



Marian Keyes and Catherine Mayer

Catherine Mayer: It's such an enormous pleasure to be here today interviewing one of the great writers of the world - not just of Ireland, not just of Europe, but of the world - Marian Keyes. The only disappointment in this conversation is that she should have been coming to the second ever Primadonna Festival in Suffolk this summer. I'm one of the cofounders of Primadonna Festival and we were incredibly pleased that she had agreed to headline, but of course we are now in lockdown. And, I have to say, this is the best way that I have spent an afternoon since lockdown started. I hope and trust that you will enjoy hearing from Marian as much as I know that I will. I'd like to start, Marian, by thanking you, because one of the things about lockdown is that I kept hearing all of these programs and people going on about, "What a great time to read, what a great time to do all these things." I don't know about you, but I've found it really hard to get round to doing anything that was contemplative. Because everything just takes so long, apart from anything else, but my head wasn't in that space. And then I knew I was going to talk to you and I started reading *Grown Ups* and it's actually the first book... I normally read voraciously, it's the first book that I have been able to read for a while. And I not only read it, but it totally transported me, took me out of myself and then brought me back into myself, in a way where I felt happier than I had felt for ages.

Marian Keyes: Oh my God, thank you. Thank *you*, Catherine. I mean, I'm so delighted to hear that. Really, I thank you so much. Thank you.

Mayer: We should let people know a bit about what this book is. I was slightly daunted when I first got it, because it's big. You should be able to see it behind me, there. It's a long book and it's a kind of, quite... I was going to say sprawling, but in terms of the time period it covers, it's not that sprawling at all. But it's a family story, a story of family dysfunction and the characters are so recognisable, as well.

Keyes: Yes, it's a story of three brothers and their various wives and ex-wives, adult stepchildren and the ages range from, the adults between 22 and 50. And I think, it kind of, in many ways, it feels similar to the people that I spend a lot of time with, which is my brothers



and sisters and their kids. And I'm very close to my 19 year old niece and I felt if I was going to write a book about now, that it felt really important to me to talk about the world that the Millennials and the Generation Z have inherited. How capitalism has failed them so utterly and how dreadfully frightening the global emergency is. And at the same time, I wanted to talk about the things that people my age worry about, that are important to them. And I wanted all of the characters to be equally likeable and explored. I didn't want it to be a generational clash, it felt like it was really important that everybody's story was told as fully as everyone else's.

Mayer: That's one of the reasons it is so impressive, because you slip into the skin of all these different characters. Sometimes when you read something, it's pretty obvious that a novelist has, in some way, just distilled bits of themselves into those characters and it's like different parts of their brains are having conversations with each other. Whereas these characters are so properly realised and the different generational perspectives is one of the things that you so rarely see in a book.

Keys: Thank you so much. I mean, I talk about my niece about that a lot an awful lot, and she has educated me entirely. And I really do feel... you know that whole thing about snowflakes and avocados and the way that that generation are mocked. I think it's appalling. Their worries are incredibly real. What we have done to the planet is not... It's not theoretical, it affects them and their day-to-day life and, you know, how the job markets are, how the housing markets are. There is no security for them. Life is such a struggle and, well, first of all, she told me all about it, but also I was able to reconnect with how I was at a young age, where I really felt like the things that other people were achieving or were striving for were not the sort of things that I would ever manage to be able to do. I did feel, the way Nell feels in the book, that it was overwhelming, this effort to try and be an adult and to try and behave like a grown-up. It was important for me that their voice was heard as much as, you know, Jessie, who's 50.

Mayer: I think, as I say, I think you've done it incredibly well and I kind of want to ask more about how you do that, but one thing I would also say about how difficult it is for those generations, particularly young women, which you capture also very well, is this notion that



somehow they are the heirs to all of this progress that our generation of women have made. And in fact, of course, what you also pick up on is that it is still incredibly difficult, it is still a ridiculously sexist world and they are dealing with all sorts of pressures that we didn't have to. The whole online sphere, for example.

Keys: Yes. I mean, the world is still incredibly sexist. I do think, the last thing I want to do, though, is blame women for that. Because women have been trying, since forever, to try and make life better for other women and I do think enormous progress has been made. You know, since the 60s. However, in parallel with that I think capitalism has become more and more brutal. It takes more and more from people and it gives less and less. I can see that an awful lot of men are very angry at the moment, and they do feel left out, they do feel that they don't have all the things that capitalism says they should have. You know, like the house and the car and the money and all of that. And rather than blame capitalism, they're blaming women. I think there's an awful lot of misdirected male rage at the moment. Instead of seeing sexism as something that actually damages both men and women, men are mis-identifying the culprit in all of this and, yeah, because of that, I do think life continues to be incredibly hard for women. Any progress we make, there are people, men, waiting to claw it back from us. We can see what is happening in the United States with abortion rights, with contraceptive rights. Absolutely terrifying. I think until maybe quite recently, until around 2008, women thought that everything that had been achieved would stay. And that all we would be doing would be making more progress and I think, now we're realising that what we have achieved is very fragile and that it can be taken away and there are many people who are interested in taking away all that progress. It is awful, but I think if we are aware of it, that that makes a big difference in how we defend our rights.

Mayer: I couldn't agree with you more. As you'll know, I co-founded the Women's Equality party in the UK. One of the reasons I did that was absolutely the recognition that progress isn't linear. We are all brought up with this lie that progress is something that happens and it's supposed to happen without us, which is the other thing that I remember in the '70s, assuming that way before now we would have equality and then you realise that of course it is not only not linear but it can reverse. But also your point about it being... our first slogan was, "Because quality is better for everyone." It is much better for men, as well as women.



That sort of dis-ease that you described so well in the book. When I was talking about how you did, one of the things I was most impressed by was the idea that you write male characters. We had, at Primadonna last year, we had a panel about whether men can write women, which had a very jokey title: “Her breasts preceded her into the room.”

Keyes: I know, yes, yes!

Mayer: You know that kind of writing about women...

Keyes: Completely!

Mayer: You write incredibly believable male characters and sympathetically but flawed. I can't say I found anything to sympathise with in Liam, but perhaps you can tell me that there is. I think we all know a Liam.

Keyes: Liam was my one bad character. As I've got older, I prefer not to write goodies and baddies, anymore. I really feel that all humans are fairly well-intentioned, nuanced and flawed. But for plot reasons, one person had to be beyond redemption. Unfortunately, Liam was all too believable. But in many ways, my favourite character in the book is Johnny who is a 49-year-old. On the outside he looks like an alpha male. He's good-looking and he has all that kind of appalling corporate charm. He has the ability to do the chat and kind of make everybody like him. On the inside, he is very threatened, because his wife is his boss. She earns far more money than him. She's far more capable than him and he has a past as a womaniser that he's very ashamed of now. He feels he's got to be strong, always. He has a really dysfunctional relationship with his own father and he can't make peace with it. He has no outlet. He has no ability to talk about these fears, or the shame that he feels. I really feel for men, because they are given such a narrow template in which to live, in which to exist. They have to be the ones to earn the money and they cannot show weakness, they can't show their vulnerabilities or their fragilities, because then they're not man enough. It was really nice to write sympathetically about a man who, on the outside, I would probably... he would not be my favourite person. But internally, he was so tender and vulnerable and wanted to be better and wanted to be different and didn't know how. So I think that is one of the benefits of getting older, that I can distinguish between the patriarchy and individual men and that individual men are prisoners of the injustices of the patriarchy just as much as women are.

Mayer: Exactly. There are all the studies that show, for example, better mental and physical health in more equal societies among men, if they're freed up from those external pressures



to behave in certain ways and to repress emotions and all of that, they do much better. That's also why I was laughing about Liam, because the toxic masculinity that you have there is also incredibly recognisable. These are really important themes and these are really beautifully drawn characters and I guess my fear with your book and also the last book I wrote which was a non-fiction book, *Attack of the 50 foot Women*, the problem that both of us have is getting men to read what we write, because we are also in a world in which there are assumptions that what women have to say is only of interest to women. And where fiction such as yours, which is just beautifully written, but also important in terms of the themes, is not treated as seriously. So, one of my questions to you is about how we tackle that. We partly founded Primadonna in response to that, to make sure there were... to increase the platform available to female writers. What else do you think we can do to get men to listen to something that will actually help them? And that they would enjoy?

Keys: Yeah, I mean I completely agree with absolutely everything that you said. Anything that is created by a woman is automatically given less worth than something identical that is created by a man. One of the things that we need to keep doing is just to keep calling it out. To keep reminding everyone that men will not read women, whereas women read men and women. And just to keep banging on about it. To also kind of develop a thick skin about it, because there will be people who say, "Oh God, here she comes again, moaning that men don't read her work." But sometimes if you call things out, things happen. Like I criticised the Wodehouse prize for... which rewards comic writing, and in 19 years, 2.5 women had won.

Mayer: I'm laughing at that half woman.

Keys: They shared the prize between a man and a woman, because obviously a woman just wasn't adequate to deserve a prize all of its own. And I called that out in a public interview at the Hay Festival and it caused a mini furore and the next year, Nina Stibbe, a woman, won, which I am delighted about and I'm not saying it was tokenistic in any way, because Nina is fabulous. And then Helen Lederer set up the CWIP prize, the comic prize for women in print, and it just has to be said and said and said and said again. And not just so that men will hear it, so that women with internalised misogyny will also hear. And it's just going to take a huge amount of saying, because men in their privilege, so many of them, honestly don't get it.



They think that literature by men is the actual literature and something that women do is some sort of a schism, a breakaway branch, but it's not part of the default literature. There's a whole mindset. It's not just them being awkward or snobby or sexist, they honestly think that it's not really... it's not the real thing. I was interviewed by a very clever, learned man recently, and he just... I could see he really didn't understand. He really did not understand that men could read books by women with the same expectation of brilliance as they could read books by men. And the thing is, sexism is across the board and when something improves in one area, I think it improves, maybe not for all women, but definitely progress can be fluid. It can benefit people who haven't directly been fighting for that particular form of benefit, if that makes any sense.

Mayer: It does. It absolutely does. For me, I was a journalist for a very long time, and one of the things that most worried me, was about which stories get told and which stories get listened to and why that is. Part of the reason that the world is in such a mess is because the wrong stories are told. Too few voices are heard, too few perspectives are paid attention to. Everybody suffers as a result. One of the things that I campaigned for is equality in the media and in the wider entertainment sphere, not because I want more book deals or anything else, I'm lucky, I've done fine on that, it's because that imbalance is really bad for everyone. A friend of mine who's a journalist at a top news organisation, sent me an email she'd had from a listener – it's a broadcaster - he had said... "You and your organisation would have way more credibility if you ran more stories about how superior men are."

Keyes: God almighty! You hear something like that, and you think, it can't be true, but it can be true because they have grown up with that privilege.

Mayer: Exactly! And its being reinforced.

Keyes: Another thing that's really important, and I see positive change being made, is that it's become less OK to objectify women. It's less OK to describe a woman in terms of her appearance, because for as long as women are considered to be decorative rather than useful, their brains, what they produce with their brains, is not going to be treated with the same respect. And then, further along the spectrum, how we address domestic violence,



relationship abuse or coercive control, how we take care of rape victims and what we do with rapists. All of those decisions send a message about how much we, as a society, value women and it's only when the law sees to value women that, again, proper change becomes possible. Because if women are regarded as punch bags, or sexual objects, it's very hard to equate that vision of womanhood with women running the country. We really have to... I mean, that's down to many things, the legislature and the media. Even things like newspaper headlines, the way they describe rape victims. "Blind drunk, scantily clad." All of those things make it the woman's fault. I was wrong to say that it is just about calling things out, because it's not. We have to fight this on many fronts.

Mayer: I think storytelling is one of the really important ways of doing it, which is also why I want your... You are, as I said in the introduction, you are a massively bestselling author, who I suspect the majority of your readership is female. I would like to make it my personal crusade to ensure that equal numbers of men read your stuff...

Keyes: Thank you, Catherine.

Mayer: I think it would be very helpful. One thing I wondered is if you've ever considered doing a kind of JK Rowling and submitting a manuscript under a male name and seeing how differently it was received?

Keyes: I've thought about it, just for the laugh. But it wouldn't be practical for me, because I'm way too slow.

Mayer: How can you say you're slow, you're such a productive writer?

Keyes: No, Catherine, I'm not. It takes me, at the moment, between two and three years to write a novel.

Mayer: That's quite fast.



Keyes: It feels to me incredibly slowly compared to my peers... I was going to say I'm ashamed about it. I suppose I'm not really ashamed, anymore. I've decided that I'm as productive as I can be. I put as much work as I can into any particular day and if this is what I can produce and this has to be enough. And I've been trying really hard to kind of move away from that awful kind of capitalist, "We must be productive at all times" sort of philosophy. So I'm slow and I'm more OK with it than I used to be.

Mayer: I'm going to demur from the idea that you're slow, because I think 2-3 years for a novel is fast. But I would say, if Primadonna had happened, we would very much have hoped that you would have participated... a lot of would-be writers come to Primadonna and we ran the Primadonna prize for unpublished, unagented writers, and we held face-to-face surgeries with writers because a lot of people want to know about the writing process, itself. When do you write and what does it look like? For me, it's kind of 5am, pyjamas.

Keyes: I write from about nine in the morning and it is pyjamas, also. I would never get dressed, unless I really had to. Lockdown suits me very well, in that regard. I write in the mornings. I write until about one and it is slow and I don't do the, kind of, crappy first draft and then the second slightly better draft and all of that. I kind of only write one draft, so I inch my way forward. It takes... I have to have everything perfect before I move on. That may not be for everyone. It seems to be kind of rare. People like that feeling of getting from start to the end and having a body of work that, even though it is very raw, that people can say, "Look, this is the extent of my vision, this is what I hoped for." Then I try and do other things in the afternoon, because I have found that, again, I was going to say, I'm slightly mortified by it, but I get tired out more easily than I used to. I've only got so much words to write every day, so much energy every day, for the book, anyway. And then in the afternoon, there are always other associated things to do.

Mayer: You mean like research.

Keyes: Yeah, or articles or interviews. But I would say, when I was younger, I wrote much more. I had a full-time job, so I used to go in and I used to write in the office for an hour before work and then I used to edit in the evenings after work, and I think when you don't



have as much time, I've heard so many people say this, when you don't have as much time, the time you do have you really make the most of it. You don't waste time, you don't faff around, you don't look around look up the weather and your horoscope and stuff like that. You use that precious time to write as much as you can. Whatever a person can fit into their life, they should use that to write. The important thing is that they write it. There are so many people who talk about wanting to write a book and they sort of act as if the book is some magic thing that will go away and write itself and it absolutely won't. And people hate me when I tell them that. They want to know the spell. The magic formula for how your book gets written. How does it just make itself into a book? It gets made into a book if you sit down and write it. I can see them looking at me and first of all, the disappointment in their eyes and then then the hatred... But no, it's hard and it's tedious and sometimes it's frightening and it's boring and then it's glorious.

Mayer: I was going to say, it's delicious, when it's going well. I'm so addicted to writing. That's the thing that's really hard to explain to people.

Keys: Yes. Yes. If I'm away from it for a while, if I need to do other stuff, there are sentences in my head and there are scenarios and I'm thinking, "Oh my god, I can't wait to sit down and just run at this." So, yeah. I would hate to not be able to write. I feel so lucky that it's my job, I feel so grateful.

Mayer: Do you feel, I mean, I realised a long time ago that I sometimes don't even know what I think or feel until I start writing. Do you have that same thing, it's actually a way of working out, it is the most direct conduit to who you are of anything?

Keys: Not so much, personally, because I don't find writing cathartic in that way. When I'm writing about a character and I'm not sure, they're fuzzy and I don't understand their motivations, once I start writing and I write and write and write, it is like suddenly I drop down a level and into them. I am into this person, I have landed in their interior landscape and I know them and sometimes it feels like you have to write huge amounts to kind of clear a pathway. I don't know if that sounds too esoteric, or anything.



Mayer: That's what I mean. I didn't mean necessarily about myself as a person, I meant about getting to some truth or idea. It's sometimes a kind of instinctual thing and it is quite hard to retro-analyse what you have done.

Keys: Yes. Very much so. Just the process of writing words, any words, letting your head go where it wants to go and not trying to pre-empt it. To just do a kind of stream of consciousness thing, yes, very much so. Then that way the truth kind of reveals itself.

Mayer: When we were younger, we didn't have social media to distract us. You do an amazingly good social media game, but how do you actually handle that? When you're writing, do you switch off? You're so brilliant on Twitter and you don't look like you're getting upset. Are you as sanguine as you appear to be on there?

Keys: God, it depends. The thing about Twitter is, I have really come to accept that no matter what you say, somebody will be outraged. It's just a fact of life. There are the perpetually outraged, waiting for the next thing to deliciously be outraged about. And an awful lot of them, and I'm sorry to say this, are men. An awful lot of them do not like opinionated women or successful women. It really, really bothers them. I see it happen to other women, as well. I think, yes, I've got older and I've got tougher in some ways and I'm just able to let it go and aware now that would have upset me, you know, eight years ago, five years ago, whatever. The only thing that would ever really upset me, is if I upset a righteous person. If I said something stupid in an attempt to be funny, and it really did hurt somebody. That would make me very sad and very ashamed. And I really would try to make amends, in that case. For a lot of the time, I have decided that Twitter is where I have an awful lot of fun and I suppose I can distinguish now between the genuinely upset and the joyously outraged. And the joyously outraged, I can shrug it off, in a way that I just think, they're pathetic, they're absolutely pathetic. And I know what's going on for them and I won't take it on.

Mayer: One of the things that seems to me, that I so enjoy about your voice on writing and on Twitter, is the sense of learning through experience. The sense of kind of coming more into who you are and being more comfortable in your own skin in ways that means that you can take those sorts of decisions. It's not that you're not upset. But you do things in a different



way, and you use humour beautifully, as well. Often when it is around things that are serious, too.

Keyes: Thank you so much. A lot of the time, it appals me how I continue to make mistakes, how I continue to misinterpret things and get things wrong. I really do think, at this stage, that I've lived a life, in many ways of fuck ups. You know, like... I wouldn't use that word about the fact that I'm an alcoholic, but a lot of people would and in many ways, my life was so shambolic when I was drinking. And since then, I have tried so hard to live like a decent person, it's important to me. And at the same time, I'm still so fallible and so flawed and often when I go into myself for a response, there's kind of an empty room. I don't know what to do. That freaks me out, because I think I should be wiser and better. I think the fact that I am very aware of how fallible I am makes it a small bit easier, if you know what I mean. I wish I didn't make mistakes, I wish I didn't hurt people. But I do sort of expect that, of course, I'm going to continue to, for as long as I engage with anyone in any medium, even in personal relationships. The ability to make mistakes and to get things wrong is always there. And even the wisest person, maybe even the Dalai Lama, occasionally, makes a joke at the wrong person's expense. Maybe he doesn't though, I don't know.

Mayer: I'd love to see it, if he does. The best thing I've ever seen in my life was when he was a judge on Australian MasterChef and refused to judge anything.

Keyes: I didn't know about that!

Mayer: Honestly, it's on YouTube, you really need to see it.

Keyes: And would he not?

Mayer: No, because he said it was against his precepts to judge. So why did he agree to it in the first place? It's brilliant.



Keyes: I must look that up. So, maybe he wouldn't make mistakes. But I will continue to. But I feel like I'm not a complete, "Throw the whole person away," thing, either. I still am valid, even though I'm flawed.

Mayer: I think more so. I think this is more of a female thing than a male thing, as well, that there is such a demand on women to be perfect when they are in the public eye and that's partly because there are fewer women in the public eye, so there's a sense then if a woman is in the public eye and she gets it wrong, that she's let all of us down. I hate this word, but it's relatable. If you show, if you are honest about your vulnerabilities and your flaws, it helps other women to understand that that is a universal experience and, instead of that, awful Instagram world of unattainable perfection and happy lives that everybody else has that the rest of us can't reach.

Keyes: I so agree with you about if a woman in the public eye gets it wrong, the outrage and ire that rains down on her head is always much more savage than anything a man would get. That's because women are told to be beautiful, and ladylike and modest and charming and any time a woman lets slip an inability to be perfect, the punishment, the judgement is savage. And I was just always a person without boundaries and I don't like lying, I find it incredibly exhausting and so I would rather just, I would rather just say, "This is who I am, all of my flaws." And I also believe in apologising, I don't think it's a weakness, I think it is a really powerful, brave thing to apologise and to own it.

Mayer: It's like changing your mind, that weird idea that politicians that change their minds are in some way doing a bad thing instead of acting on new and better information.

Keyes: Yes, exactly! You can see people who have commented on the current crisis and they said something at the start of February that was one opinion and then they said something mid-April that is polar opposite and it's because the circumstances have changed. They've got more information and they have the ability to change their mind. And then you see people raging and calling them hypocrites and liars and, you know, there is so little room in public discourse for civility. People are so angry all of the time and they want reasons to be angry. It really bothers me that we... that those voices are so savage.



Mayer: Again, I think this is where something we were trying to do with Primadonna was to have kind of the conversations that you need to have, for example about having children or not having children, and the ways in which you're penalised if you do or you don't. If you try and have them in shortform on social media or you try and have them in the media, they're always kind of polarised at the start. And they become quick punch-ups instead of the thoughtful long discussions that you need to have on this. And I think that is something that we need to find a medium, it isn't just a way for civility, but a way to have more complicated and longer discussions, that do not set out from a, "Let's get this group of people who think feminism is good and let's get this group of people who say inequality doesn't exist" and put them in a room together. And that's never going to come out with anything good.

Keys: No, and it feels like they were never actually intending to. That it was just about setting up, you know, like a boxing match. And selling tickets and letting people shout and jeer at the ones they hate and to cheer the ones they love. It is the pursuit of ratings that has driven that ugly, public scrapping and the idea of a thoughtful discussion where people could tease out each other's thought processes, I suppose it doesn't sound as exciting to those who decide what gets put on our TVs or in our papers. It's a shame, because it has reduced everybody's ability for empathy, I think. We are told we have to take a rigid position. It has to be an extreme one and we have to stick to it. And really that doesn't help anyone.

Mayer: It's ironic to say this now, because I'm aware that we're running short of time and I could talk with you for hours and there are so many more things that I want to talk to you about. One of the things that I do not want to miss talking to you about, we touched on it a bit, but it's about the whole issue of body image and, you know, you have a character in *Grown Ups*, who has an eating disorder, but it's something you've talked about a lot, generally in your books in helpful ways. I talked about being comfortable in one's own skin, I think age, ageism is far more pernicious when it comes to women, as well. Can I get some thoughts from you on where your head is on that and also what you think is a helpful way to approach this and to talk about this? Because it is, again, not discussed in always very helpful ways.



Keyes: For a woman of my generation, and it's not just mine, but I was brought up and told, you must be skinny. You must have big boobs and you must be, you must just not be fat, ever. And it seems to have gone so, so deep in almost every woman I know and partly it's because... It's mostly because the images of beautiful women that surround us are those unattainable types and the progress, I think, has come from younger women, because they are rejecting that bullshit and they have become so much more confident about their diverse body shapes. Until we have plus size models, ordinary size models and different heights and shapes and whatever to sell us our clothes, we're always going to... The majority of us will feel wrong, until we see ourselves being reflected back to us as an ideal. It's about representation in advertising. I think that's a huge amount to do with it.

Mayer: I agree. I think that's massively important, and not just in advertising, if you look at the news. There's the grizzled male anchor and then the beautiful, svelte female one.

Keyes: Yes. It's a really cruel thing to do to us. To all of us. To say, "Look like that." You know, it doesn't matter what age you are, you've got to look like her.

Mayer: Can you imagine how much energy we would have left over if we weren't worrying about these things?

Keyes: Yes, I mean I agree. Who gains from all of this? Because it's not women.

Mayer: And it's not really men, either, that's where you go back to the patriarch.

Keyes: Yes.

Mayer: It disempowers in very profound ways, that I don't think people fully understand. When you think about change, you're somebody who's risked change a lot, yourself... If people ask you about where they are in life and about career change and about taking risks, what do you tell them? What's your, as I say, you've done it yourself...



Keyes: I think fear holds us back, those judgements, those voices in our heads that got programmed really on. It says, “You stick with the same thing, even if it doesn't make you happy.” We only get the one life and I think after a certain age, and I'm amazed that I believe this, but I do, I used to hear people say, you only get the one life and it didn't mean anything to me, not on a visceral level. And now I really feel it. You only get the one life. And it's short and... It's maybe trite to say, “What's to be gained or lost, if you give up something steady for something insecure?” Because it's no fun if somebody is worried about paying their rent, but I would always urge people to be courageous and if they can't, then they can't. That's got to be acknowledged, as well. But yeah, if a person has any inkling at all that they want to do something different, my plan is always, go on, give it a go. Why not?

Mayer: Is there anything you are holding back from doing?

Keyes: Not really. I mean... there are things that like... I love my job and people always say, “You should do this and you could try that and why don't you give this a go?” And I absolutely don't want to. I love writing novels. I have always wanted to be different. I've always wanted to be a better version of me or an entirely different person. And in recent times, I think, “No, I'm so lucky. I'm so lucky to have this job that I love and that I feel well, kind of emotionally and mentally.” And I'm really grateful for an awful lot that I have and I don't want anymore. Again, that's something that people get judged on. Because in this questing, appalling productivity-driven world, we're all meant to have five year plans and goals. I hear young people talking about their goals and it breaks my heart and if they're not on track to meet their goal by the date, that they feel so frightened and like failures... And I love what I do and I don't want to do anything else and I'm not going to make myself do anything else, just so that I can seem productive. I'm going to write my books every two or three years and I feel so lucky that I can let myself do that, if you know what I mean. That I'm not just being fake productive to show... You know these people, they can't meet you for the next year-and-a-half, because they're flying here, they're a judge on this and they're writing the screenplay for that and they, you know... We're meant to think they're fabulous. And I often worry about them because I think, “Are you really fabulous or how propped up, how is your ego in all of this?” But whatever. I'm not judging them, I'm just saying, it's not me. I kind of like it simple, because I'm happy like this.



Mayer: You've found what works for you. I so recognise that sense of feeling lucky. It's an amazing piece of good fortune.

Keyes: It's the best. It's the utter best. It really is. It doesn't have to be with something enormous. Just if you like where you live, it's lovely.

Mayer: I'm disappointed I won't be able to tempt you into politics, because I think you would be brilliant in that.

Keyes: I'd be hopeless. But thank you.

Mayer: If you were Taoiseach for the day, or Prime Minister here for the day, what would you do? What's your one thing you would do?

Keyes: Oh my God, I'd start a massive programme on social housing to get rid of our homeless problem. We treat our refugees in Ireland in a very cruel way. A thing called Direct Provision. I would abolish that. All of the people with the hungry children, it appals me. We have to have food banks. In the developed world, in countries with plenty of money, it appals me. I mean, I would try to address the massive inequality, the massive gulf between the higher earners and the rest of the people. I wouldn't have any problem putting up the rate of tax for the higher earners, and, you know, it's just... I was always that way inclined as a young person, as a teenager and in my 20s. I never grew out of it. I still think if a society has enough money for everyone, then nobody should be hungry or homeless and I don't think that that's utopian codswallop. How many helicopters does any one very rich person need? After a point, what are they doing with all that money? I know that I sound naïve, because I'm not an economist and I haven't laid it out like an economist would. But there is enough money for everybody. There are enough resources for everybody, they just need to be shared out equally. Not even entirely equally. The men with helicopters can keep 40 of the helicopters, just stop buying them for a while and then maybe we could make sure the children weren't going to school hungry. It's as simple as that.



Mayer: It really is. You don't sound naïve, you sound like one of the world's important voices and you should be heard and, you know, as I said I could go on talking to you for hours, but I think that I have to stop now. But all I can say is, people should read you and they should listen to you and they should also learn from your life experience. Things have not always gone right for you, but you have taken that experience and moved with it, out of it, done things with it, it's incredibly important. You're amazing.

Keyes: Oh, Catherine, you're amazing. Thank you for such a beautiful interview. It's such an honour to be part of the Primadonna Festival and hopefully next year I can be there for real in person.

Mayer: We will do it. It will be such a great Primadonna next year.

Keyes: It will, it will! It absolutely will! Thank you so much. You are brilliant!