



# In just four hours, this woman promises to teach feuding couples how to 'divorce with integrity'. Scam, or a badly needed mission of mercy? Either way, a snip at £30

With 50 per cent of marriages failing, classes in 'happy divorce' are mandatory in the US. Founder Christina McGhee, right, tells **Polly Vernon** why break-ups need not spell devastation

**T**he Memorial Hermann Wellness Centre is an unprepossessing building situated off Houston's Highway 59; a boxy, two-storey concrete edifice that merges perfectly with the featureless sprawl of this part of Texas. The centre is officially dedicated to the promotion of 'a lifetime of wellbeing and personal achievement' via the media of acupuncture and physio and something called preventive imaging – but it somehow lacks the Zen-minimal beauty you'd expect from a temple to holistic health. It has the air of a déclassé small-town shopping mall.

On a Saturday in early March, at around 8.45am, the least inspiring of all the building's dimly lit, low-ceilinged, window-less conference rooms fills with a mismatched group of 50 or so Texans. They're a miserable bunch. Prickly, raw, self-righteous, angry, vulnerable and confused, pretty much without exception. No-one wants to be here. And yet each of them is part of a brave pioneering movement – a movement which aims to transform the most heart-rending aspect of modern relationships: divorce. In exchange for a mere \$50 – roughly £30 – and four hours of their lives, these people will get a masterclass ▶

in the art of the civilised divorce from Christina McGhee, the US's premier break-up coach.

Divorce coaching is a booming – if unregulated – business in the US; and Christina McGhee is its leading light. She is dedicated to the art of the accomplished split. A social worker, certified family mediator with experience in what she refers to as 'high-conflict family situations', she has devoted her professional life to the cause of the better divorce. She has two websites, a booming business in one-on-one counselling, in addition to the court-order classes, a DVD and a TV series to her name. She has been described variously as 'the remarkable Christina McGhee', and also 'Christina McGhee with her PhD in the Glaringly Obvious', by different facets of the press, not all of which are convinced she knows what she's talking about. But regardless, she is a woman on a mission. McGhee wants to alter the experience of divorce for as many people as she can. She wants to teach people how to 'divorce with integrity. That's my thing.' (McGhee's a fountain of upbeat, emotionally empowering snippets of this type.) 'People are called to do things, things they have passion for; and this is what I have been called to. I do not believe that people have to spend their lives being damaged by divorce. I truly do not. And I have a choice to watch people go through it and say: "Oh dear, how sad!" Or I can step in. I have chosen to step in.'

It's odd, really, that so many of us *do* spend our lives being damaged by divorce. We should be great divorcees by now. We are divorcees with form and history – second-generation divorcees, the divorcing offspring of divorced parents. We are prolific divorcees. The most recent statistics testify to the fourth successive increase in annual UK divorce rates (167,116 were granted in 2004, as opposed to 166,737 in 2003); and despite rumblings about a growing reluctance to split because of the financial implications, 50 per cent of all British and American marriages will still end with it. There's relatively little social stigma attached to modern divorce. Witness the multitudes of celebrity divorcees and royal divorcees; see the films and songs and infinite soap-opera plot lines dedicated to it. And we are divorcees with resources. We know about therapy, we know about coping mechanisms, we know about support networks and clever use of anti-depressants. All things considered, contemporary divorce should be a relatively painless affair, certainly when compared with the shameful, infrequent, emotionally uncharted divorces of 50 or so years ago.

But it's not. It's worse. It's almost gratuitous, how badly we divorce now. How angry and nasty, depressed and inclined to mess up our children we've become. How an estimated 60 per cent of fathers will lose touch with their kids within a few years of divorcing their mother. How the high-profile super-rich have transformed divorce into a series of epic, graceless struggles to out-do each other in the mega-settlement stakes.

And then there are all those low-key, insignificant casualties of divorce limping about, feeling sorry for themselves... People like me. I was 17 when my parents divorced, with moderate-to-high amounts of mess, unhappiness and fuss. That was 17 years ago but it still impacts on my life. It's at least partly responsible for how alienated



## We should be great divorcees by now. We are prolific divorcees, with form and history

I often feel from my family, who I don't see a lot of. But can today's divorcees really be taught a better way? Can the advice and action plans offered up in McGhee's classes help? Can a philosophy that has evolved in reactionary, republican Texas of all places possibly ease the sceptical British towards healthier, more functional, more cheerful divorcees? Towards McGhee's dreamy-sounding *Divorces With Integrity*? And is the US's flourishing divorce industry anything more than a scam; an opportunity to compound our more miserable moments with the sneaking suspicion that we can't even get abject marital dysfunction right?

I first meet Christina McGhee in the coffee bar of Houston's Sheraton Airport hotel. I identify her immediately, partly from her starring role in February's Channel 4 documentary *How To Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Children* (in which, McGhee helped three British families through divorce), but mainly because she radiates sympathy and empathy and unburden-yourself-on-me qualities that make her pretty much luminous in the dim half-light of the hotel lobby. I'd expected her to be smugger and stricter than she is; either

that, or cloying, saccharine, drippily sincere. But she's none of these things. She's a willowy, alabaster-skinned woman with a definitively gentle demeanour and a great line in both sympathetic head tilts and wry asides.

We sit down for coffee – which McGhee mainlines – and she launches without preamble into her theory on desirable divorce practices.

'It is,' she says, 'all about the children. Putting their needs first. Working out what's good for them.' The seminar at the Wellbeing Centre 'is what I call Divorce 101 – the basics. It's court-mandated in Texas – attendance is required for any parent seeking a divorce – and it's entry-level stuff. How children are impacted. What parents should consider. How parents should separate their feelings from their kids' feelings, and their situations from their kids' situations. It's not appropriate, for example, to say: "He or she left us! Look what they did to us!" You do *not* want your kids to feel that they have been left. You do *not* want them to feel that your ex-spouse is hurting them, as well as you. It's not appropriate to bad-mouth the other parent, and by the way, all the signs are that your bad-mouthing will damage *your* relationship with the child, rather than your ex's relationship. Equally, it's not appropriate to start referring to your ex-spouse by their first name, or as "your father" or "your mother", or "that man" or "that woman", rather than "Mom" or "Dad". That's objectifying, that's an alienation tactic. Parent alienation is the hot topic in divorce coaching right now – it's where one parent becomes committed to destroying the child's relationship with the other parent... And it's not



'I give people what they need': Christina McGhee (second right) with divorcés (from left) Yvette, Tom, Connie, Arnette and Marvin.

appropriate to share the financial burden of your divorce with your child – even if that child is a teenager. It's not appropriate to confide too much in your teenager at all. Parents amaze me all the time with what they think is appropriate.'

Christina McGhee got her 'calling' to the divorce business in her early thirties, some years after she'd begun a career as a social worker. It happened because of 'a kind of collision of the personal and the professional in my life'. McGhee's parents divorced when she was 14 'and their experience would fall into the less-than-ideal category. I didn't think much about it at the time, but I realised it did throw up certain issues as I became an adult.'

Like what?

'Like I was very cynical about love and relationships, like I picked inappropriate partners because of that... when the parents of teenagers divorce, the children will fall into one of two camps. They'll either go the cynical route, like me, or they'll get into domestic situations very prematurely, and try and correct their parents' mistakes by creating families too soon. Neither is healthy. Then, after I became a social worker, I gravitated towards high-conflict situations in families. Trauma resolution, women and children who have been sexually abused – oh, I've always dealt with the light topics, ha ha! But then I became a step-parent, which was when I really started thinking about it. I saw how my husband's children were struggling with their situation, and also, I knew the statistics, I knew that a second marriage has a 65 per cent chance of failing, and that both my husband and I came from divorced families which meant we had even less chance again, and I wanted my marriage to

## 'Advice is what people need. People ask me how they should act, what to say. I tell them'

work. So I said: OK, we're going to talk about this. And my husband had to go to the equivalent of the class I now teach while he was getting divorced, and he said to me: "You know, you should do this. You'd be good." Personal experiences led me to this, and personal experiences keep me mindful of how important it is.' It's also personal experience, she thinks, that makes her so good at coaching others through divorce.

'Well, it definitely helps me relate, anyway. And it helps them relate to me. My classes are called "parenting classes", and obviously, people come with some resentment about that, like: "Who are you to tell me how to be a parent?" But I'm not shaking my finger at people, I'm not telling them they're doing wrong.'

She is, however, telling them what to do *now*. McGhee's approach is unapologetically prescriptive, and unapologetically anti-therapy. 'Advice is what people need,' she says.

'Practical advice. My experience of working with divorcing families is that therapy is not the way to go. By the time you're in a divorce situation, you're probably in crisis. By the time you come to someone like me looking for advice, you're

definitely in crisis. Therapy on top of divorce can be overwhelming. If someone's starving, you don't sit them down and talk to them about their childhood. You give them what they need. I give people what they need. I tell them what to do. My classes are interactive. I do face-to-face, one-on-one sessions; I do telephone sessions. People ask me how they should act in situations, what they should say, what words they should use. And I tell them.'

Back in the Memorial Hermann Wellness Centre, the disgruntled Texans attending today's class take their seats in the time-honoured fashion – there's a rush for the back rows, a predictable reluctance to sit up front. Most of them have come alone. Divorcing couples are not required to attend the same class, and give or take a couple of examples – on whom, more later – most of this group have jumped at the opportunity not to spend more time with their ex-spouse. One relatively chirpy blonde makes it known that she's here voluntarily, having recently acquired step-mother status. But by and large, the group avoid eye contact with each other; social niceties are barely observed.

But then McGhee stands up, introduces herself, cracks some jokes and charms the logo'd loungewear off even the most sullen faction of the class. She's unexpectedly charismatic and dynamic in front of a room, and she works them with the cadences, registers and gag-devices of an accomplished motivational speaker. She addresses their resentments, humours them, asks them to humour her. 'This,' she opens, 'is a pro-children seminar. It is not about judging or criticising. It's about knowing how best to help your kids. Some of it will not be relevant to your situation. Some of it will. Feel free to ignore the bits that aren't.'

McGhee co-presents the seminar alongside Dr Stephen Loughead, another divorce pro – a deadpan psychologist and card-carrying divorcé. Each speaks for roughly 45 minutes before handing over to the other; each encourages audience participation, jokes and heckling. McGhee plays the part of a seven-year-old boy with Playstation 2 relocation issues. Loughead gives surprisingly good shouty, white-trash mother-in-law. The session progresses at a breathless rate, the mood changes in the room from moment to moment. Different points strike home with different individuals in different ways. Some cry a bit. Some come over all *Tyra Banks Show*, and want to share their experiences and their breakthrough moments with the room.

Tom and Yvette – a soon to be ex-couple, who have arrived together, and sat together, and chatted and laughed together throughout – earn class-celebrity status when they explain that they're staying in business together, even though they're no longer married. One middle-aged man asks when it might be appropriate to start dating again, and also, would anyone be interested in joining him at the Cirque du Soleil that evening, because he's got a spare ticket? Many people do not resist the opportunity to rant about their ex; and there are some deliciously Texan examples of how they've been wronged. 'So my little girl comes home from her daddy's house, and says that granny's said that mummy dresses all slutty, that mummy talks to all the men, ▶

# The 8-step guide to a perfect divorce

**1. Avoid using legal terminology in front of your children. Talk about 'arranging time with the kids', rather than 'custody'. Colour-code dates on calendars according to which days are mummy's, and which are daddy's; younger kids can look at it and instantly get a sense of where they are, emotionally and geographically.**

**2. All adult information increases anxiety in children, so keep it minimal.**

**3. Remember that your children almost certainly consider themselves to be a composite creation of the two of you. They**

**think they are part mum, and part dad. If you slag off your ex, they will relate that slagging to themselves.**

**4. If your ex badmouths you to your kids, don't retaliate. Don't try to set the story straight.**

**5. Don't believe your children don't feel guilty about your divorce. Don't believe they don't feel at least partly responsible for it. Because they will.**

**6. Don't have important conversations with your ex at the time of handing over the children for a visit. Keep it for more neutral, less emotionally charged moments, when the children are out of earshot.**

Don't leave answerphone messages that the children are likely to overhear. Don't send contentious emails if you think the children will be in your ex's vicinity when he or she first reads them. Your child will be on the receiving end of their reaction, and whether it's directed at them or not, they will experience it.

**7. Don't assume that, because your child is a baby, they will not be affected by the divorce. Some studies suggest that, as they grow older, they mourn the lack of memories of being with both parents. A child's experience of**

**divorce can change as they get older, the divorce gets more distant, or their parents' situation changes - if they remarry, for example.**

**8. Don't believe everything your kids tell you. They're likely to say whatever they think will keep you happiest, and they'll do the same with your ex-spouse. They'll mirror both parents' behaviour and reactions constantly. It isn't necessarily what they really think, feel or believe.**

[www.divorceandchildren.com](http://www.divorceandchildren.com);  
[www.lemons2lemonade.com](http://www.lemons2lemonade.com)

and mummy smokes cigarettes, and that the only way mummy will be coming in granny's house again, is when mummy's dead...'

But McGhee and Loughead maintain order, work their way steadily through a pile of retro-look OHP sheets, respond to individual questions, issue advice. And so it unfolds.

In the class breaks, I speak to the participants, many of whom are transformed from their earlier torpor by the class, and are eager to offer their thoughts on Christina McGhee. Arnette is in the midst of a custody battle over her four children. 'I'm in a shelter for battered women,' she says, neutrally, 'so you can probably guess my ex is not the greatest, but the kids are with him right now because I don't have a home. I'm finding it very degrading that the courts are questioning my parenting skills. But this class... this class is good! I don't find it patronising, no, not one bit! It's supporting. I like how specific [McGhee] is. I need to ask her what to say next time my ex says I can't see my kids on Christmas Day because it's "not my day". That's what I need to ask her next.' Richard of the Cirque du Soleil tickets is less gushing. 'Do I resent it? Er, maybe. It's a Saturday, and yes, I suppose I don't like being forced... But there are so many mixed emotions in divorce and you can lose sight of what's important. Taking the emotion out of it when you're talking to the kids, that's so important. And I'm learning things too. Like not to feel guilty about looking after myself.'

Like Arnette, Yvette and Tom - the ex-couple who are somehow managing to pull off the most civilised divorce possibly in the history of the world - also find the class encouraging. 'It's kind of what we were doing anyway,' they say. I find myself wondering if smug divorcees are shaping up to be the new smug marrieds.

But then Arnette raises a point that's been troubling me throughout my time with McGhee. 'The thing that I don't get,' she says, 'is what you do when the other parent is a... problem.' As appealing as it is on paper, McGhee's master plan falls apart somewhat when it knocks against the realities of an uncooperative ex-spouse. Not all of us have the good luck to divorce an Yvette, or a Tom, or a *Cirque du Soleil* fan like Richard. We can play by all of McGhee's rules, but will a

bad-mouthing, badly behaved, bitter ex undo all our work?

The seminar ends. McGhee distributes certificates that confirm the attendees have taken the course. ('I advise you to make a copy. As fun as I am to hang out with, I think it's unlikely you'll want to spend another Saturday morning with me, and you'll need to give this to your lawyer.') Arnette, Yvette and Tom, Richard and the others file out of the room. This was a good class, McGhee says. People were receptive and responsive. She's not so sure about the afternoon seminar, which will begin after a lunch break. 'They're always tougher,' she says. 'I don't know why. Maybe because the kind of people who are really reluctant to come are not going to get up early enough for a morning class.'

She admits that it's hard for her to know how effective her teaching is. 'I guess about eight to

## 'People think by not marrying, they'll dodge the bullet. But splitting up is splitting up'

12 per cent of divorcing couples will never get it. They are so narcissistically vulnerable that they won't get over the pain and see what their kids need. So what do you do? You give the kids information, you try and teach *them* to put distance between themselves and their parents, and you change your definitions on success, you try and get the parents to fight just a little less...'

She's got plenty of concerns about the way divorce is evolving. About the divisiveness of new technologies, for example - the problems that are exacerbated by things like emails and text messaging. She's also concerned about the latest generation of parents. She thinks that the children of divorced parents are growing up and having kids without getting married 'because they think they'll dodge the bullet [of divorce] that way. But splitting up is still splitting up, whether you're married or not, and of course I don't get to see

those people, because they don't go through the courts.' She was pretty shocked, she said, to learn that Britain doesn't offer equivalent resources to separating parents even if they're married.

I wonder if McGhee could ever envisage a fall in divorce rates.

'I don't know that there's any going back now. It's gone so far... I'd like to think that things will improve, that it might get less common, but... we have a lot of work to do. I'd like to see work at the front end. I'd like to see people educate children on healthy relationships. On family values. Which I mean in a conservatively liberal way.'

Isn't it all just unbearably sad sometimes?

'It's never easy... Divorce is never easy...'

Neither is being caught in the middle of tens of divorces a day, I imagine.

'Some days are harder than others,' she says. 'Some days, I have to take a deeper breath. Some days, I go home and look at my family and think: Wow. I'm pretty lucky.'

And then she collects her papers and her OHP sheets, and says goodbye, because she must start preparing for the potentially awkward afternoon session; for another four hours in the company of yet more bitter, angry, prickly, desperately, desperately sad individuals.

So could McGhee's mission help Britons toward a better divorce? Possibly. The most revolutionary, potentially powerful, aspect of it all, is that it questions the legal systems in both the UK and the US. Functional, child-conscious divorces are mediation based, as opposed to adversarial. Yet modern divorce hinges on litigation. Or as McGhee puts it: 'So you've got two people with two attorneys who've been briefed to get everything they can from the other and well, it's an attitude that's going to infect all your dealings with your ex-spouse.' This is what dictates the ugly, angry culture of contemporary divorce. And this is what McGhee's teaching rejects. It seems like an absurdly radical idea. That we might contemplate not ruthlessly doing over the one person we once loved most in the world - the person we share children with. But hell, it's not a bad idea, either. And it was entrenched in the court system here, as it is in Texas; if it were embraced by the establishment in the same way, that might help. It would - at the very least - be a damn good start. ■