

Review



The long road West

Four years on from the invasion, we talk to the Ukrainians who have made Co Kerry their home

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In depth

‘Ireland is a second home and the most important thing is that we feel safe’

Four years on from the invasion, **Kim Bielenberg** speaks to Ukrainians who have settled in Co Kerry, why they chose to come here, the heartbreaking stories from their homeland, and dealing with the ‘small percentage of haters’

The vast majority of the tens of thousands of Ukrainians who now live in Ireland could never have imagined they would still be here four years after the full-scale invasion of their country by Russia.

They were like the unfortunate soldiers at the front in World War I who, at the conflict's outbreak in the summer of 1914, thought it would be all over by Christmas.

Members of the sizable Ukrainian community now scattered across Kerry recall how they felt they would be away from their homes for a few weeks, or at most a few months, when Russian troops moved across the border on February 24, 2022. And then they would be able to return to home.

Natalia Krasnenkova, a community worker now living in Killarney, says: “I thought it would be over in the summer, but I was naïve. I never thought it would be four years.”

Ukrainians are now part of the fabric of Irish society, but they feature less in the headlines than during the early months of the influx.

The latest report from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) showed 121,048 PPS numbers have been issued to Ukrainians since they started arriving in Ireland after the invasion. It is by far the biggest influx of refugees in the State's history.

The latest figures also indicate that 84,000 Ukrainians remain in the State. A number of others have either returned to Ukraine or moved to other countries.

The CSO survey showed that Kenmare Municipal District – an area that takes in much from the ring of Kerry, including the town of Cahirsiveen and Killorglin – had both the highest number of arrivals from Ukraine (1,922) in the country and the highest proportion of Ukrainians for every 100 people of the population. In parts of Kerry, they make up to 7pc of the population.

The presence of Ukrainians is perhaps most noticeable in local schools. For example, up to half of the pupils at Caherdaniel National School are children of Ukrainian refugees.

The war in Ukraine was, in many ways, eclipsed over the past two years by the conflict in Gaza. But Ukrainians in Kerry are keen to ensure that the invasion of their country by Russia is not forgotten.

The tragic impact of the war was brought home to local people in Kerry earlier this month when a picture of Viktoriia Popova appeared on the front page of the *Kerryman*.

In the photo, the Ballybunion-based refugee from Dnipro held a flag showing pictures of her soldier husband Vadym and comrades who went missing last autumn during battles in the Donetsk region, which is largely held by Russia.

The flag carries the message: “Missing does not mean forgotten.”

Popova, who was an accountant in Ukraine, now works as a cashier in SuperValu in the town and is studying health exercise and massage therapy at Munster Technological University.

She is welcoming at her home, a bungalow on the edge of the seaside town, where she lives with her teenage son Yurii and her daughter Marianna.

Over tea and biscuits in her living room, she tells the *Irish Independent* that since her story appeared in the *Kerryman*, she has received a lot of support from local people about her husband's plight.

“I wanted to show that we are still living with the war,” she says. On the 24th of every month, she joins other Ukrainians at a rally to mark the invasion in Tralee.

Popova has not given up hope that her husband is still alive.

BATTLES

In her living room with her children by her side, she tells how the family was able to go on holiday in Croatia with Vadym when he was on leave last year.

She was last in contact with him on September 28 as he fought in battles in Donetsk, but then there was no further communication – a few weeks later, she received notification from Ukrainian authorities that he was missing.

Popova is sceptical about the present peace negotiations involving the US, Russia and Ukraine: “Donald Trump is too sympathetic to the Russians. [They are behaving] like Ukraine started this war.”

She is desperate to know if her husband is a prisoner of the Russians. “Pressure should be put on the Russians to show what prisoners they have, and the Red Cross should be allowed to visit them.”

For a huge number of Ukrainians living in Ireland, the number one attraction is that it is an English-speaking country. Parents and children might have already had a grasp of the language before they arrived.

Before the Russians invaded, Kateryna Brykalova did not know anything about Ireland other than it was supposed to be 40 shades of green.

Together with her husband Timor and three daughters – Stanislava, Polina and Nikol – Bry-

kalova lived in Kharkiv, only 20km from the Russian border.

She worked as a beautician and her husband worked in car technology. On the outbreak of war, tanks rolled in from Russia and they had to shelter with other families in a basement.

As fighting became more intense, they moved to another city, Dneber, but after a few months, Brykalova and her daughters had to flee the country, spending time in Austria and Italy.

Brykalova speaks little English. So during our interview, her daughter Stanislava acts as interpreter.

She says: “In Italy we didn't get any help at all from the government. We came to Ireland, because I read on social media that it was the most friendly place for Ukrainians to live. Mums and children were given a place to live, as well as payments.”

Brykalova and her daughters came to Ireland in October 2022 and were initially housed in the Ely House hotel in Shannnonbridge, Co Offaly.

“The owner there was one of the best people I ever met, and gave us all the help we needed.”

Eventually, a house was found for the family in Kenmare. Her husband Timor stayed behind in Ukraine for a time. He was not called up to the army for medical reasons and joined the family in Ireland in 2023.

But as with so many other refugees, Brykalova's family was touched by tragedy.

Her 57-year-old brother Vyacheslav, a voluntary recruit, was killed in fighting in September 2022, and she feels an enormous sense of loss.

“A cousin first read the news about him on [instant messaging service] Telegram and it was impossible to believe. He had been manager of a factory making bulletproof vests – and the Russians celebrated his death.”

Brykalova remains uncertain about whether she will be able to return to Ukraine in the foreseeable future.

As with so many others, she is in the strange situation of having a home in Ukraine but not being able to return.

Windows were blown out in the bombing, and there is currently no heat and electricity supply in the neighbourhood. Members of her family are still in the area, and she keeps in touch with neighbours in Ukraine.

“We are so close to the Russian border that I am afraid that if there was a peace settlement and we returned, it would only last a short time, and the Russians would come back over the border. What would we do then?”

The war goes on with little end in sight, despite Trump's talk of a peace settlement. But



“When we arrived here we were like aliens from another planet. I had to start my life from scratch”

in the meantime, many Ukrainian children are becoming settled in Ireland and are going through the education system here.

With each passing month, they become more accustomed to the Irish way of life.

Stanislava says: “My sister Nikol prefers to speak with me in English – and she has a Kerry accent.”

Brykalova says: “Ireland is the best place to live because the people are kind and we are friendly with our neighbours.

“It's a second home and the most important thing is that I feel safe.”

When we meet in the International Hotel Killarney, Natalia Krasnenkova asks if I want “bainne agus siúcra” with my “cupán tae”.

Four years after she arrived in Ireland with her two teenage children, Zoia and Stepan, Krasnenkova is a community worker with North East & West Kerry Development.

“I work in the Gaeltacht – so I am trying to learn Irish,” says the former reporter with a Ukrainian TV channel.

“When we arrived here we were like aliens from another planet. I had to start my life from scratch.”

Like thousands of others, the Kyiv resident Krasnenkova had to make a split-second decision on whether to leave when the invasion started.

“We packed our things to leave in five minutes, and I only took very few clothes and one pair of shoes. My daughter just took books she was studying for exams.”

She joined a convoy of five cars heading west out of the Ukrainian capital towards Lviv – including babies, children, grandfathers and grandmothers.

With bombs also falling in the west, she still felt her family was in danger. And so she left her car behind and they crossed the border into Poland before flying to Dublin.



“I work in the Gaeltacht – so I am trying to learn Irish”: Natalia Krasnenkova at Ross Castle; and Kateryna Brykalova and her daughter Stanislava in Kenmare with a poster of her brother Vyacheslav, who was killed in Kherson in 2022. Photos: Don MacMonagle

Ireland seemed to her to be the best English-speaking option, because the country opened its borders to Ukrainians, and was not as far away as Canada or the US.

“When we arrived in Dublin Airport we had no idea where we were going. We were processed in the old terminal building and given a bit of paper with ‘Innisfallen Hotel, Fossa, Killarney, Co Kerry’ written on it.”

The family lived in the hotel for one year and nine months and she said it felt like living in a “very comfortable prison”.

The former journalist did a course in Kerry College in community development and leadership, which led to her current job.

Her job involves helping to integrate Ukrainian refugees and implement programmes for employment assistance, language courses, cultural activities and mental health projects.

Eventually, she was able to move out of the hotel and rent her own flat.

Among the Ukrainian refugees there is plenty of coming and going between Ireland and their home country. Krasnenkova's grown-up daughter now lives back in Kyiv, where she is studying sociology. Her son is studying criminology in UCC.

As the negotiations over a peace deal continue, Krasnenkova is sceptical about their outcome.

“USA and Europe don't understand Ukraine because they have never been in their shoes – they are blind [to the fact that] this is not just a war in Ukraine. It's a threat for all of Europe.

“We appreciate Europe's support but it's not enough. The Russians only understand the language of power, sanctions and economic punishment.”

She is positive about the welcome given to Ukrainians by the majority of people in Ireland.

“Most people are extremely hospitable and friendly. There is a small percentage of haters. They are a minority, but very loud on social media. I think Ukrainians are now seen by some as competitors for jobs, but usually they are doing jobs that nobody wants to take.”

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Playing with fire: What can we do to stop the rise in arson attacks on playgrounds?

In Dublin alone, the number of incidents has tripled over five years. **Kirsty Blake Knox** talks to those affected and finds out what is being done to turn the tide of vandalism

Around the railings of the Diamond Park playground in Dublin's north inner city, signs state that it will remain closed until further notice due to vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

Behind a fence, the plastic tunnels remain melted and twisted, a swing ripped off and burnt and discarded empty glass bottles and half a bicycle can be seen.

The park, on the corner of Sean McDermott Street and Gardiner Street, opened to much fanfare in August 2023. It has an impressive playground, a basketball court and a multi-use games area with two table tennis tables. Last October, its multi-storey play structure was set alight. It was the third time since it opened that vandalism had resulted in a forced closure.

The damage was reported to cost between €250,000 and €300,000.

Figures provided to the *Irish Independent* from three of Dublin's four councils show that the number of arson attacks on playgrounds and recreational areas run by councils has increased from four in 2020 to 12 in 2025.

Dublin City Council, the largest local authority in the capital and country, did not provide a breakdown of arson attacks as it "does not isolate or count minor incidents of fire damage in the upkeep work on the playgrounds".

However, it said that in 2025 a "small number" of playgrounds suffered "significant fire damage". They were: Diamond Park, Sean Moore Park, Bridgefoot Street and one in Kilmore. "Work is ongoing to repair or replace the play items that were damaged," it added.

Mother-of-four Orla Priestley lives in Dublin's north-east inner city and two of her children attend the adjacent Rutland NS. She and her family regularly visited the playground. Her children finish school at different times and it was an ideal place to pass the time.

"When it first opened, it was stunning and a meeting point... And the way it was planned – you have the lovely green area, the basketball court and then you had the playground itself. It was brilliant and the kids really enjoyed it.

"And it was so safe because there was a wrap-around wall that the parents could sit on and keep an eye on the kids. Why someone would put a match to a playground, I do not understand."

Priestley is the chairperson of Families of Autistic and Additional Needs Coming Together (FAACT), a parent support group. The playground was of real benefit for children with additional needs, she says. "They would have

a little run around to regulate themselves." She recalls how the community gathered in Diamond Park to watch Kellie Harrington make Olympic history in 2024 when the council erected screens.

In the months before the playground was destroyed in October, there had been a series of incidents. In August alone, there were four separate arson attacks in the park. Today, the park is open, but there is no date when the playground will reopen. Dublin City Council says a contractor is looking at the site "with a view to doing repairs".

"You're looking at it and... there's no end goal of saying 'well it's going to be sorted by May or June'. And that only attracts more anti-social behaviour," says Priestley.

She stresses how important parks and playgrounds in the city are for families. "These small little clusters of green areas are beautiful to look at and they really do brighten up the area. Even the murals, they look fantastic. And it's lovely when you walk by them, and you say, look, people are taking pride in where they live.

"The parks are so vital to the people in the north-east inner city. I think [the authorities] should be going into schools to speak to the kids about the impact of taking a park away from people in the area, and how damaging it can be."

This problem is not unique to the north side of the capital. In September, a suspected arson attack destroyed the main slide structure at the Sean Moore Park playground in Sandymount. It was reported that repairs would cost about €100,000 and a boy was arrested in relation to this incident. At the time, local TD James Geoghegan said the playground had been set alight "six or seven times in the last two years".

Kilmore West playground on the Oscar Traynor Road was set on fire last November, with Fianna Fáil councillor Daryl Barron estimating the cost of repairs at around €80,000.

In a statement, Dublin City Council says its priority is to keep its 74 playgrounds "safe and of the highest play value" to children.

"To this end, we undertake a programme of playground upgrade and repair each year."

It also says that designers mitigate against damage through "design and provision of high-quality equipment and play surfaces".

In South County Dublin, where there are 62 public playgrounds, there were 12 recorded instances of arson over the past six years.

'Why would someone put a match to a playground?': A child looks at the fenced off Diamond Park in north inner-city Dublin after an arson attack last year. Photo: Mark Condren



'It creates a really hostile atmosphere. Locked gates around the city present the image of a city that people can't access because of crime'

There were two in 2020, one in 2021, none in 2022 and 2023, two in 2024 and seven in 2025. The rise in attacks coincides with an increase in the numbers of playground in the city.

The council has allocated €6.6m over three years for the upgrade and provision of new playgrounds and play spaces.

In Fingal, the council recorded just four instances of playground arson in the past six years. All of these took place in 2024 and 2025. The most expensive was the burning of a junior multi-unit structure in Lanesborough Park. The structure was replaced at a cost of about €30,000. The section of the playground remains closed.

Other incidents were more superficial – a basket swing being burnt out in Ongar Park with damages of €1,500, and a tunnel being burnt and replaced at Hansfield Park, which cost €2,800.

In Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, there were nine arson attacks over the six-year period, with five of those between 2024 and 2025. No detail on the cost was given, but they range from climbing structures being burnt to a slide in Tully Park in Cherrywood being set alight.

It is not known how widespread arson attacks on playgrounds are outside Dublin, but they do take place. Last July, extensive damage was caused to Carrigtwohill playground in east Cork following a suspected arson attack. In 2024, the swing set in Sixmilebridge playground in Co Clare was

set on fire. Dunville Park in West Belfast was closed last year after part of the playground was set alight. In 2020, the slide and play area in Donegal's Bernard McGlinchey Town Park

were set on fire. According to Les Moore, head of parks services at Dublin City Council, the vast majority of playgrounds are not subjected to vandalism and are a hugely valuable and highly utilised by people living in the area.

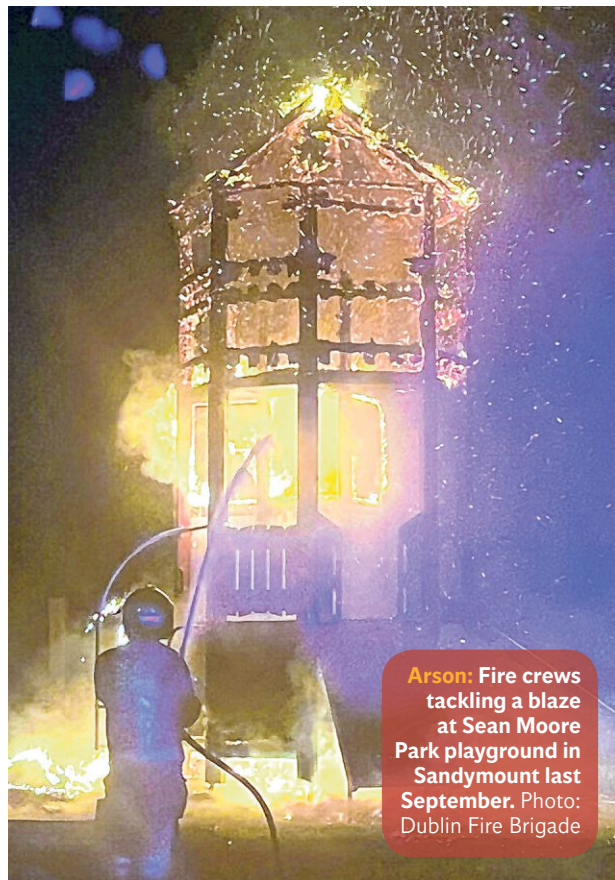
"In most of them, people are using them and they're being respected," Moore says, adding that playgrounds in the city "are a positive story".

"I know the media likes to pick up on the negative, but to us, playgrounds are positive. You have to deal with some negative issues that arise but, overall, the playgrounds are fantastic."

However, instances of playground vandalism strike a chord with people. Firstly, because many have experienced the benefits of these amenities – they provide a safe space for exercise, connection, learning and fun. An act of destruction against them impacts children and young families. On top of this, councils often ask the community for their input into the design and layout of playgrounds.

Their importance is not just practical but symbolic. A burnt-out or cordoned-off playground, such as Diamond Park, can have a demoralising impact on a community.

The broken windows theory, developed by



Arson: Fire crews tackling a blaze at Sean Moore Park playground last September. Photo: Dublin Fire Brigade

Wilson and Kelling in 1982, suggested that visible vandalism that goes unfixed indicates a lack of care and can result in further anti-social behaviour.

Gary Gannon, the Social Democrats TD for Dublin Central, says: "It creates a really hostile atmosphere. Locked gates around the city present the image of a city that people can't access because of crime and the threat of crime."

This area faces other issues – it has the highest concentration of homeless accommodation in the country, with one in 10 homeless people in Ireland living on Gardiner Street.

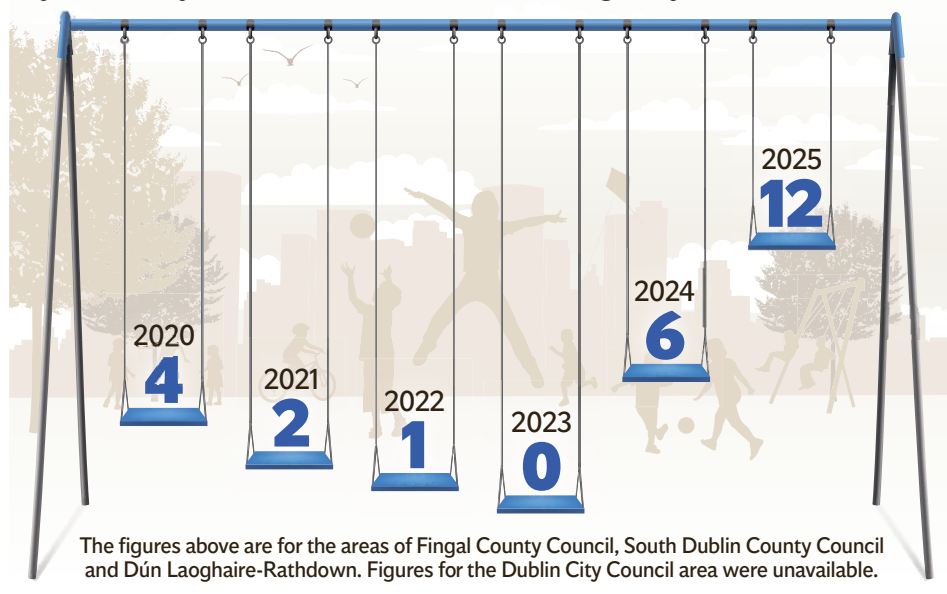
"These parks are not just being closed because kids burnt some of the facilities, they're closed because of bad planning and bad procedure," Gannon says. "The city council is basically putting a huge number of people with very complex issues into an area, [they are] trying to barter for drugs, you are going to have these young people going around on scooters meeting that need, and they are hanging around in parks while they are waiting to do that."

At the north-east inner city's Community After School Project, Ruth Breen, the designated liaison person, says the lack of safe green spaces is a real problem for families.

"It is disheartening because this area has always had a bad rap and it is not a bad area... it is disheartening in that the children lose out yet again. I am working here 24 years so I have seen the regeneration of all the flats and apartments, and that is all lovely aesthetically, but where are

ARSON ATTACKS ON DUBLIN PLAYGROUNDS

Since 2020, there have been at least 25 arson attacks on playgrounds in Dublin city and county, with almost half of them occurring last year alone



the children playing and where are they being children?"

Breen thinks there should be more rangers employed to patrol the parks. "It doesn't have to be police the whole time... a park ranger that would constantly be in the parks? That would be a deterrent."

An Garda Síochána was asked what it was doing to tackle this problem, and whether there had been any successful prosecutions in relation to the arson attacks. It said it was "not in a position to manually trawl through every recorded incident of criminal damage in Dublin over the last six years to figure out if they took place at a playground and then if any arrests took place as a result".

Burnt-out amenities are not the only deterrent from visiting playgrounds. Parent Christina Jones from Dublin says that racist and sexually violent language was graffitied in a playground she and her children use.

"One of the things it said was 'if she says no, she means yes'," she says. Moran says to the council's credit, it responded quickly when alerted. Her family also uses the Sean Moore playground. She believes that more investment in preventative measures is the way forward.

"I don't know why the council isn't going into schools and talking to children. Are they given thought to measures about CCTV or lights at night time?"

There have been other calls for CCTV footage to be installed in parks. This is something Fingal County Council has committed to doing.

"We are not discounting CCTV in certain situations," Moore of Dublin City Council, which has a budget of €1.9m for the upgrade of existing and new playgrounds this year, says.

"But there has been CCTV before and all you get is pictures of youths doing the damage. It doesn't stop the damage happening, you still have to clean up afterwards and CCTV doesn't always identify culprits. But we are working with the gardaí and if they want us to put in CCTV – and they think it would help the situation – we are happy to do that in conjunction with them."

Trina O'Connor, a community criminologist, says there are a number of reasons why arson attacks have increased. "First of all, we have had an increase in playgrounds being built so more opportunities for them to be damaged," she says. "And that age cohort of 9-14 year olds are losing out on community support."

She adds that children in this age bracket are too old for playgrounds and have few social spaces available to them. "We need to be meeting them where their interests are – skateboarding

or graffiti projects."

Ruairí Ó Dúlaing, senior parks superintendent at Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, agrees there should be more investment in teen-friendly public spaces. "Traditionally, we are good up to the age 12 and then people don't want to acknowledge that teenagers exist," he says, adding that it takes a nuanced approach when designing for this age group.

Gannon believes there needs to be more joined-up thinking when it comes to dealing with vandalism. He suggests deploying 'night-time youth work' to discourage anti-social behaviour.

"People who understand these communities, who can walk around, who know where the young people are, who are talking to them and trying to provide them with alternative places where they can just be. At the moment we don't seem to have a strategy for this and it is only getting worse."

Last year in the Budget, €7.3m in additional funding was announced for 'youth diversion projects' to prevent young people from getting involved in crime. According to O'Connor, vandalism is a complex issue and the motivating factors need to be understood.

"Sometimes, people dismiss vandalism as something that's random or something that's inevitable to happen. I really think that's a mistake, because vandalism is a complex psychological sociological behaviour. It has triggers, it has patterns and it has root causes. To stop it, you need to understand the psychology behind it," she says.

"People often say to me when I talk about more resources for young people, 'Oh but they destroy what they are given'. The broad question is, why are they destroying the resources? It's complex."

Sometimes vandalism is not malicious in its intent but recreational and driven out of boredom, she says. Then there are targeted instances. "This damage is intended to be as messy and as expensive as possible... this is to hurt the owners or custodians," she says. "If people feel outside or disconnected from the community, then this may be why they take aim at a community resource."

Quickly removing or fixing instances where property has been damaged reduces the likelihood that it will be targeted again, she says. "But crucially, we need to be looking at young people and how we create places for them to exist as part of the community," she says. "The best route is to interrupt, disturb and give alternative prosocial activities to young people. Make them part of the solution to reclaim public and civic spaces."



Gary Gannon TD: 'It is only getting worse'

U2, their creative coma and the new songs fizzing with fury

New EP ‘Days of Ash’ caught the music world on the hop this week, writes **John Meagher**. With little in the way of new original music for almost a decade, could we be about to see the veteran rockers finally stage a renaissance?

It has been almost two years since U2’s last live performance. It was March 2, 2024, and the occasion was the 40th and final show of their residency at the newly opened Las Vegas Sphere. As the band walked off stage, having just finished *40* – the final song on their 1983 album, *War* – the roar of the crowd ringing in their ears, they must have felt that they had achieved yet another milestone: delivering an audio-visual spectacular in the world’s most hi-tech concert venue. And in their sixth decade as a touring force, they could remind themselves that they remain masters at money-making. Each concert reportedly increased the bank balance of U2 Inc by \$4m. In all, some \$160m to play old hits in Nevada’s all-night party town is one hell of a pay packet.

For the first time, they had to play without Larry Mullen Jr – whose ‘Drummer seeks musicians’ note on the school bulletin board 50 years ago this autumn started everything. Dutch percussionist Bram van den Berg had stepped into the breach. Despite largely positive reviews, it was difficult to escape the notion that U2 had become what Bono vowed they never would: a heritage rock band, determined to secure their legacy and forgetting about making new music. That was certainly the feeling when they released *Songs of Surrender* in 2023. A 40-track album, it saw them rehashing their own songs. Critics were lukewarm – some of the reinterpretations worked; others seemed like weak facsimiles of previous songs.

The project was inspired by *Surrender*, the exceptional memoir that Bono had released the previous year. It would spawn a stage show and an Apple TV film. Nobody could accuse U2 – especially its frontman – of being quiet. And yet, the dynamism of old seemed to be gone. Where were the new songs? Their last studio album, *Songs of Experience*, was released in 2017 and despite murmurs from the band that they were working on a new album, each year came and went and there was nothing to show for it.

Instead, they delivered a batch of forgettable songs, the most recent one, the catchy but empty *Atomic City*, was seemingly written in haste for those Las Vegas shows. Another, *Your Song Saved My Life*, was a likeable effort penned for the 2021 animated kids’ film *Sing 2*, but hardly vintage U2 – and it felt more like a Bono solo effort. In November 2024, they released a so-called ‘shadow album’, *How to Re-assemble an Atomic Bomb*, featuring 10 previously unreleased tracks recorded during the sessions for the *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* album two decades

before. That at least half those tracks were of a high standard only served to reinforce the idea that U2 had now fallen into creative paralysis. Although it might seem strange to blame their well-received 30th anniversary *Joshua Tree* tour in 2017, the rot seemed to have set in then. For the first time, they were following the herd and touring a classic album.

Songs of Experience was already in the can – indeed, they debuted *The Little Things That Give You Away* from that album on that tour – but bringing their most celebrated album on the road appeared to shift their gaze backwards, rather than forward.

Rather than release a new album for the shows in the Sphere, the \$2.3bn venue famed before its 2023 opening for its immersive audio and video capabilities, the band resorted to building the show around 1991’s *Achtung Baby*. It was the album that had reinvented their sound for a new decade, after Bono had famously told the crowd at Dublin’s Point Depot in December 1989 that U2 would go away to “dream it all up again”. Since the release of *Songs of Experience* – a companion to 2014’s *Songs of Innocence* – various band members teased fans that they were working on a new album, one that would reinvent their sound yet again. But nothing happened.

SILENCE ON ISRAEL-GAZA

Over the past 20 years, U2 have reportedly worked with several producers, only to later scrap the music. There was an album tentatively called *Songs of Ascent* that they were making with Brian ‘Danger Mouse’ Burton in 2010 and 2011, but it never saw the light of day. A mooted album with French dance floor guru David Guetta also never emerged, their collaboration only yielding *Atomic City*.

And, for a band who had long delivered politically charged songs such as *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (about British forces killing 14 unarmed protesters in Derry in 1972) and *Bullet the Blue Sky* (about America’s military destructive intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador during Ronald Reagan’s presidency), they seemed unusually quiet about Russia’s incursion into Ukraine and Israel’s merciless assault on Gaza.

In May 2022, Bono and the Edge travelled to Ukraine to play a surprise show in a Kyiv metro station, with Bono telling attendees that “the people of Ukraine are not just fighting for your own freedom, you’re fighting for all of us who love freedom”.

But their silence on Israel-Gaza led to furious criticism, until last August when each of the four members took the unusual decision to release separate statements.

For some, it wasn’t enough. Veteran folk

Long wait: U2 haven’t played live in Ireland since 2018. Photo: Getty

singer Mary Coughlan, who had been especially critical of the band’s refusal to comment on the matter, slammed Bono’s words as “putrid and pathetic”.

Others wondered if the band that had penned such powerful anti-war songs as *Miss Sarajevo* – released by their side project Passengers in 1995 – had simply lost the ability to write songs about current events.

Their former manager Paul McGuinness had memorably said that “domesticity is the enemy of rock ‘n’ roll” but maybe U2’s advancing years had become the real enemy of creativity. Bono, after all, turns 66 – pensionable age in this country – on May 10.

Even avowed fans had started to believe that U2 had become a tribute act to itself. That was until they surprised everyone with the release of a six-track EP, *Days of Ash* – without warning – on Wednesday at 5pm. It was their first body of original music in nine years and from its strident opening guitar line, it felt like the sound of a band reborn. And it was the original quartet, with Mullen back behind the drum kit, and with Dublin producer Garret ‘Jackknife’ Lee at the control desk.

The Guardian noted that the EP “reaffirms the band as a vital political voice” adding that the new songs “have a crispness that has been lacking in their 21st-century material, as they nimbly react to shocking news stories”.

The reviews that poured in from all around the world were overwhelmingly positive, with many pointing to the first song, *American Obituary*, as evidence of Bono’s rediscovering his old ability to write lyrics that fizz with fury about injustice.

The song is inspired by the killing of mother-of-three Renée Nicole Good by an Immigration



and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent in Minneapolis last month and has already incurred the wrath of MAGA fanboys on social media.

Another track, *Song of the Future*, is inspired by the so-called schoolgirl uprising in Iran which lead to the death of Mahsa Amini while in police custody. Again, it feels startlingly contemporary, a protest song about events shaping the world right now – just as it was back in the 1950s and 1960s when the likes of Peggy Seeger and Bob Dylan released potent songs about injustice as they saw it at the time.

For those who long thought that U2 had

Getting political again: U2 surprised fans this week with the release of ‘Days of Ash’. Photo: Anton Corbijn

“These songs were impatient to be out in the world. They are songs of defiance and dismay”

online distribution systems now ensure it is quick and easy to release songs on the hoof. Bruce Springsteen did just that three weeks ago with *Streets of Minneapolis*. Another coruscating anti-ICE song, it rages against President Trump’s lapdogs, Stephen Miller and Kristi Noem.

“It’s been a thrill having the four of us back together in the studio,” Bono said, adding that the EP is a standalone project. None of the songs will feature on a future album.

And, for once, that album – as yet untitled and set to be the band’s 16th studio offering – looks like it will arrive sooner rather than later, according to the frontman.

“The songs on *Days of Ash* are very different in mood and theme than the ones we’re going to put on our album later in the year. These songs were impatient to be out in the world. They are songs of defiance and dismay.”

Quite what the material on the new album will be like is anyone’s guess. After flailing creatively for the best part of a decade, this week’s new music suggests a band revitalised.

Music history is full of big-name acts who have had a late resurgence – everyone from David Bowie to Johnny Cash and from Paul Simon to the Rolling Stones. U2 will be hoping to join such august company – and concert promoters will be keen too.

For a band who were toured relentlessly for years, one has to go back to 2018 for their last hometown show. That wait is unlikely to go on much longer.

Three key ingredients to boost nature restoration in Ireland



Empowering communities: Fintan Kelly (inset) says we need more ambitious planning by the state bodies who manage key areas like peatlands

Aisling Maria Cronin

Nature in Ireland needs targeted support to speed up its recovery from decades of degradation, says Fintan Kelly, senior land use officer with the Irish Environmental Network (IEN).

At the end of last year, the Government published *The Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland, 2025: Summary Report*, known as the Article 17. Published every six years, it provides an update on the conservation status of 59 habitats and 60 species in Ireland protected under the EU Habitats Directive.

According to this report, 90pc of Ireland’s protected habitats are in ‘unfavourable’ conservation status, while 51pc are showing deteriorating trends.

Following the European Council’s adoption of the Nature Restoration Law in 2024, each EU member state must produce their own Nature Restoration Plan to show how they will achieve the targets it sets out. At present, an Independent Advisory Committee on Nature Restoration has been established here, with the task of making recommendations to the Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Biodiversity on what should be included in the national plan.

The IEN is a network of 40 environmental non-government organisations that advocates for positive ecological policy changes. Each of its member organisations – including Friends of the Earth, the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, and the Irish Wildlife Trust – are involved in the well-being and protection of nature.

Kelly says that three elements are required if Ireland is to make meaningful progress on restoring degraded ecosystems – particularly peatlands, native forests and other areas with the most potential to capture carbon and reduce the impact of natural disasters.

1. Strong political leadership

Kelly says that to date, one of the major obstacles to Ireland developing a cohesive nature restoration strategy has been an official “siloe” approach, with different Government departments playing sometimes conflicting roles in developing the national plan. Currently, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has ownership of Ireland’s proposed Nature Restoration Plan, while the Department of Public Expenditure and Department of Finance holds the purse strings.

“Unless you have strong political leadership to drive change in all of the relevant sectors and departments, it’s very difficult to develop a clear strategy,” he explains. “The State says they’re going to adopt an all-of-government approach, which on the face of it is a good thing. In practice, what we are seeing is a lot of confusion and bureaucratic barriers, with each department incentivised by different things. An all-of-government approach towards tackling the biodiversity crisis is needed, but ideally, this would involve clear, determined leadership from the Department of the Taoiseach, all the way down the chain.”



2. Secure funding

“If you’re restoring a house, you need to know exactly what budget you’re working with, so you can see what’s possible,” Kelly says. “The same principle applies here.

“We really need dedicated, ring-fenced, long-term finance in order to make the Nature Restoration Plan a reality. We should have seen that in last year’s National Development Plan – and at a bare minimum, I would have expected that the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund would have received a large allocation for nature restoration. There hasn’t been any concrete action on funding, so IEN is strongly advocating for that to be put in place. Ireland has legal obligations to meet in this regard.”

3. A strong plan for public land

“Ireland has a lot of privately owned land, including small family farms,” Kelly says, “and plenty of individual farmers are doing their best to help nature on their land. But if we want to really drive Irish nature restoration at the scale that is needed, we need to do that through publicly owned land. This would mean much stronger, more ambitious planning by the state bodies who manage key areas like forests and peatlands. Effectively, the Irish people own that land.

“We often hear a narrative that pits humans against nature – arguing that nature restoration is very difficult, very controversial. But in our experience, from the many communities around Ireland we have engaged with, that’s not true at all. Obviously, people want to see nature restoration done in a way that supports and empowers their communities, but the idea of restoring nature as a whole is broadly popular. Our message is: Ireland can’t achieve transformational change by continuing to do what we have always done in the past.”

• ien.ie

‘ELVIS THINKS HE’LL TOUR EUROPE THEN HE JUST GOT STUCK IN THIS VEGAS BUBBLE’

Interview

John Meagher



Baz Luhrmann on the 50 hours of never-seen-before footage that inspired his new Presley documentary ‘EPiC’, and letting The King tell his own story at last

Baz Luhrmann thought he was done with Elvis Presley. His biopic, starring Austin Butler and Tom Hanks, was widely acclaimed in 2022 and nominated for several Oscars. He had first got the ball rolling on *Elvis* some eight years before and, yet, there was unfinished business.

In the course of working on that lengthy feature, the Australian auteur filmmaker had come in contact with more than 50 hours of never-before-seen footage of Presley, with much of it depicting him rehearsing for his Las Vegas shows, as well as concert footage from that residency at Sin City’s International Hotel.

A veritable treasure trove, some 68 boxes of both 35mm and 8mm film had been found at the Warner Bros film archives within salt mines in Kansas. From the moment Luhrmann saw some of the footage, he knew he had to embark on one more Presley project – a documentary that attempts to get to the heart of the man, while also showcasing what a stunning live performer he was.

The result is *EPiC: Elvis Presley in Concert*, an up-close look at a legend towards the end of his short life. It bears many of the hallmarks of Luhrmann’s approach to cinema – bright, brash, never boring – and at a lean 90 minutes, it offers a new insight into one of culture’s most mythologised figures.

Luhrmann, more youthful looking than anyone at 63 has any right to be, is in a buoyant mood. The previous evening, *EPiC* had its premiere in London. It was a long night, which might explain why Luhrmann’s sunglasses stay on. He sports a hoodie under his formal jacket with Presley’s handsome face emblazoned on the front.

“We had a crazy cool screening last night,” he enthuses, “with the Rod Stewarts and the Noel Gallaghers out for it.”

Advance notices have, largely, been very posi-

tive. Luhrmann’s own enthusiasm is infectious. “So many people put their passion into the project,” he says, not least ‘Johnno’ Redmond who’s from your neck of the woods.”

Jonathan Redmond is a film editor from Dublin who has worked with Luhrmann since *Moulin Rouge!* in 2001. He received an Oscar nomination for best editing for his work on *Elvis*. It was Redmond who had to take hours of raw footage and deliver a coherent whole. He did a remarkable job.

Having had Elvis in his head for a dozen years, there’s little about the man that Luhrmann hasn’t obsessed over. And while there is a veritable library of books, documentaries, exhibitions and the like about Presley, the director believes that the seven-year period of residency at Las Vegas is not as well known as his early, breakthrough career, or his film work – or the celebrated 1968 ‘comeback special’ for TV. He hopes *EPiC* will change that.

“The first couple of shows are extraordinary – which is what you see in this doco. He thinks he’s going to go on a world tour, he thinks he’s going to play Europe.” Vegas was supposed to be a dry run for a global tour. It never happened.

Luhrmann suggests that the adulation at Vegas turned Presley’s head, made him a little complacent and “he lost the will to tour. He just got stuck in this bubble. Vegas was a bubble.

“And it’s also associated with his decline, and a lot of the jokes and the Halloween stuff comes out of late Elvis – say the Elvis of ‘76 [towards the end of his residency] – but we’re looking at the first shows, when he thought he was going to use this show and tour all over the world.”

Those shows capture a man still in decent physical shape and fully aware of his own powers. It makes for bittersweet viewing.

EPiC concludes with Bono reciting lines from his poem *American David*, which was released on the Passengers album, in truncated form, as *Elvis Ate America*.

Gifted performer: The King warming up in ‘EPiC: Elvis Presley in Concert’



“The Colonel didn’t want to sell him as human: he was selling a carnival act and the carnival act had to be perfect”



Kingmaker: Baz Luhrmann

talking about Elvis. We thought, ‘Let’s let him just tell his story’. And when we did that, that was an easy way of going. The song that would suit that moment would be that one.”

In essence, Luhrmann says, *EPiC* is about Presley “telling his life story and how the music poetically expresses his feelings about the people in his life”.

The film reminds us of what a remarkable stage presence Elvis had and also just how talented a musician he was. The respect that he is afforded by a crack team of backing musicians is palpable.

“Bob Dylan,” Luhrmann says, “once said, ‘When Elvis covered one of my songs, it was the greatest moment of my life.’ Elvis was a huge icon for Dylan. And there’s a story of a bass player working with the Doors. He was asked to come in to do a session with Elvis, [Jim] Morrison [Doors frontman] had died and he goes, ‘This [Elvis] is the coolest musician I ever worked with.’

Elvis’s demanding, controlling manager, Tom



Honoured: Bono’s poem ‘American David’ featured in the film ‘EPiC: Elvis Presley in Concert’ (above) which covers the early shows of his residency in Las Vegas

Parker – the self-styled ‘Colonel’ – features tangentially in *EPiC*. He’s an important part in Luhrmann’s Elvis feature and played, with brio, by Tom Hanks.

“The Colonel was all about taking out the imperfection. I think what’s great about [*EPiC*] is how funny and goofy and imperfect and human Elvis is. The Colonel didn’t want to sell him as human: he was selling a carnival act and the carnival act had to be perfect.”

I suggest to Luhrmann that when he had cast Austin Butler to play the titular part in *Elvis*, he asked him to get to the heart of the man, and not the caricature. “You said it. From day one – and Austin really embraced this – we said, ‘Look, there’s an industry of Elvis tribute artists’ – and bless their socks. But to do a tribute is to do an impersonation – and we can all impersonate Elvis, good or bad.

“With Austin, I would often say, ‘I don’t want too much lip-curling, it’s gotta be the human

being.” Presley was one of the most recognisable people of the 20th century, one whose fame is very apparent in *EPiC* – look at all those women throwing themselves at him – and something he claimed to have enjoyed.

But did he? Luhrmann has worked with very famous people in his career – most notably Leonardo DiCaprio, whom he directed in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo + Juliet* and *The Great Gatsby* – and is likely to have a real sense about the true impact of fame.

He does not believe Elvis was able to handle the level of fame that arrived in his life as a teenager and never left.

He says: “I’m not going to say who it is because I really respect her – it’s someone who’s retired from fame – but we were talking the other day about Elvis and she said, ‘No human being is built to be that famous.’ From the outside looking in, it appears as though you can have whatever you want – you almost can live outside the rules – but from the inside, it’s the loneliest place in the world.

“Things that would normally fulfil us,” he adds, “like a relationship, or sitting on a beach in Hawaii [aren’t enough]. There’s nothing you can’t have and you get addicted to the love [from the fans] and then you get addicted to something that numbs you, and that’s usually prescription drugs.”

Presley’s daughter Lisa Marie gave Luhrmann her blessing when he was making *Elvis*. The two became close. She died suddenly – of cardiac arrest and intestinal obstruction – aged 54 in 2023 around the time that the director started working on *EPiC*.

“When I started to make *Elvis*, I met with her and [her daughter] Riley [Keough, actress] and Lisa said to me, ‘A lot of people tried to make films about my father but, bless their socks, they’ve always failed. I really believe in you. You’re going to give him a fair job’.

“Lisa Marie was not someone who would easily roll over, but her embrace of the movie was everything to us. I can only hope... actually, I know that she would have appreciated this one [*EPiC*].”

Luhrmann says he is finally ready to move on to a new project.

It’s a big budget Joan of Arc feature with filming set to commence on Australia’s Gold Coast in the next few months.

It’s based on a 1974 novel, *Blood Red, Sister Rose*, written by his compatriot Thomas Keneally, and he says he has been mulling over the idea for 30 years.

For now, though, as Elvis is still always on his mind, he is excited by the prospect of new generations discovering the music and taking Presley to their hearts.

● *‘EPiC’ is on exclusive IMAX release for the next week, before a wider theatrical release from Friday*



Thread of hope: A pod of Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins swimming across the coral reefs of the Red Sea, Egypt in 'Ocean with David Attenborough'. Photos: Olly Scholey/ Conor McDonnell

OSCAR-WINNER STEVEN PRICE: ‘LISA HANNIGAN HAS THE BEST VOICE IN THE WORLD’

Interview

Lauren Murphy



From David Attenborough to Bugs Bunny, the English composer has scored them all. He talks about his ‘call-to-arms’ project that’s coming to Dublin and the light-bulb moment when he saw Hannigan performing on Jools Holland

It all began with a toy guitar. As a young boy, Steven Price's first incursions into composition were via the play instrument that was “knocking around the house” when he was growing up. “I just used to pick it up and try and pick little tunes out of it,” he recalls. “And my dad noticed I was trying to do that, and was like, ‘Oh – do you fancy trying lessons?’”

It was the first tentative step in Price's musical journey, but neither he nor his parents could have envisaged that a few decades later, he'd have written the scores for major Hollywood movies, won an Oscar for his work and become one of the most revered film composers of his generation. He smiles as he recalls how his mother “swears that I learned to talk from listening to Beatles records”, not knowing that a few decades later, he would work regularly at Abbey Road Studios. “It remains my favourite place,” he nods. “I’ve been mixing there for the last couple of weeks, and it’s always lovely to be there. And a lot of the people who work there, we all started off making tea together about 20 years ago.”

Today, the easygoing, friendly Price is in his garden studio in Surrey. It’s the room where he has dreamt up the music for films like *Gravity* (for which he won that aforementioned Oscar), *Suicide Squad*, several Edgar Wright films including *Baby Driver* and *The Running Man*, and a slew of what he calls ‘natural history’ documentaries. It’s the latter we’re here to discuss today – most notably Price’s work on *Ocean with*

David Attenborough, the 2025 film which will be screened and performed live with an orchestra in Dublin next month.

Much of Price's backstory has a fairy-tale quality to it. As his love of music grew over his teenage years, he realised that he wanted to pursue it for a living. He wrote to a plethora of recording studios, hoping to get work – and one of the people who wrote back was Andy Gill, guitarist with post-punk legends Gang of Four and producer of note, who was building his own studio at the time. “He taught me loads about recording and how to produce music,” says Price. “But from that, I started to think, ‘This isn’t really what I want. This isn’t ticking all the boxes.’”

A bolt of inspiration came in the form of an ad in the back of a music magazine, which read: “Film composer seeks assistant”. It is the sort of thing, Price admits with a grin, that probably wouldn’t happen these days. “But as soon as I got to his place, it sort of all made sense: the idea that you could tell stories through music, and the effect that music would have on your emotions. It’s something I always kind of knew, but I never really thought about the power of it. And once I got into that, it was an ever-fascinating thing for me.”

Price’s formative exposure to film composition with that composer, Trevor Jones [most famous for the scores for *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Merlin* and *Mississippi Burning*], was a game-changer. He had loved ‘the classics’ growing up – John Williams’ score for *ET*, Alan

Silvestri’s work on *Back to the Future*, the works of John Carpenter and Ennio Morricone – and was struck by how they were all “massively different” but worked to help tell a story. “It just felt like this world where you could play in lots of different ways.”

Price’s next big break happened when he was drafted in as music editor on Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in his early twenties – another consequence of “being in the right place at the right time”.

He says: “I’d read the books when I was young, but when the films came up, no one knew what [they] were going to be, at that point. It was just going to be a lot of music, and they needed to build this team at Abbey Road to help produce the music and edit it.”

“So I was just asked if I was interested in taking part; I had no idea that it was going to become this thing that you did for four months of every year, for three years. But it was amazing to be involved. You became aware – certainly by the second film – that people would be watching those films for a long, long time.”

Since then, Price has



Voice of the ocean: Lisa Hannigan

gone on to write many of his own scores, some of them recurring collaborations. His Academy Award-winning score for Alfonso Cuarón’s 2013 film *Gravity* also came relatively early in his career, and he laughs as he recalls the “sur-real” pageantry of the Oscars. “Looking back on it now, it was the most incredible opportunity for a composer there could be, really – because you’ve got this palette of space, where there’s no sound, and you were tasked with being a huge part of the emotion,” he explains. “And you also had a director who was pushing all the time to make something that was really unique. It was the dream scenario, really.”

Price’s career has continued to be incredibly versatile, which is part of the appeal for him. “I’m always looking for the exact opposite of the thing that I’ve just done – which I’m sure annoys my agents to distraction,” he chuckles. “But I really like that sense of ‘OK, we’ve done that; let’s see how far in the other direction we can go now’.”

“*Ocean* was a real case in point, because it was a very different sort of film for us in the

natural history world. It was quite a campaigning piece that is very emotive, and the music was lucky enough to be a big character in it.”

Having previously scored *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* in 2020, *Ocean* feels like a similar ‘call-to-arms’. It sees Attenborough and his team focus on the havoc that overfishing by supertrawlers are wreaking on the world’s oceans – yet there is a thread of hope as it also reveals that there are comparatively easy ways to reverse the devastating effects.

“What’s happening down there is recoverable if we stop doing it,” agrees Price. “And it’s almost an awareness thing; if people know about this stuff, I think it’d be very hard to argue against it. I certainly didn’t know anything about what was happening there; I’d heard the term ‘trawling’ but had no idea what it entailed. I think we all just want it to be seen as widely as possible. And hopefully with the live show, we can keep people returning to it and keep them talking about it.”

Price’s score for *Ocean* also has an unexpected Irish connection. Both he and director Toby Nowlan were keen for it to be vocal-led, so he enlisted the help of his friend, Irish musician Lisa Hannigan, who “became the voice of the ocean” in the film. They had first worked together on the score for *Gravity*.

“To me, she’s the best voice in the world and one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet,

as well,” he says. “The sound of her responding to a piece of music and phrasing it in a way that suddenly brings all this emotion to it; she’s one of my favourite people to work with. I knew that I was going to use a female voice on *Gravity*, and there were lots of conversations going on with the film studio and everyone about who it should be. People kept making suggestions, and I kept sort of going, ‘They’re great, but...’”

COYOTE VS ACME

He had long admired Hannigan’s work with Damien Rice as well as her solo output, but when he saw her performance on BBC music show *Later... with Jools Holland* while in the midst of scoring *Gravity*, a light bulb went off. “I remember one morning my wife just going, ‘You’ve always liked her voice – why not just get her?’ So we did a trial session, and she was brilliant: it all just worked beautifully and she’s all over the *Gravity* score. From then on, it’s literally been ‘If I can find a reason to involve Lisa in something, I will.’”

Price talks about his forthcoming projects: there’s *Arctic*, another show by the same people who made *Ocean*, while he is looking forward to seeing *Coyote vs Acme*, the live-action/animated comedy that has had a “slightly troubled birth” due to Warner Bros first shelving it, then reversing their decision. It will be released this August.

“We’re all really proud of it,” he says. “And

again, growing up with these characters – Wile E Coyote, the Road Runner, Bugs Bunny and everyone else – it was just really good fun to do that sort of project. We ended up having a choir doing all of Road Runner’s ‘Mee-meeps!’ that you get from the Road Runner, so it was a fun day out.”

From David Attenborough to Bugs Bunny? Price is nothing is not versatile. He also remains as hungry and ambitious as ever to explore the cross-section between storytelling, music and advancing technology.

“If we want people to come to cinemas, we’ve got to give them something exciting and new,” he says. “And I feel there’s so much opportunity with that; the technology is there for us to take audio in cinema in incredible new directions. So that’s the stuff that gets me excited; the idea that there’s all these things we can do that haven’t happened yet.”

He smiles as he considers what his five-year-old self, wandering around the house and bashing out tunes on a toy guitar, would make of his career now.

“Not a lot’s changed, really,” he chuckles. “I’m still just fiddling around, trying to find a tune on things. But I think if you enjoy it, then other people enjoy being around you. And before you know it you’re working together, making something neither of you could have imagined.”

● *‘Ocean in Concert’ narrated on film by David Attenborough plays at the 3Arena on March 7*



‘It was the dream scenario, really’: Composer Steven Price with his Oscar for the score of ‘Gravity’ in 2014. Photo: Jeffrey Mayer/Getty

“I’m always looking for the exact opposite of the thing that I’ve just done – which I’m sure annoys my agents to distraction”

Theatre

Katy Hayes



Losing control: Charlene McKenna and Adam Rothenberg in ‘The Crucible’

Adultery aspect of Miller witch-hunt classic lacks passion

The Crucible
Gaiety Theatre, Dublin
until March 21

Arthur Miller’s 1953 play is based on the Salem Witch Trials in late 17th-century colonial America. The community of the town in Massachusetts became engulfed in a major persecution frenzy, where young girls made wild accusations of witchcraft. People, mostly women, were asked to name names. Miller’s play was an allegory for the McCarthy crusade of the 1950s, when the US government persecuted people suspected of being communists, a witch hunt to which Miller himself fell victim.

Hard-working farmer John Proctor has had an affair with a servant, Abigail Williams, and his wife Elizabeth has turned her out and sent her home. Abigail, the ringleader of the girls who make the accusations of witchery, points the finger at Elizabeth.

Set designer Maree Kearns and costume designer Sinead Cuthbert go all-in on reproducing a late 17th-century frontier aesthetic. Barn-like buildings stand sturdily against dense forests. Rough frock coats and britches adorn the men, with modest caps and aprons for the women. Carl Kennedy’s movie-style score adds classical atmosphere. But there is nothing in Andrew Flynn’s direction to give the show any great immediacy. This production could have been done 30, 40, 50 years ago.

The adulterous relationship between John and Abigail is not given sufficient attention. We hear about the girls dancing naked in the woods, but this sensual undertow finds little expression. The human appetites bubbling beneath the frock coats and aprons get insufficient emphasis. It’s all debate and argument and not enough carnal appetite. Without enough emphasis on the lustful inciting incident, the story lacks passion.

Andrew McCarthy is a dangerous viper as Deputy Governor Danforth who presides over the courts. Marcus Lamb, as Reverend Parris whose daughter kicks off the trouble, is mean and self-interested. Charlene McKenna is a touching Elizabeth Proctor. Adam Rothenberg as John Proctor is too intense at times, losing control of the character’s necessary heroism.

Despite reservations about the production, the play still has great power. Miller was the great moralist of modern theatre, but he was skilled in the creation of tension and knew how to keep the stakes high. The moral surface of the play is well served by Flynn, but the bubbling undertow of desire, the messy feminine, is underplayed.

Books

BookBrief

with Myles McWeeney

THRILLER

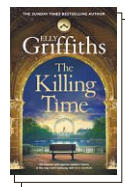
The Bone Garden

Simon Beckett

Orion, 368 pages, trade paperback €19.99, e-book €6.99



Unsettled by a letter he had just received, forensic anthropologist Dr David Hunter impulsively decides to drive from London to Carlisle in the teeth of a violent storm. An accident on the motorway causes him to find an alternative route and he is soon hopelessly lost in a narrowing series of side roads in a howling blizzard. Seeking help in a remote pub, he discovers that the local residents are unwelcoming, the road is a cul-de-sac and all communications with the outside world have been knocked out by the storm. The next morning, while seeking a way out of the village by foot, Hunter makes a bizarre and unsettling discovery. He finds a human skeleton inextricably wrapped in the roots of a tall tree blown down during the storm. His expertise leads him to surmise that the human remains are not as ancient as might be supposed, and that the man had been murdered. Curiously, his discovery does not surprise the villagers and they are strangely tight lipped about who the victim might be and one of them will do anything to ensure Hunter's find remains a secret. This is a beautifully written cliff-hanger of a thriller, in which Hunter must navigate the social complexities and hidden history of an isolated community riven by closely guarded secrets. It is also full of fascinating forensic detail and lyrical descriptions of the natural world in winter.



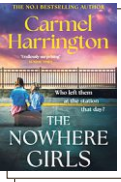
THRILLER

The Killing Time

Elly Griffiths

Quercus, 352 pages, trade paperback €24.65, e-book €12.99

This is the second of author Elly Griffiths' new series featuring officer Ali Dawson, head of the London Met's cold case unit. The unit is unlike any other in that, thanks to physicist Dr Serafina Pellegrini – know to all as Jones, Ali and her team are able to travel into the past. Getting back to the present has, however, proved problematic, and Jones herself now appears to be stuck in 1850s London. Approached by a bereaved mother whose son leapt from the roof of their apartment building after being hypnotised by charismatic celebrity psychic Barry Power and told he could fly, she interviews Power. Convinced that Power also possesses the ability to time travel, Ali dons her corset and corsets and finds herself back the past, meeting up with Jones again, and fighting for the truth about Power and her own life. It must have taken courage to kill off her highly successful Ruth Galloway series, but by not bothering too much about the science, Griffiths delivers a warm, witty and compelling mystery featuring an intelligent and resourceful protagonist as well as a delightful dip into stylish Victorian London life.



1 The Nowhere Girls (OF)
Carmel Harrington, Hachette

2 The Housemaid's Secret (PB)
Freida McFadden, Hachette

3 The Housemaid (PB)
Freida McFadden, Hachette

4 In Glass Housees (OF)
Edel Coffey, Hachette

5 Binding 13 (PB)
Chloe Walsh, Hachette

6 Heated Rivalry (PB)
Rachel Reid, HarperCollins

7 Second Chances (OF)
Roisin Meaney, Hachette

8 The Housemaid Is Watching (PB)
Freida McFadden, Hachette

9 Dear Debbie (OF)
Freida McFadden, Penguin

10 Three Widows (OF)
Patricia Gibney, Hachette

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 for the week ending Sunday, February 15

BRESSIE'S GUIDE TO LETTING GO AND FEELING OK IN YOUR OWN SKIN

Niall Breslin pens his own struggles to help others find healing in this beautiful and kind book, writes **Katriona O'Sullivan**, but for readers searching for quick solutions, it might not be for them

When I was asked to review Niall Breslin's book, *The Place That Has Never Been Wounded*, I was resistant, to say the least. "Self-help" books are my least favourite genre. I often find them patronising, know-it-all-ish and – as a psychologist myself – I find myself questioning the credentials of the author to tell me how to be better. I rarely finish them. The fact that I know Bressie, and have followed his journey, made it feel even more daunting. How could I publicly say that I didn't like his book? Thankfully, all of my fears were unfounded.

This book goes far beyond the realm of self-help. It is beautiful, kind and unpatronising. And it is genuinely helpful. The book is split into four parts, or four acts. Each act supports the reader to achieve principles or practices that aid a journey towards healing or peace. In each section, Breslin openly shares anecdotes from his own life to exemplify the principle being explored, using his experiences to show how he has struggled and how he continues to find his way towards healing. Breslin draws on his experience as a mindfulness practitioner, his developing academic engagement with mental health literature and his lived experience of anxiety and trauma to bring the reader on a thoughtful and compassionate journey towards health and healing. In Act One, we are introduced to the five 'Polaris Principles', five guiding ideas that can be used to refocus ourselves and our lives. He speaks honestly about his ego, his drive to hide himself and his search for peace. Throughout, Breslin uses his experience as a public figure to highlight the importance of finding peace. He references an abundance of people – both public and private – who have taught him something along his journey. One

SELF-HELP

The Place That Has Never Been Wounded

Niall Breslin

John Murray, 256 pages, trade paperback €16.99, e-book €9.99



particularly poignant story, involving Vicky Phelan, stayed with me. She asked Breslin to sing at her funeral, and through their conversations about life and death, she taught him the ultimate lesson of letting go, or in the language of the Polaris Principles, "untethering". This story, like many others, grounds the reader in the lived reality of Breslin's ideas, bringing to life what could otherwise feel like dense concepts about well-being and healing. In Act Two, the reader is introduced to dúchas, an Irish word relating to connection with the land. Here, the land is used to represent different states of being that we can embody on our journey towards inner peace. Writing this, it sounds airy-fairy even to me, but this book does not read as "woo woo". Breslin writes as he speaks, directly and with ease, giving the sense that what he is suggesting is accessible and doable. He writes "be the lake", meaning simply to be still when you are still, and rough when you are rough. It is not complicated or overly demanding. The concept of dúchas uses the land and sky to encourage the reader to listen inwardly and to align their inner-experience with the natural world. It is Act Three that moved me most. It



'It is Act Three that moved me most. He shares the darkness of experiencing a miscarriage with his partner Louise, the particular hurt of being a man in that situation'

describes Breslin's decision to live fully and his recognition that the purpose of life is to be free enough to love. He shares the darkness of experiencing a miscarriage with his partner Louise, the particular hurt of being a man in that situation, and the realisation that his life philosophy aligns with a line from a poem by Pádraig Ó Tuama, *The Facts of Life*: "So you might as well live, and you might as well love." He uses his experience of tragedy and loss to explore how pain is unavoidable, but how we can choose not to add unnecessary suffering. In the midst of loss, he chose to feel the pain of losing their child and to let that pain be enough. One of the truly wonderful aspects of this book is not just the writing, but the accompanying music. Breslin has produced an album with the same name. At the end of each chapter, there is a meditation piece that aligns with its themes that can be listened to by scanning a QR code. These help the reader to centre their thoughts and deepen their engagement with the material. It is a unique approach to book writing, and one that very few people could get away with. Bressie, with his blend of sport, music, advocacy and podcasting, has the profile and confidence to say: "I'm going to do something



Poignant story:
Vicky Phelan

different", in the hope that it helps people. And that is the genuine takeaway from this book. Breslin wants to help. He has been on a journey that is useful, and one that many of us could learn from. I would say that the book occasionally veers a little too far into the theoretical or intellectual. It is clear that Breslin is undertaking a PhD and engaging deeply with academic literature. In a world where many readers want ideas delivered simply and quickly, this might not be the book for everyone. This is an intellectual and spiritual guide to letting go, to being yourself, and to feeling OK in your own skin. It is filled with beautiful stories and enhanced by a carefully curated soundtrack and meditations that bring the reader further along the path of healing and health. A triumph, particularly for those of us who are always searching to better understand ourselves and our inner worlds.

● *'Hungry: A Biography of My Body'* by **Katriona O'Sullivan** will be published by **Hachette Books Ireland** in **April**

Paul Mescal's mum on finding joy in the small pleasures of life

Enda Wyley

If 'April is the cruellest month,' as TS Eliot once famously wrote in *The Waste Land*, then surely this January was one of the wettest of months. No wonder then that in the throes of such rainy weather I was delighted to come upon a new collection of poetry, *Finding Joy* by Dearbhla Mescal, which put a spring in my step, made the bleak and damp days brighter. In her introduction, Mescal describes how a meaningful conversation with a friend a few years ago set her off on an unexpected personal journey. "I heard somewhere that if you reach 28 days of anything, it will become part of your daily practice," she writes. Together, they set themselves the challenge of seeking out joy each day for 28 days – a challenge that couldn't have come at a better time for Mescal. "I was playing catch-up all the time. I was seldom present." Initially, Mescal recorded these moments on Facebook, later moving to Instagram, where her posts attracted a wide online following, encouraging others to slow down and notice the small, sustaining pleasures of daily life. Years went by, she tells us, her children – including Hollywood star Paul and singer-songwriter Nell – grew and went about their lives: "Nell leaving school and moving to London, Paul living out of a suitcase pursuing his career and Donnacha stepping into the corporate world with all its challenges."

But then, "the summer winds blew cancer my way," and life changed irrevocably for Dearbhla. In that period of illness, the practice of noticing joy took on a pressing importance. People who had been following her online sent their own joys to buoy her up – images of "clothes blowing on a line in Shetland, daffodils by a river, sunrises, sunsets, jumping in puddles". She received so many messages that she was, "filled with gratitude. I felt held and able to concentrate on getting better". This candid personal narrative provides valuable context for *Finding Joy*, a handsomely produced volume, elegantly illustrated by Steve Doogan, containing poems written over the course of 28 days. The collection is carefully structured, with poems grouped under headings such as 'Loving,' 'Living,' 'Hoping,' 'Being' and concluding with 'Mothering,' 'Holding,' 'Dreaming' and 'Ending.' Each section contains two poems, written in a pared-back, accessible style. Mescal's cocktail for life is full and varied, richly textured – including friendships, dreams, adventure, anticipation and "a tumbler of butterflies/ topped off by a sprinkling of sunlight". Themes of family also abound. In *The Holding Place*, she remembers her mother's table, as "a safe place." It was "a family's circle/ holding secrets,/ allowing tears to fall and laughter to fly." Elsewhere, the metaphor of tack stitches – "knowing with certainty/ that the original stitch knot will hold" – is used to describe the bonds of family and the ingredients of a fulfilling existence. It's a poetry not

without its own distilled wisdom. That we should live our lives "with our hearts/and eyes wide open," (*You Were a Whisper*) offers an emotional lift, as do many other poems such as *Wild Abandonment*, which advises: "Embrace it all/ feel it all/ Be present/ and be wild." Such moments could easily tip into sentimentality but somehow succeed because of the poet's authentic attention to lived experiences. Formally, the poems are largely free of punctuation. This creates a momentum that may tempt readers to complete the book in one go – and indeed there is no right or wrong way to read a mindful collection of poetry like this. However, whichever way one chooses to embrace these poems, there is an overriding sense that here are poems to savour, take your time with, settle into over the course of 28 days. The poem *I Wish You Time* tells us, "sit/ read/ listen/and breathe," each activity awarded a line of its own, adding a simple conviction to the poet's message. In fact, what makes these poems compelling is the way Mescal addresses the reader directly, in a voice of genuine companionship. Here is a poet who writes with her "eyes open," her "heart full". She is not afraid to lean into her vulnerabilities, is aware that life can be both "messy and full of magic". There is



POETRY
Finding Joy
Dearbhla Mescal
Eriu, 144 pages, hardcover €13.99, e-book €6.99

no promised roadmap here, no instruction manual. What matters in life is to take "the road/ that allows you/ to be your true whole self." The collection comes full circle with a prose conclusion that mirrors the honesty of its opening pages. Joy, Mescal acknowledges, is "unexpected, unruly and beautiful," but also personal and subjective. "Not all my joys will sit comfortably in someone else's space," she admits. "This was self-work done in a public space and it won't be for everyone." Still, her hope is clear: that readers might discover their own ways of noticing what matters and begin curating joy on their terms, tap into the experiences within their lives that really matter. "I truly hope it gives you a pathway to beginning your own 28 days of finding joy." Reading *Finding Joy*, I was reminded of the acclaimed poet Mary Oliver and her three memorable instructions for living a life: "Pay attention. / Be astonished. / Tell about it." Certainly, all of these elements are evident in Mescal's collection. It's a poetry inspired by the ordinary, that holds at its centre a natural wisdom. Wind blowing through the trees, a pile of folded laundry, the sound of laughter. In the frenetic times that we live in, we could do far worse than find joy, as Mescal asserts, "in the ordinariness of a life well lived". Fitting then, that the final poem, *Sweet Summers End*, draws this uplifting collection to a perfectly pitched conclusion: *The washing machine spins the house creaks the piano plays – and I will sleep softly*



● Enda Wyley's recent collection is *'Sudden Light'* (Dedalus Press). She is a member of Aosdána and the 2026 recipient of the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Prize for Poetry at the University of St Thomas University, Minnesota.



‘Ramsay wants his young protégés to bring showbusiness to cooking, which he himself did to great effect’

Fascinating story: The chef and entrepreneur in ‘Being Gordon Ramsay’. Photo: courtesy of Netflix © 2025

GORDON RAMSAY COOKS UP A RUTHLESS ONE-MAN SHOW OF PERFECTIONISM

This is an advertisement for Gordon Ramsay. He is one of its executive producers. It is what is known these days as a celeb doc: see the Beckhams, Arnold Schwarzenegger, etc.

In a bombshell development, the chef school at Ballymaloe comes in for praise from Gordon in the first episode. And then the whole family flies to Co Cork to visit daughter Tilly, who is training at Ballymaloe – in episode five.

It must be stated at the outset that *Being Gordon Ramsay* does not include any coverage of Holly Ramsay’s wedding to Adam Peaty, and its consequent very public row between the families. God Almighty, there is enough fuss in this series about Holly and Adam’s engagement. Anyway, for their fans, this omission of the wedding may be a disappointment.

We’ll just have to wait for *Being Holly Ramsay*. Won’t be long now. Then Holly will be pitched tough questions like: “Tell me about the love you have for your kids.”

For me, however, it was not a disappointment. Even though there are six episodes and each episode lasts for 40 minutes. You might think that you are not that interested in Gordon Ramsay – I’m not either – but in its own way his story is fascinating.

It is an old story. A boy born to a poor family, with an alcoholic father, who sounds like an absolute scumbag and a heroic mother who worked three jobs at a time. She is his hero to this day.

So this boy, who on top of all the problems

The Ballymaloe school gets a visit in new ‘celeb doc’ following the fiery chef as he expands his empire, writes **Ann Marie Hourihane**



at home also does badly at school – “You feel you’ve let your parents down” – sets off to make something of himself. His father told him that he was a snob. Gordon replied that he was not a snob, he just wanted to get out of “this ****hole” that he was born into.

There was the footballing career – nothing about that here – and then he went to work for Marco Pierre White. Happy days. “Marco was brutal,” remembers Ramsay. But, and this he doesn’t say, he was used to brutal abuse from a man who was in a superior position to him.

While you’re watching *Being Gordon Ramsay* the temptation to turn to amateur psychology is pretty much inescapable. You have to respect his struggle and his achievements, which are considerable.

Of course, we all secretly believe that our life stories are unique and therefore fascinating; but we don’t all make six-part documentaries about them; although we probably would if we could.

Ramsay is literally self-centred. And very intelligent (also rich, we’ll get to that in a minute).

Yet, having witnessed the addiction of both his father and of his brother, he does not seem to have heard of the term workaholic. He talks constantly about pressure and about his drive, as if they were unique things and also very good things.

He’s got 95 restaurants and two and a half thousand staff. He’s got millions of followers around the globe: he’s huge in the US and also, strangely, in the Philippines. In Manila, one young woman had a tattoo of his face on her arm. But is he happy? Yes, and he’s compelled.

60-STOREY HIGH

The other story of this series is the opening of five – yes, five – new restaurants in an office block in London at 22 Bishopsgate. I’m never going to visit them because the new restaurants are on, if I understand correctly, the top four floors of a building which is 60 storeys high.

Ramsay put in £20m of his own money into this mad project, which is filmed as it is constructed, inch by tiny inch. He opened three

restaurants on the site. And he loves it. Because he’s always happy on the precipice of disaster. And he’s always on a plane, off to tour his empire.

He is a ruthless one-man show of perfectionism. As a viewer, it is great to see someone caring so much. The workmen on site take up a misaligned carpet because they know GR will notice it, and freak out.

But as a young member of his staff, his perfectionism can be wicked.

We see Michael and James, his two top chefs. They are white-faced, they are conscientious, they are talented. They do everything right.

Then Ramsay tells them to bring a bit of theatre, a bit of pizzazz, so the customers can see and hear the action in their kitchens. “Don’t make it church service,” he says. If only fine Irish restaurants were listening to him on that.

In other words, Ramsay wants his young protégés to bring showbusiness to cooking, which he himself did to great effect. And you know what? They did. Michael and James start shouting and joking and smiling (that smiling was huge from Michael). And silent, supremely shy James starts engaging with his customers. Mind you, James is working with only 12 customers in Restaurant Gordon Ramsay High, which is the most exclusive restaurant at Bishopsgate and costs £250 (€287) for the tasting menu.

The only time we see Ramsay eating at the same table as his family is at Ballymaloe (again, episode five). Although he does make cheese toasties at home with daughter Tilly. ‘Tilly’s a female Gordon Ramsay,’ he says affectionately. Oh Lord.

Technology Adrian Weckler



Generation phone: Overs 30s are more likely to own a Samsung (right) than an iPhone (left)

‘When you don’t need your phone to do as much, a cheaper model is fine. When you depend on it, you might get a higher-end model’

The smartphone split – how age is shaping brand loyalty

Gen Z go Apple, Gen X go Android, and with clear patterns emerging, the choice has become a marker of generational identity

Hi there grandad, nice new Samsung phone. According to new figures, Ireland is a country where your phone can indicate your age.

Gen Z, by a large majority, won’t touch anything but iPhones.

But the older you get, the more you’re likely to have a Samsung – and maybe one of those leatherette carrying cases for holding all your bank cards and ID, alongside a comfortable pair of reading glasses.

This is one of the glimpses from a Deloitte poll of 1,000 people, which indicates what your tech says about you.

Two thirds of ‘Gen Z’ adults (aged 18 to 29) have an iPhone, leaving all remaining brands to fight for the scraps of the last third.

But at the other end of the scale, three quarters of ‘Gen X’ (aged 45 to 61) and ‘boomers’ (aged over 62) use Android phones, mostly Samsung. It’s a little tighter for ‘millennials’ (aged 30 to 44), with a 60-40 split, but it still falls in favour of Samsung and Android.

So despite Samsung being Ireland’s outright leader – 41pc compared to Apple’s 38pc – it’s metaphorically Mars and Venus, iPhones are for young people and Samsungs are for old people. This might explain why you never see a 23-year-old with a large folding phone, despite it regularly being marketed as the latest cool thing. Apple simply doesn’t make

one; Samsung is the dominant folding phone manufacturer.

Jeremy Clarkson types seem to like these flagship devices, especially as they sometimes have room for a ‘stylus’ and come with leatherette case accessories.

But I’ve never seen one used by a TikTokker. It has often been claimed by cynics and – mainly older – marketers that Apple’s brand popularity is based overwhelmingly on faddish fashion preferences and a herd mentality among some demographics.

Mostly, this is wrong: Apple’s devices – from MacBooks to iPhones to AirPods to iPads – have generally been a benchmark in quality and (especially) endurance within their respective markets.

HERD MENTALITY

Over time, people who buy the company’s devices generally choose them for the products they are – everyday essentials that handle stuff smoothly and predictably – rather than some imagined faddish points more typical of a new haircut, shoes or outfit.

But there are some vestiges of truth to the herd mentality accusations. In the social media worlds of Gen Zers, the question of ‘green’ versus ‘blue’ text bubbles has regularly been a topic of preference and even slight snobbery. This appears especially prevalent among young women, with whom a bias

towards iPhones seems unusually strong, even though the Deloitte poll doesn’t interrogate gender breakdowns.

What’s equally intriguing, though, is the economics of what your phone says about you. Apple iPhones are, on average, far more expensive than Samsung or Android phones.

This is why Apple makes almost €1bn in profit every two days, according to its latest financial accounts. In a cost-of-living crisis, where under-30s are widely flagged as having the tougher end of it, how is it that they are the ones far more likely to shell out over €1,000 for an iPhone 17 Pro, compared to their greying parents and grandparents, who feel fine with a €350 Samsung A56?

My own theory is that under-30s might use their phones more productively for things like research, payments and work tools than older people, who are still more accustomed to printing out boarding tickets for planes.

When you don’t need your phone to do as much, a cheaper model is fine. When you depend on it, you might get a higher-end model. Overall, Samsung and Apple own the Irish market, with around 80pc of users. Surprisingly, Xiaomi is next, at 5pc, with Google Pixel following on 3pc and a gaggle of others on 2pc and 1pc.

But there has never been a time as much as now where the screen in your hand is a predictor of a thinning hairline.



Gift for her son: Mary McCarthy with the Balance Phone

Ask Adrian

CAN WE BUY A PHONE WITHOUT SOCIAL MEDIA FOR OUR SON?

Question

My son is in sixth class in primary school. He doesn’t have a smartphone but is already campaigning for one this summer around his birthday. He says that all of his friends either have one or are getting one. We’re uncomfortable with the idea of it because of what’s happening on social media. But we think it’s fair for him to have access to WhatsApp and maybe some version of the internet, just not social media. Is there a phone that can do this?

— Aidan O’Mahony

Answer

Yes, but the market is very limited as such devices have, somewhat surprisingly, proven to be of little interest to parents or kids.

For example, Nokia used to sell a range of devices that were semi-smart ‘dumb phones’, which could access basic versions of WhatsApp. But they simply didn’t sell enough, so they dropped making that functionality available. None of the modern mainstream phone brands has found enough demand to make one, either.

One option you could try is the Balance phone (€279) which is essentially a rebadged Samsung A16. It has software that blocks anything classified as social media or adult content. But it allows things like WhatsApp, maps and Spotify.

It sounds like this is the kind of thing you’re looking for; it looks and feels like a smartphone but just won’t allow its user to download most of the social media stuff that most worry parents.

A word of warning, though – your teenager might simply throw it back in your face. The *Irish Independent*’s Mary McCarthy tried this device with her (then) 12-year-old and had a mixed experience – you can read more about how she got on with that on *Independent.ie*.

Email your questions to aweckler@independent.ie

16 | Chloë finds a hobby



Mug life:
Chloë
McPolin
gives
pottery
painting a
whirl with
her friend
Juliette.
Photo: David
Conachy

'It gets so bad that Roberta ends up coming over and lets out a gasp in horror as she asks me if I want her to fix it'

'I'M IN FLOW STATE, EVEN THOUGH THE WAY I'M PAINTING IS AN ABOMINATION'

Hobby comrades, I promised I would return to my artistic escapades but, unfortunately, it took longer than planned. In the meantime, my TikTok and Instagram algorithms have been relentlessly serving me videos of gorgeous girls with perfectly tousled, claw-clipped hair, delicately painting pottery like it's the easiest thing in the world. Quite honestly, I wanted in.

But we all know how my first pottery-throwing experience went. My lump of clay launched itself off the wheel and on to the floor. So there was absolutely no chance I'd be revisiting that as a hobby. Instead, I opted for the easier option: pottery painting.

There is a wonderful pottery painting studio I had heard about on Queen Street in Smithfield. The street in question is essentially a hobby mecca: tufting, pottery painting, axe-throwing, all within a few steps of each other. Perfect, whether you had Valentine's plans... or you very much did not.

Nonetheless, I got in touch with the good people at Dublin Pottery Painting Studio and gave them my usual spiel – that I would love to give it a whirl.

They said I could come on Friday and give painting a mug a go. I rope in my artistic friend Juliette for some creative support – or with the idea of maybe getting her to do the whole thing for me so I'd have the bragging rights afterwards.

My experience with art is limited to doing it as a subject in school. Most recently, I did life-drawing for this column, and I also enjoyed Paint and Prosecco with friends, during which we were tasked with painting sunflowers and I somehow made it look like a wasp nest... so I was intrigued

Making a mug into a work of art proves to be a relaxing experience for **Chloë McPolin** this week – but she's not expecting galleries to come calling

to see how painting a piece of pottery was going to work out.

Friday rolls around, and I take myself to the studio. On first impression, this place is literally like a Barbie dream factory – adorable, with little hand-painted mugs and bowls lining the walls and gatherings of mostly women all having a catch-up while painting.

I do spy one man who has obviously been lovingly dragged along to celebrate Valentine's Day. There are little mugs with Michael D Higgins painted on them, and a teapot with Chappell Roan. I have high hopes for someone whose mug is about to look like I got sick on it.

The whole occasion is BYOB (bring your own booze) and takes two hours. Quite honestly, it feels like the perfect timetabled catch-up with friends. It is €30 to paint a mug, but there are a plethora of options. We're welcomed by Roberta, one of the organisers, who explains the paints are water-based and require layering for a bold colour pay-off.

Roberta asks Juliette and I what designs we had chosen for our mugs. Juliette pulls out an entire Pinterest board of potential ideas, meanwhile I am as disorganised as ever, not having given a thought to what design I'd be choosing. I quickly get Juliette to give me some ideas I can pretend I

thought of myself. Roberta encourages us not to use Pinterest as a guideline because the options can be bland and not always the most creative. But I have no desire to put my brain under the immense stress of trying to pick a design on my own.

Juliette hurriedly passes me the phone as if it is contraband and shows me a design. It has upside-down hearts and upright hearts, which seem to slot into each another and line the circumference of the mug. Perfect.

We begin our session by sketching our design in pencil on our mug. This is where they lose me – drawing my own pattern?? That is well beyond my ability level. Nonetheless, I use my blunt pencil to sketch what should vaguely look like hearts. Juliette has chosen an intricate design of stars – and cats that look as though they have been electrocuted.

I end up having to redraw my pencil sketch a number of times, so much so that the pencil-markings end up smeared all across my mug, making it look like I've rubbed a lump of coal across it.

Then it comes to choosing the colours for my smeared hearts. I decided to embrace tradition and opt for red, with a yellow outline, and a backdrop of my favourite colour: blue. I start

painting with no thought whatsoever. I pick up a huge paint brush and start trowelling it on my hearts. In contrast, Juliette daintily uses a tin brush, with a light dashing of water, and paint her individual cats perfectly. I am treating my mug as if I am painting a house.

Aside from how terrible I am at the painting there is something quite therapeutic about using the paintbrush.

I am in a flow state, even though the way I am painting the mug is a total abomination. It gets so bad that Roberta ends up coming over and lets out a gasp in horror as she asks me if I want her to fix it. "Does it need fixing?" I ask. Let's not forget I have previously made sunflowers look like a wasp nest.

We are given our 15-minute warning before the end of class. Suddenly, I am dolloping load of green paint on the inside of my mug a supposed "finishing touches". Juliette's mug is like a work of art as she carefully neatens up her edges – mine looks like someone's toddler did it. We finish up and hand in our masterpieces. These will then be put in a kiln and made ready for collection. Dublin Pottery Painting Studio, if you don't see me come and collect that mug, it's all yours – you're welcome.

Is pottery painting the hobby for me? I am going to have to say a hard no, but that is solely because I think the world is better off without my artistic endeavours. Having said that, Dublin Pottery Painting Studio has a really uplifting and lovely, chilled-out vibe. I would definitely like to have a bottle of wine with me next time to see if it aids me in my creative pursuits. Pottery painting is a great idea as something fun to do that isn't as banal as painting on canvas. Next week, I think I want to go back to my cooking escapades.