

'Memories that I thought were gone came flooding back'; She never intended to write a book, but Andrea Corr's memoir has delved deeply into her own life, unearthing, in the process, a singular voice that tells a tale both frighteningly honest and funny. She tells Liam Collins about being a people-pleaser and forcing herself to tell the truth

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Body

It is the writing and the searing honesty of Andrea Corr's Barefoot Pilgrimage that sets it apart from anything you are likely to encounter from someone who, to an outsider, has lived the dream of stardom and celebrity.

Beginning with the self-deprecating line: "I am a singer with a debilitating desire to be liked", she explains how she never set out to write a book, let alone allow readers to peer into the deep pools of her heart and soul and the various shades of darkness and light that have characterised her life so far.

As she peels back the layers of childhood and family life, from growing up in Dundalk, Co Louth, with its joys and disappointments, to the arenas of international fame and adulation, mixing with royalty - of the rock and roll variety and otherwise - you realise that this is so different and unexpected from someone who is famous.

It does not an attempt to tell in any narrative way the story of a troubled, spiritually aware, young Catholic girl from Dundalk who went on to front a family band that sold out stadiums and shifted tens of millions of records. That would have been a good story in itself, but Andrea Corr has dug so deeply into her own life that what she has unearthed is frighteningly honest, funny and unique.

It isn't even a memoir in the conventional sense, because she acknowledges that, in writing it, she fought and won a battle to stop herself "censoring" the thoughts and memories that lie so deep inside all of us; the things that family and friends often think, for the very best reasons, should remain hidden.

When she does delve into the darkness, there is an intensity that is shocking, but not in any way self-absorbed - just someone telling the world how she felt, rather than how it was.

In her book, she says: "For I meditate these days in a graveyard, when he is at work and the kids are at school. Hush. I think I may be a witch.

"Breathe into the yew tree and ask to hear the voices and absorb the stories that are told in tears now. Tears newly shed for all their silenced early pain. The dew on my evergreen branches.

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"Voices, my neighbour, the crow, describes as 'stilled'" The reason for the use of that word 'stilled' comes at the opening of the next chapter.

"I have miscarried five times. The first and second the most devastating, as I could not see yet what...who, I would later be blessed with. I walked and I prayed. And my mother-in-law, Pat (a blessing in herself) prayed and lit a candle for us every day. Torches and tallow lamps, often to 'the Little Flower' St Therese, for whom there is a shrine in the church of St Jean," Andrea writes.

As someone who has also felt the pain of a stillborn child and since found an affinity with old graveyards, I find myself appropriating her experience because her words articulate the sense of loss we all feel for what could have been; a feeling that you never completely get over.

Another voice Barefoot Pilgrimage is not all darkness, it is the story of someone who has found another voice, someone who happened to be a singer and songwriter and part of a family band that achieved international fame, and may not yet be finished with the long and winding road of rock and roll.

While changing direction to write what can only be described as an unconsciously literary work, Andrea has poured on to the pages her unique take on growing up in small-town, religious-obsessed Ireland and emerging from her chrysalis into a world where Mick Jagger and Ronnie Wood are looking on from the wings as she and The Corrs open for the Rolling Stones at some of the biggest rock venues in the world.

And that was only the beginning. When we meet in the kitchen of John Hughes's house in south Co Dublin, Andrea is as luminously beautiful in real life as she appears in the photographs I have seen of her over the years, on and off the stage. She is not wearing make-up, and is dressed in a plaid skirt and blouse. She drinks a cup of tea and gossips with the family, dangling her children, Jean and Brett, on her knee.

Our meeting is not a chance encounter, unlike my random association with Hughes - her manager and mentor. He first encountered the 15-year-old Andrea and her older siblings, Jim, Sharon and Caroline, when he was putting together the band for Alan Parker's film of Roddy Doyle's book *The Commitments*, back in Dublin in the early 1990s.

John - a musician himself - and I just kept bumping into one another, until one day on the Main Street of Dun Laoghaire, he handed me a copy of The Corrs' 2017 double album *Jupiter Calling*, with the command: "This is special. Have a listen and tell me what you think?" When we met again, we talked of other things, of people and books we liked and disliked. Later, he rang, and asked: "Will you come out to the house and read something for me?" Of course I would, I said, little thinking that I would be presented with a manuscript by Andrea Corr, the front cover of which was a self-portrait of a raggedy child with large, inquiring eyes.

Surrounded by platinum records celebrating the success of the band and sitting in front of an open fire, I read in enthralled silence the extraordinary story of a relatively ordinary Irish family living in a town where the familiar greeting is not 'Hello' or 'Hi', but 'Well'.

Andrea Corr describes how her parents, Gerry and Jean, met at a dance in the seaside village of Blackrock, Co Louth. They had two sons, Jim and Gerard, and the day they brought Sharon home, four-year-old Gerard ran on to the road outside their house and was killed by a car.

This is how the story opens - in tragedy. But then there is the sound of music and laughter with the arrival of the two younger Corrs, Caroline and Andrea, all four of them learning to play the piano from the age of six, listening to songs on the radio, singing together and on their own, and unconsciously laying the path for a future that had yet to unfold.

Most people now know where the story went - the triumphant family band playing their own blend of pop, rock and Celtic soul, which emulated The Beatles with chart success. But it is in the telling of that very personal family story that *Barefoot Pilgrimage* captures not only a unique family, but the story of a woman looking back to when she was

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a little girl. It explores the joys and sorrows, the tragedy and the awakening of a wide-eyed teenage girl called 'Pandy' by her father and 'Bosom' by her best friend, as she turned into a woman and an international star all at the same time.

Yes, I said, when I went back into Hughes's kitchen after that first read, this is enthralling, different perhaps from anything I have read, imbued with a singular style, an honesty that captures the joy and sorrow of growing up in a family at once ordinary and unique. It describes, in episodes of prose and poetry, the world Andrea saw through the prism of memory.

Chance meeting And through it all you can hear the music, echoing from her father and mother's band, The Sound Affair, through their early efforts - the chance meeting when Jim Corr brought his three gorgeous sisters to the auditions for The Commitments, and eventually the sound that took The Corrs from a modest home in Dundalk to some of the greatest concert venues in the world.

That is how Andrea and I ended up meeting back in the same sitting room in Hughes's house many months later to discuss a book that she has written and rewritten, and that will be published this week by HarperCollins. After a cup of tea, the children are parked in the adjoining sitting-room and Andrea explains how the ghosts of the family past became her book.

"It is quite strange. I didn't intend to write a book, it more or less happened two years after Dad died and 18 years after Mam," she explains. "You face your own mortality - I might die, too, and will the story die with us? The further away from the start and that house in Dundalk, the more remarkable it seems to me: the destiny of it all and the human love story. So I needed to write it down. Maybe it would never... I didn't think of it as a book, I just thought I needed to get it down."

Surprisingly, she tells me both her father and grandfather wrote memoirs that she came across in the aftermath of her father's death.

"My grandfather's was called *The Life & Times of James Corr*. He lived through the Boer War, the War of Independence and the Civil War, and it was just his memories; he did it for his grandchildren. He wasn't a warm person as I remember, so mine are very different. I always felt somebody needed to do it and that was what prompted me to start writing. I read so much; I love books. I read all the time, and on holidays I was sitting there thinking, 'Maybe I could do it - maybe I could write a book'."

Andrea was born on the day of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings, May, 17, 1974, the worst of the many atrocities that characterised the Troubles of that recent era.

Thirty-three people were killed by Loyalist bombs that day, in an act of terrorism that still remains largely unexplained. She describes how her father-in-law, the businessman Dermot Desmond, was walking along North Earl Street intending to stop and buy something for his wife, but for some reason he kept going and was turning on to Amiens Street when the bomb went off.

Andrea and her family grew up with the Troubles, and indeed it was more familiar to them than most, living as they did in the town of Dundalk, just across the Border; a haven for gunmen and conspirators who had fled or been driven from the North, and were waiting and plotting a vengeful return.

Dangerous people roamed the streets of what became known, among journalists at least, as El Paso, a reference to the lawless frontier town from cowboy movies. This was where Dominic 'Mad Dog' McGlinchey lived and died, and it was also familiar territory to Dessie 'The Border Fox' O'Hare, and others.

That made Dundalk very different from most Irish towns, although growing up there might not have seemed all that different to teenagers, with their self-absorbed concerns and self-contained lives. In *Barefoot Pilgrimage* Andrea writes, "I am back in Dundalk, that choppy haired, blood-lipped, slip, red bra and Doc Marten boots time."

She and her best friend called each other Bosom: "Let's just say that she alone grew into our name."

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Her father Gerry played the organ every Sunday in the Redeemer church in Dundalk. It doesn't seem so long ago, but 1970s and 1980s Ireland was a place where almost every family went to Mass together every Sunday, apart from their two-week annual holiday in Skerries.

But just in case you think the Corr children were precocious and ambitious like the Jacksons or the Osmonds, Andrea recalls singing Oh Holy Night at home and agreeing to sing it in church on Christmas morning as her father played the organ. But last-minute nerves intervened. "I couldn't do it," she writes. "I was so gently let off the hook. But I knew he was disappointed. It would have been a beautiful moment for him, I think now, when I imagine myself some day with my own child."

There wasn't anything literary about their home, yet Andrea grew up loving language and surprising herself by getting an honour in English in her Leaving Cert. She had a hankering to study English and drama, but events, like becoming the lead singer in one of the biggest bands in the world, intervened.

Now, without trying to sound literary or erudite, she references Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* when I ask about the actual physical writing of the book.

"Since I've had the children, I've found a 'room of one's own' is when I get out for a walk. I walked fast and summoned up pictures, and once I started, thoughts just came, impulses and memories that I thought were gone came flooding back.

Memories "I could see the bedspread. I felt let into this room of the past. I do feel, to my mind... I have faith that I was assisted by Mum and Dad - they helped me. I felt, really, some of the memories are unsettling, but it is great when they were funny. It is the funny stuff that gets you thinking about the sad stuff; it really always comes."

Yet when you are reading these memories, apart from the heartbreak of little Gerard and of Andrea's miscarriages, there is laughter and fun, and huge success with the band that seemed to come out of nowhere, but was carefully plotted with some lucky breaks along the way - like being taken on by the legendary Canadian music producer David Foster.

"My husband [Brett Desmond] said: 'How can you write a book?' but it all came quite naturally, none of it was laboured. I found my way through it and when something got difficult, I moved from prose to poetry. What I love about a book is going into somebody else's head. I love it when you don't get things at first and then you work it out and it's like, 'I have you now'.

"I am very aware that lots of singers are trying to please people - it's known as 'singeritis' - and I have found it's part of my personality, and one of the things that makes me smile when I am happy.

"For that reason, I had to make sure I would not censor it, I would tell the truth. People react to that - when we hear a real story, we know it's true."

To get to that point, Andrea had to get rid of what she calls the "armour" that we all build around ourselves, to protect ourselves, but often to conceal who we really are.

"As time went on and as I wrote, I got more and more comfortable telling the truth. It gets easier, and the initial fear of censorship, self-censorship, 'how will it appear' is the enemy. As time went on, I realised, 'I am writing this to strangers that I am so grateful for'. When I started, I didn't realise that what I am writing about happened, and I realised, 'Oh, I discovered it through the writing and then I discovered that it is a love letter to strangers of sorts'. Our audience, that loved us, got to the soul of the stranger. That is the poetry of human experience, reaching out to somebody you don't know, the love of a stranger."

The deep pools of Andrea's eyes lead into the deep pools of her mind, and you wonder about the girl who started playing music with the family band, and played the part of Sharon Rabbitte in the film *The Commitments* at the age of 17. At 21, she was singing The Corrs' hit *Runaway* as lead vocalist in a band that had the biggest-selling album of

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1998, and became the first band since The Beatles to have the number-one (Talk on Corners) and the number-two position (Forgiven not Forgotten) at the top of the British album charts at the same time.

Now here she is reflecting on a voyage of discovery that has led to Barefoot Pilgrimage. She recalls reaching "the point of self doubt" which is basically the moment when writers think what they have done is not worth it; at least, not worth publishing for others to read.

"I came to doubt myself, I thought to myself, 'This isn't a book. What is this? This is crap'," she explains about her early struggles with earlier drafts. "I sat down and continued the book I was reading, 4321 by Paul Auster, and this is bonkers, he was talking about how the character needed to be a writer, and it gave me the confidence to continue. He talked about Crime & Punishment and Dickens and how he discovered that this is what he had to be to be a writer. It felt like a prompt."

This got me thinking: here is this amazingly successful woman and, just for a moment, I forgot how deep down she has burrowed into the realities of her life as 'Pandy', the daughter of Gerry and Jean Corr. She is someone from a small town on the Irish Border who has had an incredibly successful career in a very tough business, and still remains beautiful and normal.

And I ask, yes, but how much did you really reveal about yourself? "I wrote about my miscarriages," she says, looking at me flinty-eyed, daring me to reply to that. But there is no reply. That is going deep into your own pain, and most of us want to avoid that.

"I want dignity in my writing. It isn't salacious; there is personal stuff, but the most intimate is telling the absolute truth about childhood memories.

"I feel very contented, that is the truth. I feel it is how I wanted it to be," she says about the book. "I feel strangers will love it. It is very much about gratitude, the life I have had and the strangers I have met along the way. It is really about gratitude, it is really about grief, but it is in grief that you find love."

The writing also came from travelling the world with The Corrs. "Every day there is something worth writing about in your diary, every day is really eventful, and as we got older, it gets less eventful. I am a person who does a lot and does not sit still."

Head held high She also recognises that as she gets older, she gets a little bit more like her own parents. As she writes in Barefoot Pilgrimage: "I bring Jeanie and Brett to Sunday Mass too, like Daddy did us. I am not quite as gothic nor as troubled. And my head is held high because I can't blame God for human fallibility, and if I lost Him, would that not be the greatest casualty? I am afraid it would be for me. Because the truth is, I feel something in churches."

Looking at the manuscript, I'm intrigued by the drawing of the young Andrea. Who did it, I ask? She did it herself.

"I was watching Making A Murderer and it was something to get over it. I drew myself as a child. One eye looks older, but that little girl is who I am, that is the truth of me, that is who is telling the story, that is who I find again, meet again."

And we stop talking about the book. It will now have to speak for itself.

She tells me she and the family are moving back to Ireland after living in Washington DC and, more recently, London.

"Yes, we're moving back here, and the kids will go to school in Dublin. I had always wanted to do that. I know the welcome we have as Irish all over the world. I want our children to have that, too; there is something special about being Irish."

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And what about writing, is that the future for Andrea Corr? Has she said everything that needs to be said in Barefoot Pilgrimage or is it the start of another journey for the slip of a girl from Dundalk who is now a loving mother of two? "I don't know," she answers, "I don't have any idea."

Reading the book, you get the feeling that, like a lot of pilgrims, Andrea Corr will continue the quest, through words or music, and perhaps through both.

'Barefoot Pilgrimage: A Memoir by Andrea Corr' is published by HarperCollins FASHION Cover and this page: Top, The Kooples, Brown Thomas Page 13: Cape; dress, both Andrea's own Page 14: Top; skirt, both Helen Cody Page 15: Jumper, Lucy Nagle, Brown Thomas. Skirt, Helen Cody Opposite page: Dress, Maje, Brown Thomas THE TEAM Photography by Kip Carroll Styling by Chloe Brennan Make-up by Alyson Smyth, see www.alysonmakeup.ie or email info@alysonmakeup.com STOCKISTS Helen Cody, email helencody@gmail.com to book an appointment LOCATION Shot at Pete's of Sandymount, 7 Sandymount Green, D4, tel: (01) 260-2956 Pete's is an Italian restaurant and pizzeria that offers American-style dining in the heart of Sandymount

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