

Marian Keyes, 49, is the author of 11 books, including *Saved By Cake* – her account of her battle with depression, and her latest novel, *The Mystery Of Mercy Close* (Penguin). She and Tony Baines, 50, have been married for 18 years, and live in Dún Laoghaire, near Dublin.

Marian says...

I fancied Tony before I met him. My flatmate in London at the time, Suzanne, worked with him at Hammersmith and Fulham Council, where he worked in IT, and she used to talk about him.

She said he was really brainy – and that he liked Irish things, for example, music by Irish folk singer Christy Moore. As an Irish person in London, I always felt that Irish things were a bit rubbish – so I was touched that he would like them.

The first time I saw him was on his 30th birthday at his flat. We didn't even speak. There wasn't an eyes-meeting-across-a-crowded-room moment. We got to know each other slowly as friends.

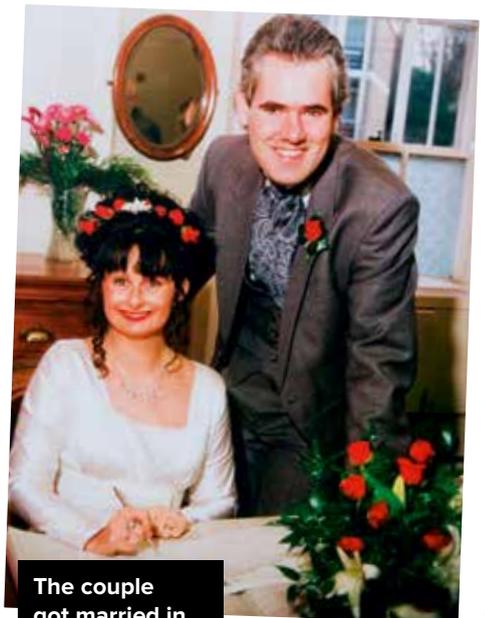
Part way through the friendship, I went into rehab and stopped drinking. When I came back, I had to change everything – no more pubs and no more drinking. I couldn't go out with the same people >>

'When I had a breakdown, Tony saved me'



INSIDE A MARRIAGE

Bestselling novelist Marian Keyes and her husband, Tony Baines, tell Victoria Young about the best of times – and the worst



The couple got married in Ireland in 1995

any more. I was raw and vulnerable, and searching for a different way to live. Tony and I would go to the pictures together or for dinner. I talked to him about it all and he was very gentle and really understanding.

He had known me during the worst of my drinking and seen how messy I was. I'm grateful for that as I've nothing to hide. There is no monster in me locked in a box. He saw that part of me and loved me still, which made it easier for me to love myself.

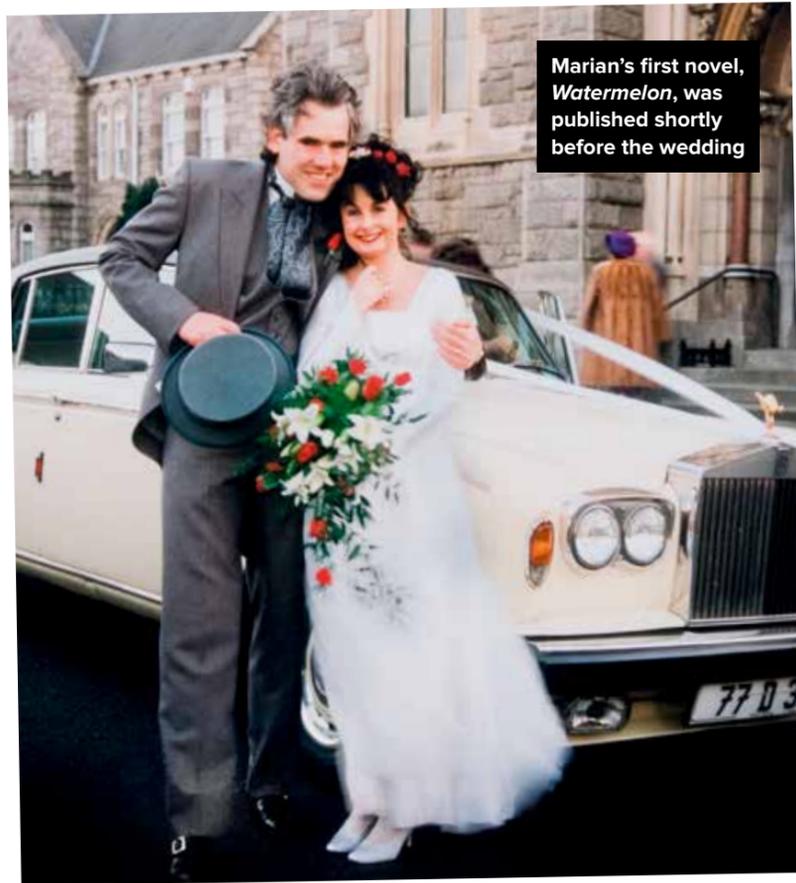
At first I was glad he was a friend. I was giving myself time – which I had never done before. I was 30, and had no idea what a mature relationship was. I thought it should be about wild passion. God knows where I got that from: my parents are more than 50 years married and harmonious, but my previous relationships were all intense arguments, doors slamming and passionate reunions. None of them had worked out. Big surprise, there!

The previous me – the drinking me – would have found him too dull, too reliable, too kind. But I'd realised there had to be a friendship too. Then one day it hit me. I was waiting for him after work one day. It had just rained and I was looking at a park full of dripping leaves and it was beautiful. Then he came around the corner and I thought, "Oh My God." That was it.

It sounds like something out of a book by Jane Austen. I told him my feelings for him had changed. Immediately we were very together and from then on I was committed. We got engaged three months later. Tony is so much nicer than I am and brings out the best in me. I put myself out there, but Tony is more private; more hesitant. The difference is important. I couldn't be with another tormented artist. It wouldn't work.

I find being alive challenging and he's incredibly good at calming me. He always gives a logical answer to my dramas. More than that, he makes me laugh like no one else can.

He's not into romantic gestures, but, if I need anything, he's there. He doesn't buy me flowers, but he got a butterfly stencil and put butterflies on my Fiat 500 as a surprise, and I love it. And he bought me my own fly spray for the bedroom, where I work, as there were flies everywhere and they were bothering me. Now I can have



Marian's first novel, *Watermelon*, was published shortly before the wedding

the windows open. That's romance! And I'll buy him potassium as he gets cramp when he runs, and cheese as he likes it.

After I had my breakdown four years ago, our lives fell off a cliff. Everything changed – and everything stopped. I was due to go on a tour of the US, which Tony sensibly cancelled. We had endless time where I was trying not to kill myself and he was in bits.

It was horrible for him. But he was absolutely wonderful and stayed calm

– even though he was terrified – which was the most important thing anyone could have done. He made sure I got all the psychiatric and psychological help I could get. He was the only one who made me feel okay. He said, "We will get through today. We will get through the next hour." He was great at small suggestions, such as "Let's watch *Four In A Bed*" [a Channel 4 show about bed and breakfast businesses]. That took my mind off things and, in that hour, something changed.

But I kept asking him to leave. I'd say, "Please go and meet somebody else

because I'm never going to be normal again and I can't bear to ruin your life too." It was a very rough time, but he had more faith than me that I'd get better.

I went into hospital a couple of times and just the vision of him walking down the ward at visiting time makes me cry. He was coming home to an empty house, but he never, ever made it about him, which was very generous and mature. I often think about how I'd have been if the roles had been reversed – would I have been able to be that mature? I hope I would.

We developed different ways of coping. Before things went horribly wrong, Tony was fit. Now he is super fit. He runs up mountains and has crampons – and an ice axe! I baked manically for a year. Then I got mildly obsessed with nails and Shellac and glitter. I was boring him so much that he

Change one thing about Tony?

Irish people talk a lot faster, so when we are out I sometimes feel sorry for him when everybody is talking over each other. I wish he could speak faster for his own conversational pleasure!

"He is nicer than me, and makes me laugh like no one else can"

said, "I could handle the cakes, but I don't think I can handle the nails!"

We are both lucky and unlucky not to have children, so the only people we have to take care of financially are ourselves. We wanted children and tried everything, bar IVF, but reached a point when we decided we had so much and nobody gets everything. It's a big sadness. Tony would have been a wonderful father. But we have nieces, nephews and godchildren. It took years to accept, but that ship has sailed, and I rarely feel sad about it now.

Tony has always been the quiet, supportive person who never gets the credit he should. But we are a team and I couldn't have had the success I've had without him. At times, he's felt overlooked. One year I had a dinner to thank everyone – editor, publisher, sales team, agent – who had worked on my last book. And he said afterwards, "I was the only person who wasn't acknowledged." I felt dreadful. That never happened again. He works harder than any of us and my publishers know how valuable his input is.

I turn 50 on 10 September and I am celebrating at Pizza Express with my parents, nephews, Tony and friend Eileen. I couldn't take the pressure of a party.

Since my breakdown, we've struggled to find a way of living that works and to find a path through this new landscape. But – although I'm afraid of tempting fate by saying this – I really, really love Tony and our life together is everything I could ever have hoped for.

Tony says...

My memory of Marian coming to my party was mainly this vague awareness of Irish beauty, but we didn't talk.

We got to know each other gradually and, pretty quickly, I knew she was the most special person I'd ever met. Apart from just fancying her, I loved her humour, her intelligence and her wisdom.

After she came out of rehab, we got more friendly. I knew I wanted to go out with her, but I was prepared to wait. And as soon as we were together, I felt happiness. Simple as that. We are well suited. She is vastly more intelligent than I am, which I like. And she gets my sense of humour, which is quite dry.

I proposed after we'd been together for three months. It was 19 December 1994 – just before Marian went back to Ireland for Christmas. It wasn't planned – I just realised how much I was going to miss her.

We got married soon afterwards in Ireland. We aren't conventional people, but we thought we might as well do it by the book. Marian had her Grannie's ring as her wedding ring and we honeymooned in Jamaica. We had a fabulous trip, although Marian spent a lot of time working on her second novel. She still had the day job, so this was too much free time to ignore.

Our lives are so different from what we would have imagined because of the work

thing. It all happened organically, which is lucky, as it would have been a difficult decision to make. But after we moved to Ireland things took off and there was a lot of administrative work: organising book tours, contracts, acting as her secretary and doing general admin. There was never any discussion about getting anyone else to do it and it works well.

Anything work related is Marian's decision.

I will advise, but she is the boss; in fact, possibly not just with work! But with non-work stuff, there is more discussion. If I do feel I am in her shadow, it is not a problem. I'm

not someone who wants the limelight.

I try to make Marian's life as nice and as easy for her as possible. There aren't many big gestures, but I make her breakfast every day, no matter what.

We work well together as a team. I do all the boring stuff – such as making sure we have all the paperwork if we're travelling – and Marian is far better than I am at dealing with people.

And we have the same approach to life. Neither of us is ever late and I can't think of any time we've argued about money – although Marian was more cautious about borrowing for a mortgage than me.

The past few years have been difficult, but that never caused the slightest threat to our relationship, certainly from my side. I am fundamentally optimistic so I thought things would be fine, which made it easier to focus on getting through each day.

The biggest difficulty was that Marian is my best friend and the person I talk to about everything. But there were times when, obviously, I couldn't talk to her about how I was feeling. Luckily, I have friends and family who were there for me.

Perhaps because of Marian's breakdown, I can't think when we last had a row. We had the odd one in the past, but knowing how bad things can be means other things are less important and we can focus on enjoying the good times. **w&h**

Change one thing about Marian?

Nothing. Other than I'd like her to be happier – and I'd like her to feel more secure.

"She is more intelligent, which I like, and gets my sense of humour"



Marian and Tony on a trip together to Peru

PHOTOGRAPH MARK MCCALL HAIR & MAKE-UP TISH CURRY AT SALON ROUGE, DUBLIN