



How an American dream came to end



Delia O'Callaghan spent 15 years building a successful life in the US but one day found herself behind bars. **Colette Sheridan** hears how she drew from her experience for her new book

FIRST time author, Delia O'Callaghan, who has just published *Honeysuckle to*

Handcuffs, always wanted to write a book and has been an avid note-taker since her teens, cataloguing her romantic life. The Cork native, who lived in Boston for 15 years as an illegal immigrant, attended creative writing classes in the US city in 2007. She was "dabbling away at a romantic novel for two years". It was about a young woman working illegally in America but O'Callaghan felt it lacked a strong storyline.

However, when her own life turned into a tumultuous drama, O'Callaghan, from Rochestown, knew she had the material necessary to write a good yarn. *Honeysuckle to Handcuffs* is her story. It's an account of O'Callaghan's romance with a wealthy American. But it is her spell in prison that takes centre stage in this true life story. Last year, O'Callaghan was one of the finalists in the inaugural Irish Writers' Centre Novel Fair competition. Her book, while mostly factual, is embellished in places and some identities have been changed.

Now aged 46, O'Callaghan wanted to travel and gave up her secure administration job with the HSE in 1994, much to the disgust of her mother. Her brother was living in Boston and through contacts, she had a job lined up there working in "a high end beauty salon with clients that included some of the Kennedy women". (The salon was owned by Ruth Clifford McCourt who with her daughter, Juliana, was killed when their plane crashed into the World Trade Centre on 9/11.)

While working at the salon, O'Callaghan had to do a runner one day when a representative of the INS (Immigration Nationalisation Service) made a visit. "Being an illegal immigrant was always at the back of my mind. From 1994 to 2001, I applied for a visa. It was a lottery. I seemed to be the only Irish person that didn't get a visa. Then, after 9/11, things changed. You couldn't draw attention to yourself. I thought Mr Right would come along and it would all get sorted. Stupidly, I thought I was above the law."

O'Callaghan, as well as



Above, author of *Honeysuckle to Handcuffs* Delia O'Callaghan enjoying the high-life sailing off the Florida Keys in America while living there illegally. She worked for a wealthy family who spent winter in Florida and summer in Nantucket; below, Delia with a copy of her book at the launch in Cork's Bodega earlier this week. (Launch picture: Miki Barlok)

working in the salon, did some waitressing and house cleaning work. In 1995, she started working for a wealthy Jewish banking family and stayed with them for twelve years. "They had their own plane. It was very glamorous working for them. I would have to travel to their various homes, organising things. They were based in Boston but went to Nantucket for the summer and Palm Beach in the winter. The money was excellent. I spent a lot of it on designer clothes, handbags and shoes and travelling. I was able to save money as well."

Eventually, O'Callaghan set up her own business, providing a concierge business for residents of "magnificent condos in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Boston. The people living in them didn't know where to find a good dry cleaner or where to go grocery shopping. I had a lot of clients and contacts in Boston".

Through an internet dating site, O'Callaghan had a relationship with "a high profile financial advisor" who knew Bill Clinton. In the book, she refers to him as Frank. "He was going through a bad divorce. I was more into the relationship than he was." O'Callaghan admits that in her book, she portrays Frank as keener on the romance than he really was. Unlike the account in the book, he didn't actually travel to Cork with her when

she returned home for her sister's wedding in 2009.

That was the occasion when O'Callaghan's life turned upside down. In her fifteen years in the US, she visited home twenty-two times, always in fear of going back through immigration but pulling it off.

However, on her way back to Boston from Cork after the wedding, O'Callaghan was pulled in by immigration at Shannon Airport, had her passport stamped and was denied entry to the US.

"The only way I was going to be able to get back to America

was to sneak in as an American. I had a Massachusetts driving license. I was in a state of shock but I was willing to try anything. I wanted to go over the Mexican border. All I needed at the time was an American driving license. People thought I was crazy."

Two friends of O'Callaghan helped her in her effort to cross the Mexican border at Tijuana. But they were all arrested with the friends being released soon afterwards. As for O'Callaghan who had tried to fake an American accent, a police officer said he didn't want any more lies from her. "You're more Irish than the Blarney Stone," he said.

O'Callaghan's possessions were taken from her, including her anti-frizz shampoo, much to her chagrin. She soon realised that she was in big trouble and was put in a holding cell before being transferred to San Diego Correctional Facility. Her cell mate was "a foul mouthed, religious, drug-trafficking yet protective lesbian".

O'Callaghan says she never felt afraid in prison but "was in the depths of depression. Initially, there were twelve of us in one room. It was like MASH. There was all this cement and wiring. We were in the middle of the desert with strong heat from the sun. The food was horrific. I lost loads of weight".

To try and dull herself,

O'Callaghan took one of her sleeping tablets every night, pretending to the prison guards that it was medication for migraine. What really got to her was not knowing when she was going to be let go. The then minister for foreign affairs, Micheál Martin, was on her case. Eventually, after twenty-seven days, O'Callaghan was released. Her five-year ban from going to the US is up next May. But anytime she wants to visit America, she will have to go through the American Embassy in Dublin and says she'll be lucky if she gets a two to three week visitor's visa.

O'Callaghan adores America but says that returning there, for a short visit, will be "bitter sweet. I have two good friends buried over there and there are friends that I never said goodbye to. There's a lot of unfinished business".

Frank stopped contacting her. The 'honeysuckle' in the title of the book refers to the emblematic flower of Nantucket where he had a house. That this glamorous former St Aloysius school girl ended up in handcuffs and behind bars was a source of amazement for her friends. "I'm known as the girl who can't go anywhere without my nail file."

Since returning to Cork, O'Callaghan was able to live on her savings for the past couple of years, allowing her to write her book. She now works in administration at EMC in Ovens. She didn't pay income tax in America as "it would have drawn attention to me. I know I broke the law. But did I hurt anyone? No. Did I ever get money from social welfare? No. I worked very hard for fifteen years. My apartment cost \$1,800 per month. It's all relative. You make money but you have high costs."

O'Callaghan may not have got her man but she has produced a book out of her experience and it's a page turner with a light touch.

"I have ideas for a second book," says the writer for whom truth really is stranger than fiction. **EW**

Honeysuckle to Handcuffs is available from Amazon and Kindle. For information on bookshops stocking the book, go to facebook.com/honeysuckletohandcuffs

