

Lies of Little Miss Misery - memoir of abused girl is a fake, says new investigation

By HERMANN KELLY

Her memoir of a childhood destroyed by cruelty and fear was a publishing phenomenon. In fact, as this investigation reveals, Kathy O'Beirne had cynically made it all up...

Within her bestselling memoir, a harrowing tale of childhood brutality and sexual abuse, Kathy O'Beirne claims: "The Devil himself could not have dreamed up a better hell."

And, at first glance, one would have to agree.

Ms O'Beirne, who was brought up just outside Dublin, reveals in lurid detail the years she spent as a slave to sadistic nuns in the notorious Magdalene laundries, how she was raped there by two priests, gave birth at the age of 13, how nuns sold babies born at the laundries and how she had her hand thrust into boiling fat by her alcoholic father.

Her heart-rending account has become the most successful non-fiction book ever written by an Irish writer, with almost 400,000 copies sold, and has made the author an icon among other abuse victims.

But today I can reveal that the Devil may not have been involved in creating this publishing phenomenon at all.

For the hell evoked in Kathy's Story: Don't Ever Tell appears to have been dreamed up by the author.

My year-long investigation into Ms O'Beirne's oft-repeated claims has found compelling evidence that her book is based on little more than fantasy, and certainly not on events in her own life.

According to official records and eyewitness statements, Kathy O'Beirne was never in a Magdalene laundry - institutions run by the Roman Catholic church to house "fallen women" and unmarried mothers, who were required to undertake hard physical labour such as laundry work.

The daughter she claims she bore at the age of 13 did not exist. And a priest who allegedly raped and beat her suffered from such severe arthritis he could not even shake hands.

Moreover, I have discovered that she tried to bribe a friend to be a "witness" to a rape that never happened, and has threatened to have those who challenge her account "dealt with".

My new book reveals how this deeply disturbed former psychiatric patient, who has a criminal record for dishonesty, "stole" other people's life stories and used the plot of a film to concoct a heartrending past and lucrative future for herself.

And she has not finished yet. The high-profile author, who is a regular on chat shows, is planning a second volume of memoirs and has accused four more men - three priests and a police sergeant - of raping or sexually abusing her.

It is hardly surprising that she is tempted to write a second instalment, for as the publishing world knows, misery sells.

The doyen of the genre, Dave Pelzer, of *A Child Called It* fame, is a multi-millionaire, having sold more than 3.5million of his books in the UK alone.

And despite some high-profile hoaxes, including James Frey's account of his drug addiction *A Million Little Pieces*, 30 per cent of the non-fiction paperback chart in any given week are "real life" accounts of neglect and sexual violence.

Kathy's Story has already made her Edinburgh-based publisher, Mainstream, an estimated £1.5million while the author is said to have received a £20,000 advance.

But soon after the publication of her book in 2005, the first cracks appeared in the intricate edifice she had constructed.

It started with her assertion, in the first line of the book, that she was in her 40s, and her later claim that she was adopted and unrelated by blood to her eight brothers and sisters.

Her outraged family produced Ms O'Beirne's birth certificate which showed she was in fact 50, and the natural child of Oliver and Anne O'Beirne.

They also claimed their father, a builder's labourer who went to Mass every day, was a caring man who had never tortured their sister.

This was swiftly followed by a statement from the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of High Park, who ran the Magdalene laundry identified by Ms O'Beirne.

They "categorically denied" that she spent any time in the laundries or related institutions, and insisted "no child was ever born in any of our premises".

The author, who produced her book with co-writer Michael Sheridan, angrily dismissed these challenges, claiming she had documents, including her daughter's birth certificate, to back up her shocking story.

"Of course I have proof," she told one journalist.

"I'm not one bit confused. I'm calling them liars. I never had an issue with people believing me. There are hundreds of people out there who know what happened to me.

"Of course I have all the proof I need. The best wine is kept till last." Another journalist, who asked to see this "proof", was told he would be "dealt with".

In a taped conversation, Ms O'Beirne is heard to say: "Well, I can guarantee you that I have a letter stating from the nuns that I was in the Magdalene laundries and their care."

She later adds: "I have to be honest with you and you can print this in your paper. If anything happens to anyone connected to me I will have you dealt with. And I mean that. And you ask anyone that. I will have you dealt with and so will the 300 of my followers."

Strangely, despite her protestations, no evidence has ever been produced.

However, the documents and testimony that I have gathered prove definitively that Ms O'Beirne's claims are false.

School records show that she spent the years 1961 to June 1969 in Scoil Mhuire, her local national school in the village of Clondalkin, which she left at the age of 12.

This starkly contradicts the author's claim that she spent two years in a reformatory school (from the age of eight), two years in a public psychiatric hospital (from the age of ten) and finally entered a Magdalene laundry in High Park, Dublin (aged 12).

The only significant period of time that Ms O'Beirne was not in Scoil Mhuire was a six-week period at the age of 11 which she spent in St Anne's Reformatory School in Kilmacud in 1967, an absence fully accounted for in her school records.

Ms O'Beirne claims she must have been registered at the laundries under a false name.

But members of the Justice for Magdalenes group, which is seeking to get compensation for former inmates, have confirmed that her account of her alleged years with the nuns is "factually wrong".

Claire McGettrick, the group's spokeswoman, said: "Kathy does not speak or sound, in what she says, like a 'Magdalene'.

"Concerning Magdalenes, it takes one to know one. We were also aware that information she spoke of about the High Park building was factually wrong. The physical layout of the grounds she gave, for example, was wrong."

Astonishingly, she added: "While the Justice for Magdalenes committee has been aware for some time that there were holes or flaws in Kathy's history, we have chosen not to engage in attacks or public rebuttals out of respect not only for what Kathy believes is the truth, but for the survivors and victims of both Magdalene laundries and other institutions."

Lorraine King, 53, who worked alongside the 70 women in that particular Magdalene laundry in the early 1970s, when Ms O'Beirne said she was there, has no such compunctions.

She said Ms O'Beirne's descriptions of the daily life and physical layout of High Park were woefully inaccurate, concluding that the book "has not been written by someone who has been there".

She cites as an example, the author's words: "The first thing I noticed while driving up to the convent that day was a beautiful grotto to Our Lady on the left-hand side. Up from that was a church, a large red-brick building with big bars on the windows."

At the time Ms O'Beirne was writing about, there was a large building in front of the grotto which blocked it from sight. Only in recent years could the author have seen the view she depicts.

Even the use of Ms O'Beirne's language in her book jars with genuine former inmates. She calls the women who worked there "Maggies".

According to Ms King, the women were never referred to as "Maggies". This was a term used by local people.

"We called them 'Penitents' and the nuns called them 'the women'," said Ms King.

If Kathy O'Beirne was never at the Magdalene laundries, what credence can be given to her claims that, while there, she was raped by priests and gave birth at the age of 13 to a daughter, Kelly Anne or "Annie", who was taken away from her by the nuns?

Despite her claim to have a copy of the child's birth certificate, there is no official record of a child born to Ms O'Beirne.

Neither is there a death certificate to back up the author's claim that her daughter died at the age of ten. Officially, "Annie" never existed.

Ms O'Beirne later claimed to have had a second child, who died at birth. Again there is no evidence of this baby's existence.

One of her oldest friends, Margaret Power, a 48-year-old hairdresser living in London, is outraged by the claims.

She said Ms O'Beirne has never been pregnant and revealed that her former friend planned to write about the second alleged child in her sequel to Kathy's Story.

Mrs Power said: "You just don't know what she is going to come up with in her second book, given what was in the first one.

"She said she was going to mention a second baby. But she didn't even have one baby, never mind a second. I would remember if she was pregnant."

Chillingly, the author tried to persuade her former friend she was telling the truth by taking her to Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin to show her where her children were buried.

"We were standing at this monument thing and I asked her to show me the baby's name and she said she didn't bother getting the engraving done. I said: 'You're an awful liar.'

"There was no first baby, there was no second baby. These stories are all absolute lies."

Mrs Power claims she was also asked to commit perjury for her childhood friend.

The hairdresser alleges Kathy O'Beirne approached her in 2005 with an astonishing proposition: if she would lie about witnessing Kathy being raped by a priest in 1969, she would give her a half-share in a bungalow.

A horrified Mrs Power told me: "O'Beirne asked me to lie and act as a false witness that I had seen her being raped by a priest of the Dublin Diocese. I refused to do so. I said to her: 'I most certainly will not. That is just lies.'"

"She did say there would be a few bob in it for me. She is money-mad. She said she would get us a bungalow if I lied for her. But there is no way I would do that."

Ms O'Beirne had already named the priest, who has left the Church and is now married, to the police and the archdiocese of Dublin in 2004.

She had also accused three other members of the clergy of rape and a police sergeant of sexual abuse.

One of the accused priests was Father Fergal O'Connor, a highly respected university lecturer in political science and a founder of Sherrard House Hostel, a haven for homeless girls.

O'Beirne claimed he not only raped and beat her up, but also that he drove students from a seminary to the hostel so they could gang-rape her.

What she does not mention is that Fr O'Connor, 77, was crippled by arthritis from his early 20s and was "a quivering mass of pain, day in and day out" according to those who knew him.

Finola Bruton, wife of former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton and friend of the priest, said: "He could not even shake hands because of the pain that squeezing his hand would cause.

"Instead, he just put out one finger to hold. I subsequently learned that he suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis from his early 20s."

Fr O'Connor was told he had been exonerated just before his death in September 2005, but friends say he was destroyed by the accusations.

Now, Dublin Diocese Child Protection Service and the police have investigated Ms O'Beirne's latest claims, and her former friend Margaret Power has been extensively interviewed by the authorities.

Ms Power said: "I am definite, there is no way that priest abused her. No way. And I will not stand in a court in Dublin and lie for her. The allegations against the three priests are absolute lies."

The reasons behind Ms O'Beirne's decision to produce her flawed memoirs may simply be a troubled mind.

Her family has said: "Our sister has a self-admitted psychiatric and criminal history, and her perception of reality has always been flawed. This has presented great problems for us, her family, our neighbours, and friends.

"This woman has broken our hearts, especially the hearts of our now deceased parents, with her behaviour in the past."

But there is a suspicion among some who know her that the financial rewards may have tempted her. After all, she has earned a fat advance from her publishers and will continue earning as the book goes on selling.

She has also benefited from the thousands of pounds being handed out by the Irish authorities to the victims of child abuse in state institutions.

Crucially, the scheme does not require "strict proof, adversarial justice or courtroom procedures of abuse before paying out up to £200,000 to "victims".

By the time the scheme closed, at the end of December 2006, an astonishing 14,540 applications were being processed.

Women who grew up with Ms O'Beirne believe she has cashed in by inventing a past from the stories she heard from others.

One woman, who did not wish to be identified, claimed that her former friend watched the 2002 film *The Magdalene Sisters*, a portrayal of abuse suffered by "fallen women" in the laundries, and now "seems to think it's her".

Another, Mary Lavin, distinctly recalls that Ms O'Beirne used to ask the girls living at the innercity Sherrard Street Hostel about their life stories and would write them down and keep them on record.

DUBLINER Celine Dempsey, 47, who also knew Ms O'Beirne, added: "These things did not happen to Kathy. Kathy took other people's stories, put them together and embellished them a lot."

The result is a series of lives cruelly ruined by false allegations.

As Mrs Power says: "She has to be stopped, for she will keep on going and going. She has hurt a lot of people. A few things will never be put to right. Never. Is there nothing that can be done about this rubbish being published?"

It is a question the publishers of "misery lit" may wish to ask themselves before the next raft of hellish childhood remembrances hit the shelves.

Extracted by Fiona Barton from Kathy's Real Story by Hermann Kelly, published by Prefect Press on Monday at £9.99. To order a copy call 0845 606 4206.