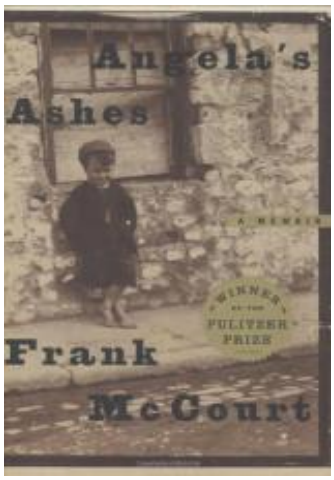
Angela's Ashes

by Frank McCourt



About the Book

"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."

So begins the luminous memoir of Frank McCourt, born in Depression-era Brooklyn to recent Irish immigrants and raised in the slums of Limerick, Ireland. Frank's mother, Angela, has no money to feed the children since Frank's father, Malachy, rarely works, and when he does he drinks his wages. Yet Malachy -- exasperating, irresponsible and beguiling -- does nurture in Frank an appetite for the one thing he can provide: a story. Frank lives for his father's tales of Cuchulain, who saved Ireland, and of the Angel on the Seventh Step, who brings his mother babies.

Perhaps it is story that accounts for Frank's survival. Wearing rags for diapers, begging a pig's head for Christmas dinner and gathering coal from the roadside to light a fire, Frank endures poverty, near-starvation and the casual cruelty of relatives and neighbors -- yet lives to tell his tale with eloquence, exuberance and remarkable forgiveness.

Angela's Ashes, imbued on every page with Frank McCourt's astounding humor and compassion, is a glorious book that bears all the marks of a classic.

Discussion Guide

1. Countless memoirs have been published recently, yet ***Angela's Ashes*** stands out. What makes this memoir so unique and compelling?

2. Discuss the originality and immediacy of Frank McCourt's voice and the style he employs -- i.e., his sparing use of commas, the absence of quotation marks. How, through a child's voice and perspective, does McCourt establish and

maintain credibility?

3. Ever present in ***Angela's Ashes*** is the Catholic Church. In what ways does the Catholic Church of McCourt's Ireland hurt its members and limit their experience? How does the Church protect and nurture its followers? What is Frank's attitude toward the Church?

4. McCourt writes: "I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland." Was this your impression of Frank McCourt's father? How can Frank write about his father without bitterness? What part did Malachy play in creating the person that Frank eventually became?

5. Women -- in particular mothers -- play a significant role in ***Angela's Ashes***. Recall the scenes between Angela and her children; the MacNamara sisters (Delia and Philomena) and Malachy; Aunt Aggie and young Frank; Angela and her own mother. In what ways do these interactions reflect the roles of women within their families? Discuss the ways in which Angela struggles to keep her family together in the most desperate of circumstances.

6. McCourt titles his memoir ***Angela's Ashes***, after his mother. What significance does the phrase "Angela's Ashes" acquire by the end of the book?

7. Despite the McCourts' horrid poverty, mind-numbing starvation, and devastating losses, ***Angela's Ashes*** is not a tragic memoir. In fact, it is uplifting, triumphant even. How does McCourt accomplish this?

8. Irish songs and lyrics are prominently featured in ***Angela's Ashes***. How do these lyrics contribute to the unique voice of this memoir? How does music affect Frank's experiences? How do you think it continues to influence his memories of his childhood?

9. Frank spent the first four years of his life in the United States. How do his experiences in America affect Frank's years in Ireland?

Author Bio

Frank McCourt (1930-2009) was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Irish immigrant parents, grew up in Limerick, Ireland, and returned to America in 1949. For 30 years he taught in New York City high schools. His first book, ANGELA'S ASHES, won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the L.A. Times Book Award. In 2006, he won the prestigious Ellis Island Family Heritage Award for Exemplary Service in the Field of the Arts and the United Federation of Teachers John Dewey Award for Excellence in Education.

Critical Praise

" A classic, modern memoir...stunning. "

-Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"Every once in a while, a lucky reader comes across a book that makes an indelible impression, a book you immediately want to share with everyone around you...Frank McCourt's life, and his searing telling of it, reveal all we need to know about being human."
-Linnea Lannon, *Detroit Free Press*

"A splendid memoir, both funny and forgiving "
-People

"A spellbinding memoir of childhood that swerves flawlessly between aching sadness and desperate humor...a work of lasting beauty. "
-Peter Finn, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

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