

# Angela's Ashes —too much of a chocolate box depiction

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*Angela's Ashes*, directed by Alan Parker, screenplay by Laura Jones and Parker, based on the book by Frank McCourt

*Angela's Ashes*, based on Frank McCourt's prize-winning memoirs of his childhood in Ireland, is a contradictory film.

Whilst remaining faithful to the tragicomic tragic tale that McCourt recounts in his memoirs, the film suffers from a sentimentality that is the stock in trade of films of this genre.

The film opens with the rainy grey green tones that permeate the entire film. The shot is of the mist over the River Shannon, Limerick, around which most of the film takes place. The following lines introduce us to McCourt's story: "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I managed to survive 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." This sets the stage for the tremendous misery and poverty that besets the McCourt family both in America and Ireland during the 1930s and 1940s.

Angela (Emily Watson) and her alcoholic husband Malachy Sr. (Robert Carlyle) and their children—Frank, Malachy Jr. and twin boys—live in squalid conditions in a Brooklyn tenement. Malachy Sr. struggles to keep a job and much of the time the family is on the verge of starvation. Angela, in a permanent state of exhaustion due to constant childbirth and the worry of feeding the family, gives birth to a new baby girl Margaret. The whole family dotes on her, especially her father. Within seven weeks Margaret is dead. Angela does not want to give the baby to the doctor, but Malachy hands her over; both are totally shaken by the experience. Malachy disappears for a couple of days and Angela

grieves in bed totally distraught and unable to cope with the death of her only daughter. A neighbour looks after the children and soon after the family leave for Ireland.

These early scenes along with those of the death of the twin boys, shortly after arriving in Ireland, are the most moving of the film. The stupefying effect the deaths have on the parents is inevitable, but the surviving brothers take it in their stride, infant mortality being the norm for many thousands like them. Although attempts are later made to recreate this level of pathos they do not have the same impact. This is due to the fact that the film does not move on past a certain point.

Angela and her children cannot stay in their present accommodation and the family move to equally squalid rooms in which they have to live upstairs due to the constant flooding and smell from the toilet in the winter months. More babies are born and appeals are made to the St. Vincent De Paul Society for clothing and food from time to time, with little success. Like the Catholic Church they are part of, the Society's attitude to the poor is that there are the deserving and undeserving and the McCourts fall into the latter category. Judgement is continually made against Angela, who is driven to despair by her husband's continual drinking.

Malachy Sr.'s attitude to the family's poverty is a strange mixture of defiance and despair. Although he feels an instinctive sense of injustice at their position, he is also determined to preserve his family's dignity. While walking back empty-handed from the coal merchant he berates his young son for "stooping" so low as to pick up the pieces of coal that had fallen off the coal wagons. Pointing at the people taking the pieces from the street, he exclaims in disgust, "Some people have no pride." This outlook perpetuates the

suffering as it often means going without, or that Angela and her sons must get their hands dirty to save face for their father.

There are many comical scenes of Frank's early childhood, and Joe Breen is able to convey very accurately the freshness with which McCourt writes his memoirs. This earlier part of the film draws the viewer in to Frank's world, something which is lost later in the film. The stifling ritualism of a Catholic upbringing produces many memorable moments in the film. Frank's class rehearses for First Communion by taking pieces of the *Limerick Leader* newspaper on their tongues. They are forced to learn all the prayers inside out and back to front, and if anyone dares to ask a question he is barked at, beaten and berated by the bully of a schoolmaster.

When the boys need new shoes their father repairs them with a bicycle tyre. The boys dread going to school. On their way the boys with shoes laugh at them. Young Frank, played well by nine-year-old Joe Breen, figures that it is better to hide the shoes and go barefoot so that at least the barefoot boys in his class will be his friends. Once the master discovers this he lectures the class for jeering at the McCourt boys. He tells them it is not the fault of the poor they have no money and compares their plight to that of Jesus. But in characteristic fashion he ends by labouring the point to absurdity. He says, "There are boys here who have to mend their shoes whatever way they can. There are boys in this class with no shoes at all. It's not their fault and it's no shame. Our Lord had no shoes. He died shoeless."

As Frank ages the romanticism which is very much in the background in the earlier part of the film comes to the fore. The sentimentality is reinforced by the use of music and essentially turns what could have been a very convincing portrayal of growing up in the 1930s and 1940s Ireland into a chocolate box depiction. It is almost as if a decision was taken to say, "Well, that was the miserable third and now let's cheer everyone up." There are amusing scenes later in the film especially those dealing with the act of confession. However, the many twists and turns that Frank's life takes are trivialised into a series of unconnected events.

An important stage in Frank's growing maturity is his meeting with a girl his own age (Patricia Madigan) while he is in hospital. She introduces him to

Shakespeare. And her death, from typhoid fever, has a powerful effect on him.

Later on in the film, following Malachy Sr.'s departure for England (never to return), Angela and her four children are evicted and forced to take lodgings at the drunken brute Laman Griffins' house. After enduring all he can of the daily humiliation that Griffins metes out to the family, and becoming increasingly disillusioned with his mother's submissiveness, Frank decides to leave home. We see again how difficult it is for someone like Angela to avoid falling under the malicious influence of more powerful figures like Griffins. But, unfortunately, we are given too little. As in the case of many of the film's later depictions, this is too limited. The film concludes with Frank sailing off to the sunnier shores of America.

Director Alan Parker considers *Angela's Ashes* his best film to date. Previous (and eclectic) efforts include *Midnight Express*, *Bugsy Malone*, *The Commitments*, *Mississippi Burning* and *Evita*. His earlier experiences were in the world of TV commercials and certainly this background has a very definite influence on his filmmaking. He greatly admires British film director Ken Loach, but says that he could never be so outspoken, in other words anti-establishment.

Parker often cites his working class upbringing as proof that he can recreate social relations as they are, but is unable to achieve this with any depth due to his philosophy of simply giving the audience what he supposes it wants! For this he won praise and backing from the Hollywood studios. Parker returned to Britain two years ago and is due to take up the post of chairman of the newly created Film Council, charged with getting the British film industry back on its feet.

The film is only partially successful in depicting McCourt's book, which is written in a refreshing and engaging style. An occasionally interesting, though sadly disappointing film.



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