Angela's Ashes, by Frank McCourt, published by Harper Collins

An Irish childhood remembered

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8 September 1998

Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt is an engaging book. Written from a child's perspective, his memoir begins where he was born, Brooklyn, during the 1930s Depression. His mother and father, recent Irish immigrants, are utterly impoverished. His mother, Angela, has no money to feed her children. His father, Malachy, is an alcoholic; when he does find work, he spends everything on drink.

Unable to cope in the United States, the McCourts return to Ireland and settle in Limerick, only to face an even worse situation. 'My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.'

McCourt was 66 when he published his memoir. A teacher of writing at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan for 18 years, this is his first book. In a recent interview, he explained what drove him to write it:

'I didn't write it for anybody in particular. I started to write it for myself. To get it out of my system. It is not the precise facts about it; it's a feeling, the experience of a child, wonderment, bewilderment, and curiosity. A small child has to deal with the world.'

Angela's Ashes is the story of the world that young Frank McCourt had to deal with. A world that, as his memoir explains, had no regard for the lives of thousands of starving families struggling to survive through the deprivations caused by colonial oppression, war and economic backwardness and isolation.

'When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.... People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.... Above all--we were wet.'

Situated in the south of Ireland, Limerick, the third largest city and the major trading and industrial centre on the western side of the country, was always considered a city of extremes. The Limerick that McCourt grew up in had a deadly reputation. Its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean meant that it could rain endlessly. The rain made the city damp, and for the poor it had terrible consequences.

'It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks.... From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetation.'

The brunt of these terrible conditions was borne by those who were most vulnerable, the young and the infirm. Infant mortality rates remained high well into the middle of this century, particularly in the cities. The major killers were diarrhea, diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, typhoid and tuberculosis. Large families on low incomes meant that children were often malnourished and children with rickets were a common sight.

In the space of five and a half years Angela McCourt had six children, and that included twins. Three of Angela's six children died and Frank McCourt witnessed their deaths. Frank himself became seriously ill with typhoid at the age of 10 and had to spend months in the Fever Hospital at the City Home.

There he met a young girl with diphtheria, Patricia, who began to teach Frank the poem 'The Highwayman', by Alfred Noyes.

'Every day I can't wait for the doctors and nurses to leave me alone so I can learn a new verse from Patricia and find out what's happening to the highwayman and the landlord's red-lipped daughter. I love the poem because it's exciting and almost as good as my two lines of Shakespeare. The redcoats are after the highwayman because they know he told her, I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way.

'I'd love to do that myself, come by moonlight for Patricia in the next room not giving a fiddler's fart though hell should bar the way. She's ready to read the last few verses when in comes the nurse from Kerry shouting at her, shouting at me, I told ye there was to be no talking between rooms. Diphtheria is never allowed to talk to typhoid and visa versa.'

Frank is moved to a room upstairs. He never sees Patricia, and she dies two days later.

There are many moving, bittersweet stories in this book. Children, confronted with such terrible situations, are nevertheless children. They play, they act, they recite poems and when they become teenagers, they begin to explore each other and themselves sexually. But they do not enjoy their lives. They just survive, many in the hope that they will eventually get out of Ireland.

That is where the work ends, and no doubt the sequel begins, with McCourt returning to America at the age of 19.

Ever present in the book is the Catholic Church, with the priests arguing to McCourt and his friends that blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God. As the young Frank remarks, everyone noticed that priests never wanted for food, clothing or a roof over their heads.

'The rain drove us into the church--our refuge, our strength, our only dry place. At Mass, Benediction, novenas, we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles. Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain.'

Historically the church worked with the state to create an advantageous position for itself. In Ireland, from administering education to the young, the link between the church and the state broadened to include administration of poor relief and health provisions. In this way, the church acted as a much-needed social stabiliser for the state. But amongst the younger generation, like McCourt, a growing anger with the role of the church festered and was fed by the degrading experiences the poor families of Ireland were forced to endure:

McCourt explains how he and his brother found his mother begging at the door of a priest's house:

'It's a gray day, the church is gray and the small crowd of people outside the door of the priests' house is gray. They're waiting to beg for any food left over from the priests' dinner.... There in the middle of the crowd in her dirty gray coat is my mother.... This is my own mother, begging. This is worse than the dole, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Dispensary. It's the worst kind of shame.... The door of the priests' house swings open and the people rush with their hands out. I can hear them, Brother, brother, here, brother, ah, for the love O' God, brother. Five children at home, brother, I can see my own mother pushed along. I can see the tightness of her mouth when she snatches at a bag and turns from the door.'

When the country was partitioned in 1922, after years of war with England, the south became known as the Irish free state of Eire, while the north remained under direct control of England. This partition, which physically divided the working class, led to an economic and cultural isolation that gave rise to antagonisms that took on a religious character--the south was identified with Catholicism and the north with Protestantism. Catholics who remained in the northern states were treated as second class citizens.

With a father born in the North of Ireland and a mother from the South, and sporting an American accent from his upbringing in Brooklyn, young Frank encountered all sorts of prejudices from many different quarters. In some ways, this allowed him to be a little more questioning of the nationalist traditions that dominated the social landscape.

'The master says it's a glorious thing to die for the faith and dad says it's a glorious thing to die for Ireland. And I wonder if there is anyone in the world that would like us to live.... I want to ask why there are so many big people that haven't died for Ireland or the faith. But I know if you ask a question like that you get a thump on the head or you're told go out and play.'

The repressive nature of the state and the dreadful poverty drove vast masses from Ireland. Ireland had an exceptionally high rate of emigration historically, to the United States, and later to Britain. As a result, the number of Irish-born people living outside the country is estimated today to total about 50 percent of the current population of the republic.

Angela's Ashes has been enormously popular worldwide with over 3 million copies sold to date. It has remained at the top of the bestseller lists for over a year. In 1997, McCourt received the Pulitzer Prize for best biography.

While many critics are lauding McCourt and other contemporary Irish writers as contributors to a renaissance in Irish literature, *Angela's Ashes* is not the classic they claim. McCourt is not another James Joyce but an honest writer who has produced a sensitive and moving account of his childhood in poverty-stricken Ireland. The widespread popularity of this book marks a refreshing change from the usual offerings heading the bestseller lists.