

Claire Keegan on her writing:

From an interview with Claire Keegan "On the Art of Subtraction."
w/Terence Winch for *This Writing Life*.

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TW: "What starts a short story in your head and how does it find its way onto the page?"

CK: "I don't really know...but I know I begin with great trepidation and fear. Something won't go away and so it antagonizes you to the point where you start writing. And anything I get excited about I become wary of—because if you're excited then it's not a story...I think stories are uncovered, and reluctantly told.

TW: "What do you mean?"

CK: "I think all fine stories are told with varying degrees of reluctance—and if anything volunteers itself, or seems ready, or is available, it's probably going to burn away and vanish, and turn into nothing. I think, really, stories don't want to be told...or written...in the way that when things happen in our lives that are painful, we're very reluctant to speak of them..."

(later)

CK: "...and we try to speak [then] with caution. But language is so revealing...[so that] we can't help but reveal ourselves once we begin."

From The Observer, in 2011, interview with Sean O'Hagan

"A lot of my work goes into taking any traces of my labours out," says Keegan, when I talk to her in Edinburgh, a few hours after she gave a reading at the city's book festival. "It's essentially about trusting in the reader's intelligence rather than labouring a point. To work on the level of suggestion is what I aim for in all my writing. There are so many things the short story cannot do; it's by learning those limitations that I am cornered into writing what I can."

Keegan is an exacting interviewee, cautious to the point of guarded. There is a definite sense that she would prefer not to have to comment on her work at all. At one point, she reprises the anecdote about Schumann being asked by a student to explain a difficult piece and, in response, sitting at the piano and playing it again. The work, she insists, is its own explanation. "Do you know Chekhov's great story, 'The Kiss'?" she asks. "I really think that story asks the question: what is the point in saying anything? The soldier is kissed. Then he tries to tell the other members of the battery what happened and he feels like a fool. To try and explain a story is to run that kind of risk.

Keegan, who was born in 1968, was herself brought up in a large family on a farm in County Wicklow. "There wouldn't have been too many books in the house," she says, laughing. "Maybe a few lying about in an upstairs press [cupboard], and few Mills & Boons that an aunt used to bring around. I remember my mother used to talk about Jane Eyre, though. At college, I read it twice just to see if I had missed anything. The ending was so disappointing, a Mills & Boon ending to a tragic situation. I always remember the opening sentence, though. 'There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.' That's a lovely moderate beginning. There's room for the story to move up and out from there."

When she was 17, Keegan left home to live in New Orleans, where she took a degree in English and political science at Loyola University. Her life, she says, has been "a bit nomadic" ever since, but she has to be at home to write. In her 20s, unemployed and living in Carlow, she applied for a part-time teaching job in Dublin. "Twenty hours a week in schools out in Tallaght and Clondalkin. I loved it." She has a master's degree in creative writing and still teaches after a fashion – "private workshops in a boardroom I hire myself and intensive weekends in fiction".

From a Guardian Interview, 2021,

"When I was young," she says, "my mother taught me that if I went to the butcher and was choosing a piece of beef to roast, it should be marbled with fat. And I actually see good prose in the same way – marbled with what doesn't seem to be necessary

From a Guardian Interview, 2023,

So Late in the Day began life around a decade ago, devised by Keegan – a teacher of creative writing for 30 years – as a way to show her students how fiction can be tense without being dramatic. "I just went to the board in class and drew out a version of the story, which I made up as I went along, about a man who goes to the office and it's Friday evening and he gets off work and catches the bus home. Then a few things happen to him which seem to be undramatic, and actually are, if you're looking at them from outside. But for him they're moments of tension, and the tension reveals his loss." One day a student asked if she had actually written it. "The way she asked made me believe that she was going to write it; I thought, I'd better write that story."

Even more than her other work, So Late in the Day deploys her typically hushed technique to devastating effect; plain sentences unfurl their full implication only on rereading, the narration a veiled disclosure of the protagonist's poisonous habits of thought. From the opening ("On Friday, July 29th, Dublin got the weather that was forecast"), to Cathal's memory of the "long shower" that Sabine took when she moved into his home (before drinking a "full litre of Evian" over takeaway "which he'd had to order"), little is incidental, least of all Cathal's stifled impulse on taking a seat beside a chatty grandmother on the bus home: "He wished she would stay quiet – then caught himself."

All the story's subterranean turmoil plays out in that one line, yet the first-time reader can't quite gauge how – still less detect its glint of hope for Cathal's future in a tale otherwise void of comfort by the end. "I do think no story has ever been read properly unless it's read twice. So it's a longer book, you see, than you think it is, because it needs to be read twice. Double the pages," says Keegan, with a laugh.

Not for nothing was the story previously published in French under the title *Misogynie*. George Saunders, for whom Keegan is "one of the greatest fiction writers in the world", recently chose it when he was invited to pick a favourite *New Yorker* story to discuss on the magazine's podcast, but he balked at reading it aloud – his duty as guest – because he didn't want to say "cunt", a word the story repeats to increasing impact. Keegan (who read the story herself, with riveting poise) tells me she respects his reluctance "even though he considered it to be the perfect word – as I do. It's what Irish men often call women here. Writing the language people use is part of what a writer does to portray the lives we lead, the world we live in."

Keegan speaks of her protagonist with weary distaste. "He's very tight with money. He's mean. He's not going to be able to look at the past and face things. He turns his back on it. He's just so dishonest. He lies to himself. He's a piece of work," she says. But she demurs when I describe *So Late in the Day* as an indictment. "I don't believe a well-considered story indicts any of its characters or has any type of agenda. I long ago took the great advice Chekhov gave in one of his letters, to 'write coolly'. The truth is in the middle."

From an NPR online article, 2023,

In "So Late in the Day"...a Dublin office worker named Cathal is feeling the minutes drag by on a Friday afternoon. Something about the situation soon begins to seem "off." Cathal's boss comes over and urges him to "call it a day"; Cathal absentmindedly neglects to save the budget file he's been working on. He refrains from checking his messages on the bus ride home, because, as we're told, he: "found he wasn't ready — then wondered if anyone ever was ready for what was difficult or painful." Cathal eventually returns to his empty house and thinks about his fiancée who's moved out.

On first reading we think: poor guy, he's numb because he's been dumped; on rereading — and Keegan is the kind of writer whose spare, slippery work you want to reread — maybe we think differently. Keegan's sentences shape shift the second time 'round, twisting themselves into a more emotionally complicated story. For instance, here's her brief description of how Cathal's bus ride home ends:

[A]t the stop for Jack White's Inn, a young woman came down the aisle and sat in the vacated seat across from him. He sat breathing in her scent until it occurred to him that there must be thousands if not hundreds of thousands of women who smelled the same.

Perhaps Cathal is clumsily trying to console himself; perhaps, though, the French were onto something in entitling this story, "*Misogynie*."

From an article in The New York Times, Nov, 2022, by Alexandra Alter:

Claire Keegan didn't read much as a child. In her home in southeast Ireland, where her family ran a sheep, pig and cattle farm, there were just a couple of books around the house — an illustrated edition of the Bible, and a cookbook, she recalls.

"I'm not sure that growing up without books was a bad thing, because I had to use my imagination," she said. "Otherwise I might have just stuck my head in a book."

As it turned out, Keegan made a career out of her imagination.

Despite her sparse output — she's released just four books over two decades — Keegan has gained a towering reputation as one of Ireland's canonical writers. Her work is a staple on school curriculums, and has won a slew of prizes and a passionate following among independent booksellers. Prominent novelists like Colm Tóibín, Lily King, David Mitchell and Richard Ford have lauded her work with an admiration that borders on reverence.

"She's so utterly in control," said Douglas Stuart, the author of the Booker Prize-winning novel "Shuggie Bain." "She can say so much, and be so loud, with very little."

This year, her 2021 novella, "Small Things Like These," about an Irish coal merchant who discovers a disheveled, barefoot girl locked in the coal shed of a Catholic convent, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and praised by judges for its "beautiful, clear, economic writing." At 114 pages, it is the shortest book to be recognized in the prize's history.

Now one of her earlier works, "Foster," which was released as a short story more than a decade ago, is being published in the United States as a stand-alone book for the first time. Set in rural Ireland in the early 1980s, it unfolds from the perspective of a young girl who is sent away for the summer to live with a foster family while her mother struggles to care for a newborn and the girl's many siblings. Writing in [The New York Times](#), the novelist Alex Gilvarry called it "a master class in child narration" and argued that "Foster" is as rich and emotionally resonant as a "heaping 400-page tome."

"She is able to tell a story in a paragraph, or to compress a novel into a few thousand words," said Deborah Treisman, the fiction editor at The New Yorker, which [published](#) an abridged version of "Foster" in 2010. "There's such a precision to what she notices."

It's rare for a writer to build such a lofty reputation from short fiction alone. Keegan has been rated among the form's most masterful practitioners — drawing comparisons to Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, William Trevor and Anton Chekhov, one of her heroes.

Keegan says her work is often described as pared down, when in fact, she writes stories as they come to her, without giving a thought to length.

“What pleases me,” Keegan said, “is brevity.”

Keegan said she revises obsessively, sometimes going through as many as 50 drafts, but never maps out a plot.

“I don’t believe in plot and I’ve never plotted anything,” she said. “I don’t think you can be in the paragraph if you’ve already decided where you need to be.”

She writes out notes and scenes in longhand, until she settles into a character’s point of view, then switches to a computer. The note-taking stage can last years, Keegan said.

She avoids lengthy dialogue and exposition out of respect for her characters, who tend to be reticent types, unwilling to divulge what’s eating at them.

“It’s not just that the character goes into it reluctantly, I too go into it with reluctance,” she said. “I’m very reluctant to go into anybody’s privacy, and that’s one of the reasons I find writing difficult.” Exposing feelings her characters prefer not to acknowledge strikes her as unseemly she said, adding, “I think all good writing is good manners.”

If Keegan has a guiding ethos in her writing, it’s perhaps her willingness to leave things unsaid, and her adherence to efficiency. Keegan sometimes references a letter Chekhov wrote, describing how grace stems from the ability to complete an action with the fewest number of movements. Keegan feels the same principle applies to graceful writing, she said.

“There’s something in the tact,” she said. “To be tactful is also to not say more than enough.”