Books



Ask Adrian



Technology Adrian Weckler

Question
I listened to your recent podcast on saving money and you mentioned sim-only deals. I'm on a bill-pay plan for €50 a month and wanted to know if it is better to buy a phone outright and get a sim-only plan with operators like 48 or GoMo, or stick with bill pay? I'm interested in the new iPhone 13 Pro Max and I have the money.

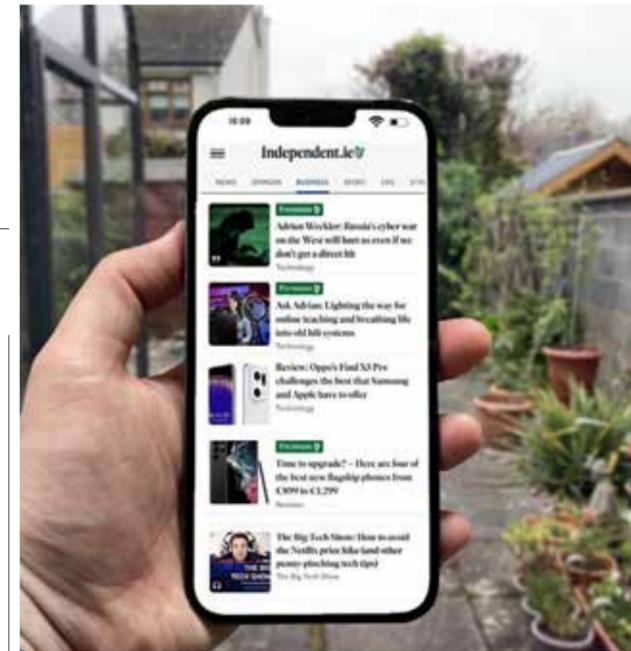
— Noah Moynihan

Answer
If you have the cash, sim-only with one of the 'value' operators (48 or GoMo) is far better value. For the same amount of data, calls and texts, you'll save anywhere from €200 to €400, depending on the plan you would have signed up for when getting the subsidised phone. The main reason to get a subsidised phone is cost-deferral — paying €100 or €200 upfront for the shiny new flagship phone instead of €800 or €900, with the balance made up in higher monthly payments. But inevitably this costs more, especially since none of the operators offering subsidised phones have prices that can remotely compare in value with the sim-only operators, GoMo and 48. (You can also add Clear Mobile into that frame, although that only offers slow, 3G-calibre speeds and is aimed at people who don't really need to rely that much on data.)

Question
You recently recommended the Ion CD Go for a reader. Would this item plug into the USB port in my car? I have a lot of CDs that I can't play in the car as the more recent models don't have CD players in them. If this item is not suitable, can you recommend something that I could use in the car, please?

— Catherine Doherty

Answer
For most recent cars, it will work this way, yes. But it should also work as a Bluetooth connection to your car, which it almost certainly has.



Question
As working from home is becoming the norm, I have decided to invest in an iMac monitor. I have an Acer laptop. Is it possible to connect the two?

— Aisling Walsh

Answer
Apple sells iMacs (an all-in-one computer-monitor) and displays (just a monitor, designed to connect to a separate computer). Your Acer laptop will work with the latter, but not with the former. But unless you're getting some friendly deal or a hand-me-down, Apple displays cost a lot more (for largely the same specifications) than screens from the likes of Lenovo, Aon, HP or Dell. So it wouldn't make much financial sense.

Question
I have deteriorating eyesight and find

most smartphones too small for ordinary operations. I use an iPad Mini but it's too big to bring around and doesn't work as a phone with my sim card. My son told me that there are new models that can be folded out to make them bigger. Are they any good?

— Mairead Byrne

Answer
No. To be clear, they're very interesting and innovative: it's a marvel that companies such as Samsung, Oppo and Huawei (not Apple yet) can make smartphones with screens that look and feel like glass but actually bend completely over in two, so that you can fit it in your pocket as a normal phone, but have more screen to look at when the display is folded out. The problem is not just that they're extremely expensive, it's that when you fold them out, it's (usually) a square screen and the letters and videos aren't really any bigger than on a normal phone. A large square screen doesn't let you see any more of a video than a small rectangular one. I wouldn't get one if I were you.

Email your questions to aweckler@independent.ie

Tech two



Xiaomi Redmi Note 11
€239 from Xiaomi.ie

There's a big market for easy-to-use, up-to-date large screen smartphones without (so far, useless) 5G and slightly less power. Xiaomi's new 6.4-inch Redmi Note 11 is a good example. It has great battery life, good storage (128GB), a really nice screen, adequate cameras and a nice overall design for far less than most rivals.



Garmin Epix 2
€813 from mysatnav.ie

We're used to Garmin offering top-end fitness watches with amazing battery life due to basic displays. But the Epix 2 has a bright, colourful AMOLED touchscreen. While this lowers the battery life to about a week, it may be a worthwhile trade off for the extra visibility and functionality. It's very expensive, though.

"You depend on other people's desires"

Rising French star Anamaria Vartolomei on acting, social media addiction and self-esteem.

Read more in *People & Culture*, exclusively in tomorrow's **Sunday Independent**



Free society has to tolerate eejitry – it beats the alternative

Last call
Ian O’Doherty

We all know the ancient Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times.” Well, we’ve been living in interesting times for the past few years and most of us would deeply adore a return to the old, boring normality.

Frankly, from the time Donald Trump first grabbed the public by the scruff of their neck with his teeny, tiny orange hands, everything has become far too interesting — and I say that as someone who would have voted for him in 2016.

Let’s put it this way: there was a time when, as a dashing and much-loved columnist (stop sniggering down the back), I used to dread the summer months, because that was the silly season and there was nothing to write about or, in my case, take the mickey out of. The politicians were on holidays. The football was finished for the season. People were heading away for a break and nothing much happened.

Sadly, it hasn’t been like that for years. The usual boredom seems to have been replaced by a sense of vaguely concealed panic as an entire society tries not to hyperventilate at the same time.

Trump. Brexit. Covid. All events that were out of our hands, yet they consumed our every waking minute.

And that, I reckon, is why we have also become a much angrier society.

A pal of mine has been living and working in Spain for the past year or so and he came back last week to mark the anniversary of our friend, the journalist George Byrne.

As we were having a beer to mark George’s memory, my pal made an interesting observation — by the time he had picked up his bags, exited Dublin Airport and gone back to where he was staying, he was completely on edge and stressed. After 12 months of enjoying the Iberian sunshine and their relaxed way of life, he had forgotten just how tense people can be in this country and it came as a

shock to his system. Yet there have been a couple of high-profile incidents in the past week or so, which, while driving people absolutely incandescent with rage, are almost counterintuitively a reminder that we’re not actually that bad as a country.

For exhibit A, may I direct the ladies and gentlemen of the readership to the appalling, embarrassing display of sub-student union politics shown by the four People Before Profit TDs in the Dáil when Volodymyr Zelensky addressed both Houses of the Oireachtas on April 6.

Refusing to join the round of applause for the embattled Ukrainian leader, the four clowns defended their decision on the grounds that somehow Nato is the real aggressor and the only way to establish peace is by, as one of them said, “supporting the Russian anti-war movement”.

GIBBERISH

That’ll be the movement that has seen 20,000 of their number arrested since the conflict broke out, then? It was a ridiculous argument that got me pondering — do they actually believe this gibberish? Or do they simply hope that some of their political base will believe it?

Let’s be honest, when it comes to old commies and new members of the far left, Russia is still their ideological mothership so it should come as no surprise that they just couldn’t join in the blanket condemnation of Putin’s folly. Which brings me back to my earlier point about us becoming a much more aggressive and angry society.

On the day of the Zelensky snub in the Dáil, I had to recharge my phone three times because the texts, calls and WhatsApps simply didn’t stop. Everyone who got in touch with me, from family and friends to *Indo* colleagues and other journo’s,



Embattled: Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky addresses the Dáil and Seanad last week and, inset, Russian supporters on the M50 in Dublin.
Photo by Maxwells/
Twitter @JustDave87



was simply apoplectic with rage. There was talk of trying to introduce sanctions against the querulous quartet and much grumbling about the way they apparently embarrassed the country when, really, they only embarrassed themselves.

There was a similarly furious reaction to the sight of an apparently pro-Russian convoy of cars on the M50 last Sunday.

By all accounts, some Russian nationals living in this country wanted to stick up for their motherland and decided to enrage Ireland and the Ukrainian embassy in the process.

People were demanding to see the reg plates of the cars. They wanted to know where the drivers lived.

They wanted to report them to the police for a hate crime.

The Ukrainian embassy demanded that Ireland ban the now-infamous ‘Z’ symbol.

Everyone, it seems, is completely missing the point and the point is a simple one — we should be

utterly delighted that we live in a country where people can behave in such a stupid, obnoxious and belligerent way and get away with it.

This is what differentiates us from countries like, ironically, the Russia so beloved by the politicians and protesters.

I’ve been in eastern bloc countries when the Iron Curtain was still pulled tightly shut and it wasn’t a pretty sight. Paranoia, suspicion and snitching on your neighbours were the order of the day. Then there was the dreaded prospect of a knock at your door at 3am from the secret police.

For all the problems we face in this country, at least we don’t have to worry about some sinister internal security service hauling us away.

That’s why, as infuriating as it undoubtedly was to witness the stupid scenes in the Dáil or the convoy on the M50, at least they were reminders that we’re still a free society.

And that’s something we should never take for granted, even if it does mean we’re subjected to serious bouts of eejitry from time to time.

What, another one gone? It’s no laughing matter

It seems to me that there are only two ways of trending on Twitter — driving people bonkers with something you’ve said, or dying.

On Tuesday night when I saw that the great Gilbert Gottfried was trending, I fervently hoped it was the former. Nope, it was the latter.

Yet another comedian has died on us. In recent months, Bob Saget, Louie Anderson and the genius Norm Macdonald have all died. Quite poignantly, they were all close friends and one of the last messages Gottfried posted on social media was a picture of him, Saget and Anderson with

the caption: “I’m the last one left.” There’s always something gut-wrenching about a comedian dying, perhaps more so than a musician or an author or some other artistic type, and that’s because laughing together is the most intimate thing people can do with their clothes on.

And man, Gilbert could make you laugh, even when you didn’t want to. In fact, particularly when you didn’t want to.

Some of his routines were so filthy and scabrous that most other stand-ups would never even consider such material, but when delivered in his buzz-

saw voice and impish grin, he was like the naughty kid in class that teachers can’t help but love.

He was also a reminder that good comedy takes almost unimaginable balls. Let’s put it this way: few comedians other than Gilbert would take the stage in New York a mere two weeks after 9/11 and joke about his flight crashing into the Empire State Building.

He used to rail against the phrase “too soon” when it comes to jokes. But when it comes to his death, those are the only words that spring to mind.