

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**PROFESSOR ANNE FOGARTY** on 6 NOVEMBER 2025 in the Aviva Stadium, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **CLAIRE KEEGAN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Claire Keegan is a supremely talented, internationally renowned, and much garlanded Irish writer. She is celebrated above all for her mastery of the short story. In her meticulous publications, she has proven her ability to shape this form and to use it in a breathtaking variety of ways. She is as successful at depicting provincial America as Ireland and stories set in the US feature in her all her collections. Recently, since the publication of *Foster* in 2009, Keegan has been feted for her incomparable skill at composing complex, highly suggestive long short stories.



These stories have won her a wide and devoted global readership and resulted in two award-winning movies, *An Cailín Ciúin* and *Small Things Like These* that bear out the haunting nature of her writing and its ability to get under people's skin whether in printed form or transposed to screen.

Claire Keegan's works have won countless awards and have been translated into over 30 languages. In 2024 alone, Claire Keegan was given the Glucksman Seamus Heaney Award for Arts and Letters in the US and the Siegfried Lenz Award in Germany, the citation declaring her "one of the great European story tellers". Additionally, Keegan's best-selling and much-cherished story, *Small Things Like These*, was ranked 8th in *The New York Times*' recent listing of the 100 Best Books of the Twenty-First Century.

Even in a very crowded contemporary literary scene, Claire Keegan's work stands out and commands attention: it travels across borders and resonates with fellow artists and general readers alike.

Claire Keegan grew up on a farm on the Wicklow/Wexford border and an intimacy with rural life is central to her highly individual artistic vision. Having emigrated to the US, she completed a BA in English Literature and Political Science at Loyola University in New Orleans and later earned an MA in the

Teaching and Practice of Creative Writing from the University of Wales, Cardiff, and an M.Phil. in Creative Writing from Trinity College Dublin. Her first collection of short stories, *Antartica*, published in 1999, won the inaugural Rooney Prize for Literature and the William Trevor Prize and was nominated an LA Times Book of the Year. Her second book, the evocatively titled *Walk the Blue Fields*, published in 2007, won the Edge Hill Prize, an award bestowed annually for excellence in a single authored short story collection.

Her long short story *Foster*, first published in the *New Yorker* in 2009 and reissued in 2010 in book form by Faber & Faber, won the 2009 Davy Byrnes Writing Award and was selected by *New Yorker* readers as the finest story published in 2009. In 2021, it was chosen by *The (London) Times* as one of the top 50 works of fiction to be published in the 21st century. Notably, *Foster* served as the basis for the Oscar-nominated, Irish-language film *An Cailín Ciúin*, directed by Colm Bairéad. The movie appeared in 2022 and played to record audiences in Ireland.

Her next long short story, *Small Things Like These*, published in 2021, was dedicated to “the women and children who suffered time in Ireland’s mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries”. It is hard to think of a story which has had an equivalent impact. Despite its concentration on the harsh and violent realities of the Magdalene laundries, it has been taken to heart by readers because it was seen to excavate essential truths about the Irish past and to expose the maltreatment of Irish women and children by the State, religious bodies, and members of society at large.

The translation of *Small Things Like These* into French by Jacqueline Odin garnered the Ireland Francophonie Ambassadors’ Literary Award in 2021 for both the author and the translator. *Small Things Like These* was shortlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize and the Booker Prize in 2022 and it also won the 2022 Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year and the 2022 Orwell Prize for Political Fiction. Further bearing out its special resonance and international reach, *Small Things Like These* was chosen by Oprah Winfrey in December 2024 as the text of the month for her online book club. It was described in the publicity material for the book club as “a little book that packs a huge punch” and as conveying a story that is “a timeless reminder of our human capacity for courage and our responsibility for one another”.

Growing out of a joint initiative by Matt Damon and Cillian Murphy, *Small Things Like These* was turned into an affecting and thought-provoking movie directed by Tim Mielants and starring Cillian Murphy, Emily Watson, and Eileen Walsh. It premiered at the 74th Berlin International Film Festival in February 2024 where it was the opening film. Emily Watson won the Silver Bear for Best Supporting Performance at the Berlin Festival, and subsequently the movie has met with critical acclaim and audience approval wherever it has played since.

Claire Keegan has since the beginning of her career taught creative writing in many venues in Ireland and abroad including UCC, DCU and the Irish Writers' Centre. She is a passionate and dedicated teacher, and many owe their initiation into the craft of writing to her inspiring guidance.

As her readers know, Claire Keegan's short stories are immersive, impactful, and heart-wrenching. They unite opposing features, the specific and the timeless, the local and the universal, a razor-sharp realism and a symbolic suggestiveness. Yet quite how Claire Keegan's stories achieve their effect is ultimately elusive. This is in part because the short story, and especially the long short story, are fundamentally mysterious forms that resist easy definition. As Lucy Caldwell has noted, short stories are closer in fact to poetry than to prose. Keegan herself has persuasively contended that the short story must leave out most of what could be said and that it is "a discipline of omission". Her most powerful stories leave things undecided as a result: exactly how the two families, one neglectful and the other loving and caring, fit together in *Foster* is uncertain, while the seismic consequences of Bill Furlong's rescue of a young woman from a Magdalene Laundry at the end of *Small Things Like These* remain completely uncharted.

Declan Kiberd has argued that "the strangeness of the everyday is Keegan's innermost theme". Even as she gives voice to unhappy women and neglected little girls in her stories, Keegan inculcates us into this strangeness. Her beautifully crafted stories refuse to be pinned down, despite the unapologetically feminist lens that she turns on the world. Her tales follow unexpected turns and trains of thought, and always keep their meanings open. Keegan chronicles a recent Irish past that we think we know and unlocks its unsettling, secret histories. She refuses sentimentality and "takes the clichés of Irish rural life and sets them ablaze", as Anne Enright has observed. The interpersonal relations that Claire Keegan describes are painful, abusive, and rooted in violence and an obdurate sexism, as the stories, "Antartica", "The Ginger Rogers Sermon", "The Forester's Daughter", and "So Late in the Day" carefully reveal. Yet, Keegan always enlists our sympathy for her damaged, needy, and destitute characters. She does not encourage us to take sides, but rather to engage fully with the dysfunctional rural and provincial worlds that she evokes and to think them through in all their aspects.

Due to her supreme artistry and her lifelong devotion to her craft, her work takes us on open-ended and emotionally charged imaginative journeys. Claire Keegan has enriched us with her work from the publication of her very first story "Storm" in 1998. Hers is a stellar career. It is no surprise that her carefully judged stories have won her so many readers and accolades. The international world of letters and above all her Irish readership are hugely in her debt. It is an immense pleasure to salute Claire Keegan in Dublin today for steadfastly keeping the faith with her craft across many decades and for

bequeathing to us such an electrifying, eloquently composed, unique, and challenging body of work.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur honoris causa ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**