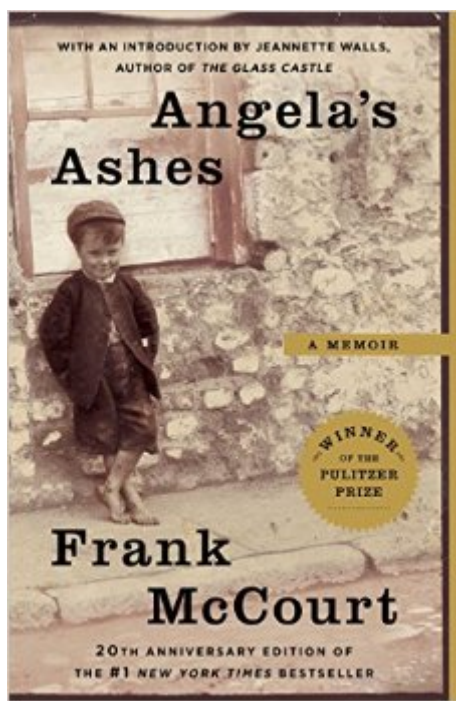


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Angela's Ashes: A Memoir



Synopsis

A Pulitzer Prize-winning, #1 New York Times bestseller, Angela's Ashes is Frank McCourt's masterful memoir of his childhood in Ireland. "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's 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.

Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Scribner; 1st Touchstone Edition 1999 edition (May 25, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 068484267X

ISBN-13: 978-0684842677

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

Angela's Ashes is a book so filled with remorse and sadness, it's amazing that the reader somehow

finds himself completely and joyfully satisfied. The novel revolves around the penniless childhood of Frank McCourt and begins in America with four-year-old Frank and his three year-old brother Malachy, who bears the same name as his father, and the infant twins, Eugene and Oliver, and the memories of the baby Margaret, "already dead and gone." Your heart goes out to the poor family, blessed with a loving mother, Angela, and yet cursed with a father who means well, but is constantly drunk or yearning for the "pint," as they call it. Early in his life, McCourt's family moves to Ireland, with help from his aunts and grandmother. Unfortunately, money is not easily found in Ireland either, and the McCourt family migrates from home to home, barely surviving on the few shillings Malachy McCourt doesn't spend at the local pub. The McCourts experience tragedy upon tragedy. His physical romance with a young lady named Theresa Carmody sick with consumption, his unfortunate habit to "interfere with himself," and the sad moment when in a drunken stupor on his first pint he strikes his own mother causes Frank to fear he is doomed to an eternity in hell. Unbelievably, despite all of the terrible things that happen in Frank's childhood, there are moments described in the book that give the reader a complete sense of joy and hope. I immensely enjoyed this memoir and would recommend it to any reader. I was especially enamored of the style of writing in which Frank McCourt chose to write. The words seemed as if they gently tumbled directly out of the mouth of the seven-year-old Frankie, or mischievously flew from Frank as an thirteen-year-old "working man." This novel was exquisitely written and is a jewel to read, as well as a treasure to remember.

The author begins his memoir with the voice of a narrator: describing people, events, etc. But, from the first chapter he slowly transitions into a man remembering & than goes back to when he was a boy. The slideshow of imagery & the depth of details made this a great read, despite the often brutal sadness of the story. The innocence of a young boy of say 8 or 9 is experienced here like in no other book I have read. The young boy finds himself talking with "the angel of the seventh step," & wishing to hear stories of his mythical hero "Cuchulain." When the boy learns something for the first time, so does the reader. While he ages, his vocabulary grows as does his views of the world around him which starts to make more sense to him, no matter how unsettling. The reader feels Frankie's angst when his alcoholic father comes home drunk after drinking his paycheck away. The descriptions of the strict Catholic school alone where he was not allowed to even ask a question in class made it seem more like a prison than a place to seek "knowledge & comfort." The living conditions in the Limerick of the 1930's-40's Ireland were truly on a third world level. Their home would flood in Winter, & the many family homes they lived in when they could not afford their rent

are gut wrenchingly vivid. The most poignant emotions are from Frankie's mother Angela. The reader can feel her desperation & frustration with her useless husband, who often failed to keep a job because of his boozing. Her anguish that she could not clothe or feed her sons, & her other children who were "dead & gone," & her feelings of shame that she had to borrow & beg in order to keep her family alive leap off the pages. The dialogue & story captures the imagination, one can feel the chill of damp air & the sickness it brings. This book has it all, the sorrow, heartache, want, humor, & slivers of hope.

What a ride! You'll laugh, cry, exhilarate, and despair—all on the same page. Trapped in a childhood of extreme poverty in Limerick, Ireland, Frank McCourt not only survives but thoroughly conquers. In the depths of even this much misery, however, there are small mercies and kindnesses and they are not lost on him. This is what gives the book its humanity—the ability to withstand horrific circumstances through humor, determination, and forgiveness—and triumph with soul intact. And the people! They seem more alive in ink than most of us seem in flesh.

I have recently re-read Angela's Ashes for a class assignment in which I had to compare a book with the film version of the same story, and I was again blown away by the beauty of this book. It is a testament to Frank McCourt's enormous talent that he is able to blend such sad situations with such delightful humor. He is masterful in the way he narrates the story from the point-of-view of a child, with his outlook and insights growing as the character (Frank himself) matures, similar to the approach that Dickens used in "David Copperfield." "Angela's Ashes" is a modern-day classic - one that I'm sure I will re-read every few years, just to hear the magical and shimmering prose in my ears again and again.

I avoided this book for two reasons. The hype. More often than not I am disappointed by highly-hyped books and movies. And, I thought it would depress and exhaust me. But as with Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*, you become so engrossed with the characters that you aren't weighed down by the crushing poverty. It almost seems an afterthought, a tiny detail, yet it is what forms the characters. Both of these books, while written 60 years apart, are written beautifully and skillfully.

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