

Angela Deconstructed
Frank McCourt's teaching memoir reveals a writer's roots

Michael Ray Taylor, M.F.A.
Professor of Communication and Fine Arts

TEACHER MAN

By Frank McCourt (Scribner, 257 pp., \$26)

In 1996, at the unlikely age of 66, Frank McCourt burst upon the literary scene with a memoir that became the sort of book every first-time author dreams of writing: an instant bestseller garnering worldwide critical praise. Winner of a 1997 Pulitzer Prize, *Angela's Ashes* told the heartrending story of McCourt's truly miserable childhood, spent first in New York, then in his parent's native city of Limerick, Ireland, and finally back in New York as the poorest of poor immigrants. The book's constant humor amid horrifying drama (not to mention the millions of devoted fans it drew) attracted the inevitable attention of Hollywood, resulting in a \$25 million big-screen flop that captured all of the misery, but little of the wit and none of the spirit with which McCourt infuses his prose. McCourt, a recently retired high school English teacher, claims to have been flabbergasted at becoming a media darling, "a geriatric novelty with an Irish accent."

"I hoped the book would explain family history to the McCourt children and grandchildren," he writes in the prologue to *Teacher Man*, his third book. "I hoped it might sell a few hundred copies and I might be invited to have discussions with book clubs... I hoped it would sit on bookseller's shelves while I lurked in the bookshop and watched beautiful women turn pages and shed the occasional tear."

Instead, McCourt responded to his instant fame with an international lecture tour and a second memoir, *Tis*, published in 1999. This book carried his personal history forward from the end of *Angela's Ashes* to the start of what became a teaching career that ultimately spanned more than 30 years. "After it was published, I had the nagging feeling I'd given teaching short shrift," he claims. In *Teacher Man*, McCourt sets out to correct this deficit by honoring what he thinks Americans tend to view as "the downstairs maid of professions."

He celebrates the "other world" of teenagers—raging hormones, terminal boredom and all—by deftly capturing the many accents of New York as delivered in five classes per day at McKee Vocational and Technical High School in Staten Island, by a colorful array of memorable characters. When he first entered the classroom, McCourt lectured the sons and daughters of recently returned World War II and Korean vets; he later taught their children amid the drug and disco culture of the 1970s. McCourt's subject was English, so great writers appear throughout the book, especially Shakespeare, whom McCourt began to read and memorize long before he thought of returning to America or becoming a teacher.

Yet this book should not be read for its insights on methods of teaching high school students, or the eternal difficulties of adolescence, or that truly miraculous moment when a previously callous teen suddenly becomes engaged with *anything*, or the squalid conditions of public schools during most of the 20th century. All these things are there, but what the book offers the fan of *Angela's Ashes* is the classroom method of Mr. McCourt, high school teacher. And the classroom method of Mr. McCourt, discovered literally in his first hour with 35 New York 16-year-olds (imagine the horror), was this: Tell them funny and heartrending stories of your Irish childhood.

For anyone who wondered nine years ago how someone who had never written a word could have penned, late in life, the marvel that is *Angela's Ashes*, *Teacher Man* provides the answer. He practiced that story live, before the toughest possible audience, five shows a day for 30 years. Two chapters in, you want Mr. McCourt for *your* teacher. And if you are a teacher yourself, you want to return to the classroom acting more like him. Of course, finding a tale from home (about being poor, Irish, Catholic, or all of the above) to fit every lesson plan doesn't always work. The effort sometimes leads to comically nontraditional pedagogic method, as when McCourt suggests—during a test lecture before a state examiner on the subject of war poems—that a class of teenagers go home and write trial suicide notes. He spends more of his first year sitting in the principal's office than do any of his students.

But his stories do connect; disaffected teenagers are drawn into the worlds of language and the rivers of story despite themselves. The small triumphs of his students become a sort of magic that counters the maddening fussiness of educational bureaucrats along the way, and explains why people continue to embrace a low-paying and often lowly regarded profession. Beyond these insights, McCourt's classroom scenes give us the birth of a writer.

For a time in the 1980s, one of the literary buzzwords bandied about by graduate students of English was *metafiction*—a trendy sort of postmodern writing that consisted mainly of stories about stories, Escher-like literary puzzles that took readers deep into words and far, far away from anything resembling the actual world. By so accurately depicting his classroom storytelling, McCourt has created what might be called a *meta-nonfiction*, a nonfiction work celebrating the stories hidden in every life—and igniting the desire to find them in the actual world. As his students find and share their own stories, their Angelas, the reader delights in doing the same.

If you know a teacher, any teacher, buy that person this book. If you are a teacher, a writer, or merely a lover of life, read it.

Biography

Michael Ray Taylor is a professor of mass media communication and author of three nonfiction books and numerous magazine articles. Recently he has been reviewing books for the *Nashville Scene* and the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, as well as working at the *Houston Chronicle* through the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Institute for Journalism Excellence.