

# Tackling love, life and loss



At home with Kate Kerrigan

I HAVE just lost another friend. Siobhan burst into my life over 20 years ago. She was a larger-than-life, glamorous, accomplished, characterful woman. A high flyer in the film industry, Siobhan had a way of making the mundane exciting. She never simply 'met up' in town. She would 'liaise over a cappuccino in The Morrison.' She sprinkled all her friends with her glamour glitter.

'Look at you—*au naturel* in your casual weekend wear' she would say if she caught me on an early morning run to the shops in my pyjamas. Siobhan never left the house half-dressed. While she was fabulously indulgent when it came to hair and make-up and fashion, she managed to infuse those fundamentally boring subjects with a fun and energy that was irresistible.

Every year, after she returned from the Cannes Film Festival, I would call 'Siobhan Darling' up for 'a cigar in The Clarence' and listen rapt as she regaled me with stories about actors and parties. Her delivery was so enthralling—she always had me mesmerised. Siobhan had her moments. She could be a crazy and frustrating friend at times, but she was never boring.

She was entertaining and beautiful and glittering and alive. And now—she isn't.

Death is a shock. I have lost a brother, family members, and a few friends now—one who was very close. Johnny's death floored me. Siobhan is competing with him. When I got the phone call, I cried. Made a couple of phone calls, cried some more. Then I went down to the kitchen in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, where I am on a writing retreat, and broke my 'no scones' rule. Then I went back to my room, lay on the bed and remembered. After my brother died, my husband went to Vietnam to visit his brother—who also died suddenly.

I was home alone with our infant son, grieving and overwhelmed. It was the most difficult time in my life. Siobhan rang me up and said: "I want to come and help you. I don't know what I can do (Siobhan had no children and was terrible around the house), but I would like to try." I was deeply touched and, more for her sake than mine, I told her to come.

On the first day, she followed me around Lidl, at a statuesque six foot, in some fashion ensemble, drawing curious attention from locals. That night we had a takeaway and talked until midnight. Siobhan offered to do



the early morning feed. She had never fed or changed a baby. It wasn't her 'thing.'

But I was so tired that I agreed. I gave her a bottle and showed her how to use it. The following morning I came down to find Siobhan in my sitting room, in an armchair, wearing a Hollywood style silk kimono. My baby son, Tom, was contentedly asleep in the cradle of her arms and bosom. She smiled at me and told me he was fed. She said that they had been sitting there, looking out at the sun rising over Killala Bay, for two hours and they had been two of the happiest, peaceful hours of her life.

Siobhan was generous. She always made me feel good about myself. Like I was a good friend. I cannot count the number of times she took a piece of costume jewellery from around her neck and gave it to me. If she let me down, sometimes, she always said sorry. And I knew she meant it. Just the other day, somebody quoted a classic 'Siobhan Darling' quote back at me.

I was complaining there were two Parisian women in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre. I was having a small moan saying: "Where do they

get their style from? They are just so perfectly dressed. So... appropriate." "Nonsense darling," the woman quipped. "All you need to look French is a spotty dress."

I roared laughing and lifted my phone to send Siobhan a text. 'I miss you' it read. I didn't send it. Siobhan and I shared laughter, and glamour, and accessories. But we shared our humanity too in so many ways. And in the end—the very end—that is all that matters.

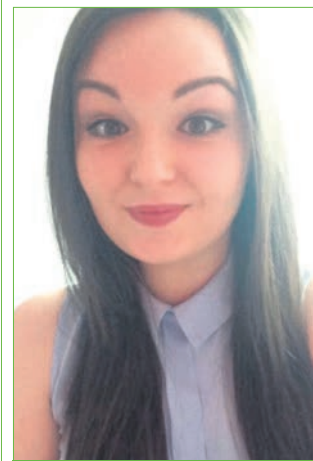
■ Kate Kerrigan was born in Kirkcaldy, Fife of Irish parents and moved to her native Ireland after a successful career as a magazine editor in London. Kate's novels about the Irish emigration experience have made her a *New York Times* bestseller and in her column for *The Irish Voice* life she muses on life back 'home' in Killala, County Mayo, where she lives with her husband and two young sons. Kate's latest book *The Dress*, published by Head of Zeus is available for download on all e-book platforms now. If you would like to learn more about her writing, visit her website at [www.katekerrigan.ie](http://www.katekerrigan.ie)

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# We need a real living wage not benefit cuts



Shannon McGurin

CHANGES to tax credits came into force recently, affecting thousands of families across the country. The measures announced in 2015 by George Osborne, are estimated to impact on 515,000 families.

Tax credits were originally brought in 1999 by the government to help low income families bring up their up children, and this help is evidently still needed. Since the benefit was introduced, the cost of living and childcare has increased significantly, so it is still a vital lifeline for families living on the poverty line.

The government introduced the rule that it will only effect families who have a third child or more after April 2017. At the moment child tax credit can provide support up to £2780 per child each year. There had never previously been a limit on how many children a parent can claim for.

The UK Government accepts that people do not receive enough income to survive on, so what does it say about that same government when they are prepared to now only provide help for some children?

There are the usual arguments that you shouldn't have children if you can't afford to look after them, but not only is this a cruel way to looks at things, it also overlooks the fact that people's circumstances may change for the worse.

The relief tax credits provide could be all that stands between a family not having enough money to put food in their fridge or use gas or electricity in their house. The government providing for people who find themselves living in poverty is exactly why social welfare

exists in the UK. It amazes me that the government wants to disadvantage the very same families that they claim they want to help in their manifestos.

They have also brought in the harrowing non-consensual sex exemption clause. It restricts families claiming this benefit only for their two children—unless they can prove the third child was conceived as a result of rape.

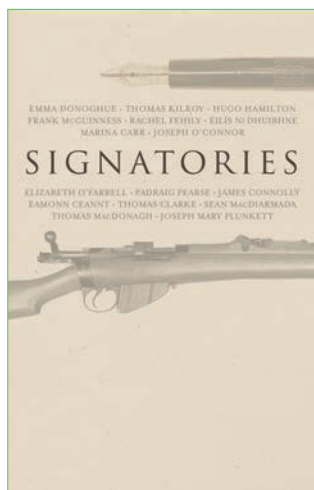
The new addition to the tax credit claim form asks the mother to disclose whether they conceived their child 'without their consent or during a coercive relationship'—not the type of thing somebody wants to revisit on an application form.

I will never be able to understand the life-changing impact that having a child as a result of rape might have on a woman, but what I do believe is it's not the type of thing somebody wants to revisit on an application form. And it's not just as simple as noting down you were indeed a victim of rape, you also are expected to then provide evidence of this from a social worker or a healthcare professional, which would entail asking them to fill this out and going through the horror of it all over again.

Making someone who has been a victim of rape or an abusive relationship provide evidence of their traumatic experience to claim £2780 could have a damaging impact. It may prevent women from coming forward as they don't want to have to go through this situation every year, which in turn has a negative effect on the child.

As the tax credits cuts come to light, it highlights the real problem across the country—people are not being paid the real living wage. Recent statistics show that 63 per cent of people who currently receive tax credits are actually working families. This means that the majority of people claiming the benefit are going out and working 16 plus hours each week and it still isn't enough to raise a family. I think the government needs to address the real issue of paying people a proper living wage to before they start enforcing cuts.

■ Shannon McGurin is a multimedia journalism graduate from Glasgow Caledonian University. She has family in Ballintra in Donegal and is passionate about football, Scottish politics and being the best mum she can possibly be



# Signatories gathers artistic responses to Easter Rising

*SIGNATORIES* is a beautifully designed book to treasure and pass on. It gathers the artistic responses of some of Ireland's most acclaimed writers to the seven executed leaders of the Rising, as well as Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell who delivered the surrender at Easter 1916.

Featuring Emma Donoghue, Thomas Kilroy, Hugo Hamilton, Frank McGuinness, Rachel Fehily, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Marina Carr and

Joseph O'Connor, this is a handsome hardback edition of the collected plays which saw the world premiere of the eponymous play in the historic surroundings of Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin.

Between the May 3 and May 12 in 1916, the seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic were among those shot by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol for their part in the Easter Rising—known as 'the poets' rebellion,' for among its leaders were writers,

teachers and intellectuals.

The signatories must have known that the Rising would be crushed, must have dreaded the carnage and death, must have foreseen that, if caught alive, they would themselves be executed.

Now, a century later, eight Irish writers of note remember these revolutionaries in a unique project combining Ireland's finest literary and theatrical talent.

*Signatories* comprises artistic responses by Emma Donoghue,

Thomas Kilroy, Hugo Hamilton, Frank McGuinness, Rachel Fehily, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Marina Carr and best-selling author Joseph O'Connor to the seven signatories and Nurse O'Farrell.

The eight monologues collected in *Signatories* give contemporary interpretations of the story of the eight protagonists' final hours, encapsulating the emotional turmoil of their self-sacrifice. Each writer presents their response to the eight revolutionaries' actions—

sending out commands, lying in Kilmainham Gaol, facing the firing squad, or, in the case of Elizabeth O'Farrell, ultimately being airbrushed out of public view.

This is a unique theatrical and literary commemoration of a pivotal moment in Ireland's turbulent past.

■ *Signatories* is published by UCD Press in Dublin and available from good bookshops and online.

JANEY JOHNSTONE