



I believe in angels: Lorna Byrne, author of *Angels in My Hair*, in the grounds of St Patricks College, Maynooth, Co Kildare.

Photograph: Frank Miller

Where no angels fear to tread

By RÓISÍN INGLE

BEING THERE: Ever since she was a child, Lorna Byrne has believed she is surrounded by angels, which have guided her through her life and now have made her a bestselling author

When Lorna Byrne tells you there's an angel at your shoulder you find yourself turning to look into thin air. "There's an angel beside you now," she says, a few minutes after we meet in her beautiful home in the grounds of a country estate in Co Kildare. "Two of them just walked across the room and there's one angel beside your shoulder and he's kind of trying to make you laugh." To this mere mortal the room appears utterly devoid of angels or any other supernatural entities. Laugh? A polite, possibly deranged-looking, smile is all I can muster.

This lack of proof positive hasn't stopped Random House publishing her "true story" book *Angels In My Hair* here, in the UK and, next month, in Australia. While accusations

of delusion or duplicity will surely come, plenty believe in the experiences outlined in her memoir, which, with barely any advance publicity, is number three on the Irish bestsellers' list. In it she recounts decades of angel experiences, God visitations, premonitions and encounters with the spirits of dead people, each story more incredible than the last.

LORNA SAYS THE book is only a fraction of her experiences and that there is much more to come. Her publishers must be delighted. Earlier this year the 54-year-old Dubliner - or "modern day Irish mystic", as the book cover describes her - sat down in a boardroom in New York with one of the most influential book publishers in the world. Steve Rubin of Doubleday, the publisher behind Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, was seriously interested in the US rights to her book but needed her to be more flexible about one sticky part of the deal.

During the meeting, Lorna had a quick consultation with the angels because she has been taking their counsel all her life. After a few moments, she informed Steve Rubin that the angels were telling her not to budge on this part of the negotiation.

"The angels are saying it needs to be this way," she told him. "Lorna," the exasperated Rubin replied, "could the angels be wrong?" The quietly confident answer was, "No". And that's how, in the only publishing deal partly brokered by celestial beings, the mother-of-four landed an undisclosed six-figure advance from Doubleday, which early next year will publish her book in the US.

Either her good fortune is down to a canny publishing industry desperate for the next lucrative self-help phenomenon - Judith Curr, the publisher behind *The Secret*, was one of the other publishers competing for the book - or Lorna's angels are, as you might expect, proving themselves experts in the field of miracle work.

Even she would agree that the publication of her angel-packed memoir, charting her impoverished early life in Dublin and her even more impoverished married life in Co Kildare, cannot be pinned on the book's literary merit. *Angels In My Hair* is written in a style so basic it could be read by your average eight-year-old. Lorna explains the angels wanted it to be as "accessible" as possible. This may be why the book carries endorsements by celebrities including Jim Corr, Daniel O'Donnell and William Roache, the actor who plays Ken Barlow in *Coronation Street*.

Some will struggle to believe the stories in the book: when she was a little girl, an angel revealed a vision of her future husband Joe, but said they would not grow old together due to his illness and early death, a scenario which eventually unfolded; after the Dublin bombings in 1974 she was transported from the department store where she worked to the scene of the carnage. There, she says, in spirit form, she helped victims and watched as their souls left their bodies. There are also anecdotes detailing her near-death experience during a miscarriage and an encounter with Satan which she says was instigated by God as a kind of "test". She says she sees not only the souls of people but their physical ailments and that she will often be told how long a person has to live.

FOR THIS READER she is more convincing in person than through the pages of the book. Softly spoken, with brown hair pulled back in a scrunchie and a simple gold crucifix at her neck, she looks at least 10 years younger than her 54 years. Tiny in height and build, she sits straight-backed and occasionally gazes into space at things the rest of us can't see. There is something endearingly childlike about her demeanour.

She says that she has been seeing angels with names like Hosus, Elijah and Michael for "as long as I can remember" and that when she was a small child they told her she would one day write a book. Several years ago she met a woman called Jean Callanan, a former marketing executive with companies such as Unilever and Waterford Crystal - people like Jean have been coming to Lorna for healing and blessings for 20 years. Lorna told Jean that one day she would help put the book together and find a publisher.

"I gave her my card and thought nothing more of it," laughs Jean, who these days, in addition to her own marketing consultancy work, is the modern-day mystic's personal assistant, agent, publicist and general right-hand woman.

"Then one day she rang me and just said 'are you ready?' and now here I am," she says, as though she can't quite believe it herself.

Jean has been working one day a week, for no payment, with Lorna for the past three years. You discover this kind of thing happens a lot. The home Lorna currently lives in is on loan to her and she has another house in Co Kilkenny which was also a donation. Lorna says a high-profile firm of accountants is currently looking after her financial affairs, again for no fee.

What makes her book even more incredible is the fact that Lorna has limited reading and writing skills. Most of the book was dictated onto tapes until somebody gave her a present of a voice-activated computer.

THE BOOK BEGINS with the story of how, when she was two years old, doctors told her parents she was retarded. She says she grew up in two worlds: "the human, material world, and the world of angels and spirits. It was difficult growing up being ignored by teachers in school but the angels taught me things so I could cope. They also told me to keep them a secret, later I realised that this was because if I told people what I saw I would have been locked away."

She describes angels as "beautiful creatures", and says they are universal entities, with no ties to any particular religion. Some people, she suggests, might be more comfortable describing them as "a higher wisdom" or an "gut instinct", an inner-voice urging you to, say, turn right instead of left, which if heeded can have positive results.

"They have represented themselves as angels to me, probably because I was brought up in the Catholic religion, but they are there for people of all religions and none," she says. "They are neither male nor female but can appear as both when they take human form,

the brightness and colours of them are wonderful but they aren't like our colours. Every single person has a guardian angel, they never leave you. There are also teacher angels who support you. Sometimes I see an elderly person walking along and their angel is supporting them and I know that without the angels' help they wouldn't be able to walk so well."

She is, it has to be said, an unusual person, with a calm and peaceful presence. Her eyes move around as she speaks, like a parent engaging you in conversation while keeping an eye on her children. She says she hopes the book will encourage people to listen to their angels more. A blonde woman walks into the hotel lounge where we have gone for coffee and then quickly leaves. "When she walked in I could see her angel ushering her out of the room. She was listening to her angel and she didn't even know it," she says. Later, when we are walking in the grounds of Maynooth College, where she has had many spiritual experiences, she sees "streamers" of light energy coming from plants and trees and points to a man in a green jacket and says that he has "a deformity in his back, he will have a hump in 20 years, I am just praying now to the angels for him".

Does the inevitable scorn of sceptics scare her? "I have no doubt and no fear. It doesn't bother me what people say. I don't have a need to prove anything . . . if angels or souls were in my imagination I could never have touched people. Neighbours have told me that they saw me walking with a man when I was actually with an angel, so in that way the angels allowed me to know it wasn't in my imagination," she says.

I tell her that if the angels were really clever they would give this journalist a sign. She just laughs and says, "I do sometimes wish they would give mankind proof, maybe something fabulous in the sky, but nobody can tell God or the angels what to do".

SHE SOMETIMES STRUGGLES with the enormity of her experiences. "To me, I am just ordinary and I don't know why I was chosen and I just feel so privileged and humbled," she says. "Many times as a child I argued with the angels. Why me? Why didn't you pick someone better? Someone well educated with more power in the world to help. I don't know why they chose me, I still have that argument with them. I even laugh today about the book. I say, 'have I really done that?' It's amazing to me. I feel amazed when theologians and people have come from places like Oxford to ask me questions of spirit and I am given the knowledge to answer their questions, I never even went to secondary school, but that's the way it is."

Is she on a mission?

"I feel my role here is to let people know that we don't die, it's only your body that dies, your soul goes to heaven. I think I am here to give people hope and courage to live life. We are all looking for hope or belief that we are not just flesh and blood, rotting in the ground when we die. We want to have faith that we have more, that we have a soul. Well I know this to be true and the angels told me write the book so people can connect more with them and with their souls," she says.

Whatever about getting your head around the details, nobody is going to argue with her underlying message of love and compassion and forgiveness and her hopes for "peace among nations and peace in families".

Spending time with her is both challenging and inspirational. I say goodbye reluctantly and all the way home I keep thinking about that Hamlet quote, that there's "more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy". Is Lorna Byrne telling the truth? Well, she's telling her truth. It may or may not be yours.

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