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## “Your *Notes to Self* are also Notes to Others”: A Conversation with Emilie Pine<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Emilie Pine is Professor of Modern Drama at University College, Dublin (UCD) and the author of *Notes to Self* (Tramp Press, 2018), her very successful collection of personal essays. As an academic, she has published extensively in the fields of memory and drama; as an essayist, her work takes us to territories that have been traditionally silenced or edited out of the collective imaginary, both in Ireland and beyond. Her first novel, *Ruth & Pen*, which will be published in May 2022, explores themes as volatile as infertility, how it affects relationships and how climate change impacts on our 21st-century lives. This interview focuses on Pine’s career as a university lecturer and professional writer. It touches upon some of the themes dealt with in her celebrated collection of essays: her father’s alcoholism, medical and hospital experiences, mental health issues and the eating disorders that she experienced in her early years.

**Key Words.** Personal essay, climate change, eating disorders, mental health, medical establishment.

**Resumen.** Emilie Pine es profesora de teatro moderno en University College, Dublín (UCD) y autora de la exitosa colección de ensayos personales *Notes to Self* (Tramp Press, 2018). Como académica, ha publicado extensamente sobre memoria y teatro; como autora, sus ensayos nos llevan a terrenos normalmente silenciados en el imaginario colectivo, tanto en Irlanda como internacionalmente. Pine está a punto de publicar su primera novela, *Ruth & Pen*, donde explora temas tan volátiles como la infertilidad, cómo esta afecta a las relaciones de pareja y cómo el cambio climático envuelve la realidad del siglo XXI. Esta entrevista se centra en su doble condición de profesora universitaria y de escritora. Y toca algunos de los temas que Pine desarrolla en su celebrada colección de ensayos: el alcoholismo de su padre, experiencias médicas y hospitalarias, problemas de salud mental y los trastornos alimenticios que marcaron parte de su temprana juventud.

**Palabras clave.** Ensayo personal, cambio climático, trastornos alimenticios, salud mental, profesión médica.

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I first met Emilie Pine in 2013 at a conference on memory and trauma<sup>2</sup> that she organised at University College, Dublin. In the truly beautiful keynote lecture that Kali Tal gave on that occasion, she defined trauma as anything that goes against the expected narrative. No matter how private or insignificant for the community, whatever breaks the plotline you had envisaged for your own life can qualify as trauma. Historically, we are accustomed to displays of national and international wounds but when our hearts, souls or bodies are broken at a personal level we tend to go down the road of silence. Not Emilie Pine. Not in *Notes to Self* (2018), her first collection of personal essays where she deals with issues that have traditionally been considered taboo, often “for reasons to do with failure and shame” (Kellaway). Alcoholism, infertility, menstruation, rape and depression are some of the themes that Pine dives into with brutal honesty in her book. As Martina Evans contends in her review of *Notes to Self* for *The Irish Times*, this is “the kind of book you want to give to everyone”. It is also partly responsible for the current popularity of the genre of the personal essay in Ireland, it has been translated into various languages (including Spanish) and it has been the recipient of numerous awards, among them the Sunday Independent Newcomer of the Year (2018), the An Post Irish Book of the Year (2018) and the Butler Literary Award (2018). Before the national and international success of *Notes to Self*, Emilie Pine was already known in the field of Irish Studies as an accomplished scholar. She teaches Modern Drama at UCD, and now divides her writing time between the scholarly and the creative. Her first novel, entitled *Ruth and Pen*, will be published by Hamish Hamilton, the UK publishers of *Notes to Self*, in May 2022. The following conversation is about all of the above. The past. The present. Also the future.

**Luz Mar González-Arias: Shall we start with what is happening right now in your writing life? You’ve just finished your first novel. Is it too early to disclose some information about it?**

Emilie Pine: No, I’m happy to talk about it. So, after writing, effectively, a memoir in essay form, I knew two things: I knew that I wanted to keep writing because it had given me something that I wasn’t getting from any other part of my life, both academic and personal, but I also knew that I didn’t have anything left in me to write about myself. So I really wanted to write about other characters for a change! I’d had the idea for a story about a woman who in many ways seems very like me but had gone on a different journey.

**LMGA: In your writing there’s definitely a pull towards the autobiographical that goes beyond the personal essay. In a way everything that we write is and is not autobiographical, isn’t it? The story may not be exactly what happened to you but it went through your head and it is inspired by something that happened in your life in one way or another.**

EP: Exactly. One of the things I think about autobiographical writing is that through it you gain insight into yourself and you really learn what the narrative is because our lives don’t really have beginnings, middles and ends, but writing does, whether it’s an essay or a novel. And so, I had realised through writing about my own life that, for my partner and I, when we were trying to have children, and then we decided to stop, that decision set us free. It was a very difficult decision and it’s very difficult to live with sometimes, but it really was a liberation from so much of the fear and stress I was living with.

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<sup>2</sup> International Conference on “Memory and Trauma: The Body in Pain in Irish Culture”, University College, Dublin (UCD) and Boston College Ireland, 12-13 September 2013.

*Ruth and Pen* began because I wanted to write somebody else's story, another couple's story, where that decision broke them rather than set them free. I wanted to explore the pain of that. I feel like I was done living the experience, but not done with it imaginatively. And so fiction has been a really wonderful chance for me to write and explore something that's not factual, but it has this emotional truth to it, which is something we talk about as academics all the time. For me, plays, novels and poetry are forms in which we're not looking for history, but we're looking to them for some insight into how people feel about circumstances.

That's a long way of saying that I had the idea for this central female character. – Ruth – who has a fertility journey! But I also didn't want her to be alone, and so it came to me that there would be a teenage girl as well in this novel: Pen (short for Penelope). Pen is a 16-year-old autistic girl who is on a very different journey to Ruth. Ruth may be at the end of her marriage, while Pen is at the beginning of a relationship with her best friend Alice. And so we have these two characters, and the novel starts with both of them going into the centre of Dublin, and it is set over the course of just one day. So it's two characters wandering around Dublin over the course of one day and crossing paths.

**LMGA: That sounds very Joycean to me ...**

EP: In a way that was accidental, but as I started writing I thought, you know what, maybe this *is* a good idea. I mean, if Joyce made it work, maybe there is something to it! And also, I work in UCD and Joyce is a UCD alumnus. And I was just thinking about how we connect to different texts and authors. I've taught intertextuality, so I was interested in finding out how intertexts work not for readers but when you are the one who is writing.

**LMGA: How can you combine your life as an academic with a writing career? Even though writing a scholarly essay is a creative act in its own way, it's necessarily different from writing a novel. Both activities are very monopolising, I would even say obsessive to the point of, sometimes, losing sleep over them because ideas keep coming right up until you actually press the send button (and even after pressing it!). The writing, of whatever kind, often stays alive in our heads. Bearing in mind that, as scholars, we often have an excessive workload and constantly looming deadlines, as you discuss in "This Is Not on the Exam" (157-81), your final essay in *Notes to Self*, I wonder what your secret to combining both careers so successfully is.**

EP: The secret is I don't. To write this novel, I took a year off my job in UCD. I had a research sabbatical and I took the rest of the year off unpaid to write the novel. And it wasn't just about writing, for many reasons I had to step away. I just had hit a wall where I couldn't do everything. And the big thing for me has been since I went back to work, because I took the academic year of 2019-20 off, so into the beginning of the pandemic, and when we went back all the teaching was online and via Zoom, which was just very draining. But I really had to start thinking "Okay, how do I live like this?", because I don't want that year to be the only year that I can write.

And I realised that the only answer for me is that by trying to do everything, I was impoverishing myself. I always thought by adding more to my to-do list I was adding to my life and being some kind of superhuman but, actually, I was taking myself away from the things I really care about. And if I try to do five things, I will spread myself far too thinly. If I do two things, I can actually give myself to them and they get better as a result. Of course, that is really hard during a teaching term when one of the things I really want to give myself to is teaching and my students. But I find if I see teaching as a kind of creative energy and a way for me to think through emotions and thoughts and intellectual challenges, and to foster that in my students as well and to support them, then that is enormous, that brings a lot of energy back.

And if I do that four days a week, you know, maybe I'll magically get my next book written on Friday afternoons (*laughs*).

**LMGA: Definitely, when you have fewer things to do you can give yourself to those activities and enjoy them to the full. I think enjoyment is a really important factor to bear in mind because we have these privileged jobs, supposedly vocational, but most of the time we have too much on our desks – too much administration, too many deadlines, too much pressure – and we can end up with burnout. When reading your essays, particularly “This Is Not on the Exam”, I felt that your *Notes to Self* were actually “notes to others”, especially women academics, whose age and looks are often commented on.**

EP: You know, I never want to give myself to administration, ever, but inevitably we have to! Anyway, on your other point, I am still asking how can our age or looks be a relevant part of any academic conversation?

**LMGA: There are many medical issues in *Notes to Self*, for example depression in academia. Mental health issues are not discussed sufficiently, partly because there is this shame attached to them, this embarrassment, as if you were weak. In “This Is Not on the Exam” you touch upon the depression that comes out of an excessive workload – the emphasis on productivity rather than on reflection that our jobs often imply. And although you touch upon it, you don’t deal with this darkness in depth. Would you consider writing more about that?**

EP: This is interesting because that final essay was for me – although it might not seem it to people outside of academia – the biggest risk of the work that I published, because I felt like I was potentially undermining myself professionally by talking about my feelings about my job, and talking about depression, and talking about being perceived as young, and so on. But really the response to it has been extraordinary from other academics – and outside of our industry as well – but particularly from academics, who say “Yeah, that’s exactly what my life looks like and thank you for saying it”.

One of the reasons I felt slightly guilty about publishing it is that I’m so privileged because I have a permanent job. I have many colleagues, and I’m guessing it is the same in Spain as well, who are working incredibly precariously, on really short-term contracts, and who are having to work in multiple institutions in order to pay the rent – because rents are incredibly high in Dublin and across Ireland. And I just think of how they don’t have space for depression. They don’t have space for mental health issues, and yet they work in contexts that make it almost guaranteed that they will encounter these problems. I feel enormously responsible for that as a member of a community where some people are doing exactly the same job as me and being paid on a completely different payscale, and not because I have been promoted or anything like that, but purely because we were hired at different historical moments. The inequality of that really strikes me. Perhaps I could find a way to write about that, without appropriating anybody else’s experience, though really Deirdre Flynn’s essay, “On Being Precarious”, published in the *Irish University Review* in 2020, said it all better than I could.

One thing I would say about autobiographical writing is that people often ask me “Oh, you are so honest. Why did you decide to be so honest?” And that slightly confuses me, because if I’m going to do it, I’m going to be completely honest, I don’t see a point in doing it otherwise. But in the wake of *Notes to Self*, I do need to think about where my boundary is around my life. I think that there is an expectation, particularly for women writing about their experiences, that because they’re talking about their lives, then everything is fair game, and now they are public property in some way. Part of the process for me, after the incredible and extraordinary

experience of people's response to *Notes to Self*, has been to reinstate some boundaries, to work out what I want to share. All of which is to say, I'm not sure that I will write more about my own experience of depression because it feels that to do so would bring me back into it potentially, and I think part of the act of care, and part of the act of self-care, is to say this is actually where my privacy starts and it is important. And, of course, as well as that, there are other stories to hear, other experiences that should be seen, that's the writing I want to read now.

**LMGA: What you have just said about boundaries links with writing as a form of exposure, particularly in the case of personal essays. You wrote this very honest book, *Notes to Self*, and you opened up certain parts of your life to us as if you were opening a window and we are allowed to look in. But then you had to go back to lecturing, to your students, many of whom may have read *Notes to Self*. Did you feel too exposed?**

EP: I have only had really positive responses from students, who have been incredibly kind and generous. One of the common themes in their response is that they have gone through, or are going through, some of the similar things that are in *Notes*, and they find it surprising, and reassuring, that one of their professors has had this in their life. I think that it made me realise something about being a teacher and that, yes, obviously boundaries are important – and, absolutely, when I'm teaching, I'm not bringing my life into the classroom – but I think it's really important that students see their teacher model the kind of ethical issues that we are often discussing in class. For me to say "I'm vulnerable, and have found life really challenging at different times" is hopefully a really positive signal to send to students because when you are going through something like that you can feel so alone. I also find students incredibly diverse and surprising in the ways they respond. I think a lot of them have no idea that I wrote this book, which is totally fine with me, but with the ones who have, I've had some really interesting conversations. And I'm really grateful for that.

**LMGA: There is a lot of interest in the genre of the personal essay at the moment in Ireland. Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations* (2019), Ian Maleney's *Minor Monuments* (2019), your own *Notes to Self* (2018) are among the best-selling books of the past few years. You were even interviewed for *El País* (Fernández Abad), which is one of the most widely read newspapers in Spain, about your debut collection. Is there any particular reason why this genre is so suited to the present?**

EP: I'm not sure that there is a particular social or cultural answer to that question. The personal essay, as you know, was already such a huge genre in American writing, particularly led by women writers. The editors of Tramp Press, who published and commissioned *Notes to Self*, saw that, as a trend, the personal essay was very strong in North America, but the same wasn't being seen in Ireland. So I think much of the credit has to go to Tramp Press, not just for publishing *Notes* but for continuing to publish essays. There's also *The Dublin Review*, which is edited by Brendan Barrington and has a really strong tradition of publishing essays, Sinéad Gleeson's and Doireann Ní Gríofa's work for example.<sup>3</sup> *The Stinging Fly* and *Granta* as well are obviously really important venues. Those journals have fostered not only writers, but also an audience for essays and creative non-fiction.

We do have a kind of fascination with "the real" at the moment, but it's not just a literary trend. It's building on an important tradition of being interested in unheard stories. For example,

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<sup>3</sup> Poet and essayist Doireann Ní Gríofa is the author of the celebrated *A Ghost in the Throat* (Tramp Press, 2020), a book that moves between the autobiographical and the fictional.

if we think of the memoir boom in the 1990s, obviously Nuala O’Faolain’s *Are You Somebody?* (1996) and Seamus Deane’s autobiographical novel, *Reading in the Dark* (1996), spring to mind as opening up all kinds of silences. I would say that reading O’Faolain’s work changed how I felt about being an Irish woman. And we can put those individual narratives next to all the stories in the 1990s that came out about institutional abuse, including Louis Lentin’s *Dear Daughter* (1995) and Mary Raftery’s *States of Fear* (1999). Those real-life stories changed how Irish people thought about society and vulnerability and the Catholic Church. More recently, I think of how the abortion and the equal marriage referendum campaigns were successful because they told real people’s stories. So, all this talk about how we live in a fake-news world, well, maybe we don’t. Maybe the majority of us have a really strong sense of what is real and a really strong need for it. And we listen and respond to it. I think that is a really positive sign about where Ireland is.

**LMGA: Did the writing routine you had for *Notes to Self* change when writing your novel?**

EP: Yes, definitely. I wrote *Notes to Self* like a crazy person because I was working full time and I wrote it on planes, I wrote it on trains. It’s one of the jokes with the title: I actually wrote it on everything. So I have bits of it on the back of envelopes, bus tickets, notes on my phone. The post-it note as a literary form. With *Ruth & Pen* it was completely different. The writing of the novel was just a joy in comparison because I sat down! My goal was to write four mornings a week. I am a morning person and my goal was to write in – I don’t know what you call them in Spain – little school copy books for students. They are very small and my goal was to write six pages a day, which felt like progress. I highly recommend the copy books because they’re small, and also very flexible so you can push them in your pocket and go to a café and write there.

**LMGA: So you’re analogic. I can understand the pull towards the notebook. And the enjoyment of the whole process. Did you experience the anguish of the blank page or writer’s block at some point? Or was the writing smooth and fluid all the time?**

EP: I think everybody experiences writer’s block at some point because there will always be days when you can’t do it. But I was so aware that I had such a short amount of time “to be a writer” that it kept me going. Then the pandemic started. In the end, most of the novel was written under lockdown because there was nothing else to do, really. I don’t have kids, so I didn’t have home-schooling or any other caring responsibility. That is one of those moments when I realised that actually not having kids was an advantage.

**LMGA: Did the pandemic impact on your work in terms of theme? Did it influence the development of the novel?**

EP: Actually, it did in two very practical ways. The novel is set on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, which was the first day of the climate justice strike week. I am sure that it happened in Madrid too. It was in Dublin, it was in London, it was in New York, it was in capital cities all across the world, and there were many protest marches. In the novel, both characters become caught up in the march. I was really aware as I was writing about it, how much of the conversation during the pandemic was about COVID-19 as an unforeseen outcome of climate crisis. This is what we are doing to the world and this is the consequence of that. The novel happens before COVID and it doesn’t have that influence but to me it made it feel quite urgent, even more urgent to be writing about that. And in the second very practical way, the characters walk around streets that I know really very well but during the lockdown, I couldn’t get to them! I couldn’t leave my

house so I couldn't walk the streets, or their routes around the city. So my process was first imagining the city and then having to imagine it further because I couldn't go there, and then after the restrictions lifted, walking the streets in real life and noticing little differences, like "that feels further away than I'd thought". So I was realising the reality of it, asking myself "If you are standing here, can you actually see this thing that I want the character to be looking at?" I had to test it out. It was both a restriction and then also fun, imaginatively.

**LMGA: When I was re-reading *Notes to Self* in preparation for this interview, I was thinking of you as both a scholar and a creative writer, which brought to mind Celia de Fréine's "A time in her life", a poem about a selkie woman who moves between land and sea. De Fréine is actually talking about moving between the English and the Irish language. Each time the mythical woman stays on land, she stays a little longer, "knowing a day would come / when she'd have to make a choice" (72). Do you think you will have to make a decision at some point? Or do you think you will be able to find a happy land in-between the creative and the scholarly?**

EP: I published an academic book, *The Memory Marketplace*, in 2020<sup>4</sup> – I had finished that really in 2019, but even when you think you're done there's still something to work on! I was also then still editor of the *Irish University Review*, which I loved but it is a labour of love that requires a lot of invisible work. Lucy Collins has taken over as editor now, and she's fantastic. I felt in those years I had very little time to be creative. But I'm lucky as an academic, with a secure job, because I could pivot, and start to prioritise creative writing over research. I am lucky that I have so many great creative writing colleagues at UCD, and from them I saw that it was possible, that one could do it. But it's not instantly achievable! I think maybe my selkie routine might be over the course of years.

I would also love to find a way to write more academic work, but more like myself. I think increasingly there are more and more writers who are doing this, who are moving away from the really quite patriarchal tone of the way that scholarly work has been written. Obviously, if other academics like that style, that's fine. If they want to continue to write like that, that's fantastic, but for me it just feels less and less true. When I write in a scholarly framework in future, I want to bring in teaching, and I want to bring in experience. I write about theatre so I want to bring in the experience of being in the theatre, and I want to have much more of the sense of the everyday as a valid part of how we evaluate literature, because it is part of our lives. Why are we pretending it's separate?

**LMGA: I couldn't agree more. Let's talk about the first essay in *Notes to Self*, "Notes on Intemperance" (3-33), which is a powerful account of life with an alcoholic father. "It is hard to love an addict", you state, because "the person who loves an addict exhausts and renews their love on a daily basis" (17-18). That is a beautiful way of describing it.**

EP: I wrote that bit on the back of a bus ticket.

**LMGA: You also describe how you sent the essay to your father before sending it off for publication. I understand why you did it, and the anxious waiting for his response, how important that might have been. In the unlikely, or likely, event that he didn't want that essay to see the light of day, what would you have done?**

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<sup>4</sup> Pine, Emilie. *The Memory Marketplace: Witnessing Pain in Contemporary Irish and International Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

EP: I am very lucky that I did not have to make that decision. And it's the same for my whole family. My mother is a very private person, and it was an act of grace for her to give me permission to publish. It would be the last thing she would ever do. I thought it was enormously generous of my whole family to give me the room to take the risk. I also blame them, in a way, because my parents brought me up to believe that writers were people who had the licence to write about all the difficult things. And, well, their lessons were very successful! I have somewhat untraditional parents, my dad in particular. That made for a challenging childhood at times but in a strange way it has made for very happy creative conversations as an adult. My parents both read the novel, in draft as well, and their comments on it were incredibly helpful to me. They were my first readers, and they continue to be, and I love that. It is a whole different kind of relationship as a result.

**LMGA: You also touch upon eating disorders in *Notes to Self*, in the essay entitled “Something about Me” (119-156). Anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating affect primarily young women – although not exclusively – and have been explored in the poetry, narrative and memoirs of a lot of women writers. In Ireland, in particular, Leanne O’Sullivan’s debut collection of poetry *Waiting for My Clothes* (2004) and Leanne Waters’s memoir *My Secret Life* (2011), come immediately to mind. In the work of women writers, factors like religion, family relationships, social class or gender violence are often presented as responsible for the onset of the disorder. However, there is the cultural assumption that eating disorders are mainly the result of the beauty stereotypes that we, as a society, are visually saturated with. Do you think this serious problem has been medically and socially simplified?**

EP: I can only talk about my experience of eating disorders, which for me was not in any way about fitting into some kind of beauty myth – though it was obviously shaped by that. It was absolutely about feeling out of control and having no agency and no power. I was a child and one of the only things I could control was what I put into my body or didn't. For me the body – and this may derive from that context – was subjected to the mind in the traditional mind-over-body dualism. It was not the body as sinful that drove me to the eating disorder but the body as something to be controlled. Of course, not in any intellectual or conscious way, as I was so young. But I understood food is pleasurable and, as a result, I wasn't going to allow myself that.

Now, as a teacher standing in classrooms with 18 and 19 and 20 year-olds, I very much hope that they are not carrying around the kind of guilt and shame that our generation did. And I think they aren't. I think there is a shift towards the idea of social and cultural progress as being a really positive thing and it's being driven by them, which is fantastic. At the same time, I think that there are still huge self-esteem issues and huge issues to do with vulnerability and mental health and not enough support.

These days people are also incredibly exposed through their social media interactions and I find it, even as someone, you know, with a Facebook account and an Instagram account and a Twitter account, very damaging. We are seeing the long-term effects emerging. It is damaging our attention spans, for example. We are all so terrified of being bored now that it is just easier to pick your phone up.

**LMGA: You mention control, which plays such an important role in the development of eating disorders. I was a ballet dancer long ago. I was never anorexic but I did monitor everything I ate very carefully at that time because we were told dancers had to look anaemic. We did not welcome the body changes that accompany puberty, so it wasn't that difficult to end up going down the road of anorexia nervosa. I'd like to focus now on the**

**hospital experiences that you went through, both as a patient and as a carer of your father. When our bodies have to be medically examined, the aim is always noble: the cure or, at least, the alleviation of whatever symptoms are affecting us. However the “them versus me” dichotomy is always there, as our bodies – or the bodies of our beloved – are being touched and manipulated, even surgically altered sometimes. And you must trust the “them” in the dichotomy. Would you say that particularly for women – because I think there is a strong gender dimension here – these moments can be experienced as an aggression of sorts, even if we are aware of the noble aim behind them?**

EP: Usually when we interact with the medical profession it is because we are vulnerable in some way and, as a result, everything after that needs to be interpreted within that frame. If I had one thing to say about the medical profession it is that they aren't understanding that level of vulnerability. And I would say that based on both being a patient and also a writer-in-residence at the National Maternity Hospital, where every member of the staff is doing their absolute best to have healthy mothers and healthy babies. But they are at work and will deliver nine babies a day. But for that person who is coming in that is potentially their only experience in their entire life. So there is just a complete mismatch between the kind of routine application of medical knowledge and expertise, and theory, to a person's body versus the person who owns that body and every single feeling they have is meaningful to them. And, when you have a simultaneously underfunded and very expensive medical system – and in Ireland what we effectively have is a private healthcare system because the public healthcare system is just struggling so much – when you have that kind of system where you only have a 10-minute slot with your doctor in order to convey all of these things about yourself, and they are not listening because they've got to see five other patients *this* hour, you know, it cannot be good for anybody's health.

**LMGA: Even at a linguistic level there is this huge problem of communication because often the doctors or nurses don't have the time, as you said, and the information about your own diagnosis and treatment doesn't get to you in the best possible way. Often the language used is too specialised and the empathy we hope for is not, in general, there. We all know exceptions to this, of course. But roughly speaking, there is still an awful lot of work to do in the way the medical establishment communicate a diagnosis, particularly a bad one, to a patient or their relatives.**

EP: Absolutely. And I can't tell you how many women I have spoken to who have lost babies or have had adverse outcomes and their communication with their doctor made everything worse. Even when the doctor is trying to be nice, but they're not thinking, or they're not trained, or there's just this huge emotional gap. In a moment when you think that it can't get any worse, your doctor might say “Well, Mother Nature has her reasons”, and that probably seems to them an acceptable thing to say. It is not. It is not okay, and that is what you are talking about, the empathy gap. It is a complete lack of empathy.

**LMGA: The second essay in *Notes to Self*, “From the Baby Years” (35-77), is a harrowing account of the frustration and pain associated with infertility and a miscarriage. You tell us about how you and your partner were kept in the dark about the loss of your foetus. The History of Medicine has shown us that religion has often influenced medical decisions to the point of making patients, particularly women, invisible. In what way is the Ireland of the 21<sup>st</sup> century different from the Ireland of the 1980s when it comes to reproductive rights and women's health issues?**

EP: It's different. I still don't think it's ideal. While I was writer-in-residence at Holles Street, there were people who came with white coffins to stand outside in protest at women's reproductive rights. That's a terrible context to have to make a difficult decision in. It's better for sure, but it's slow. It's a relief that we're not going backwards like other countries.

**LMGA: Did the success of *Notes to Self* put pressure on you when writing *Ruth & Pen*?**

EP: I need to protect my projects when they're new, and for a long time I didn't tell anyone I was trying to write a novel. I was worried I would lose the spark or the energy, and also about the pressure. I was really lucky to once more work with a really generous editor, who protected me too! Now, though, I can't pretend I'm not feeling the pressure. I read a great piece of advice from another writer, Madeleine Dore, who said we should check our own expectations. I simply can't believe I wrote a novel. That's more than I thought I'd ever do.

Thank you very much for this conversation, Emilie. And for your honesty and generosity.

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