



Feature

there once was a man from Limerick...an interview with author Frank McCourt

By [Jim Saah](#)

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.

--from *Angela's Ashes*

Frank McCourt's first book *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* is an amazing piece of work. McCourt manages to delve back into his psyche as a small boy and relay the hardships, tragedy and humor of his youth with the insight and innocence only a child could have.



Relentless hunger, an alcoholic father and the Catholic Church are constant burdens on him. His story is replete with disease, death and humiliation. But as many Irish seem to thrive on their misery, McCourt manages to deliver an irreverent, humorous tale of his daily struggle to survive and to get back to his birthplace, America.

I can't help but think that because Frank McCourt did survive he has a special outlook and appreciation on the way his life turned out. It was a great joy to chat with him through the course of this interview. He was kind, funny and forthcoming.

UNo MAS: How do you feel about the way this book is being received?

Frank McCourt: I can't believe it! It is just completely unexpected.

UM: So your expectations were...

FM: I had no expectations. As I said to my wife, recently, I might be reviewed in the New York Times Book Review under "Briefly Noted." And then I'd get my Library of Congress catalog number. And then I'd recede into obscurity and I'd get a job like everybody else.

UM: So are your plans, now that it's gone so well, to continue writing?

FM: Oh, yeah. Well, I had planned that all along. I just have to proceed as usual. No matter what happens, nothing helps with the writing of the next book.

UM: Especially after your first one is so successful.

FM: Yeah, the sky is the limit. You never have the same experience twice. So it will never happen again.

UM: And in your situation, the old adage is even more appropriate, that you have your whole life to write your first book, but only one year to write your second.

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FM: That's right. You feel a sense of urgency, especially at my advanced age, when you're staring into the grave.

UM: Did you write down anything as a child or did you have to go back and research your own past and do interviews?

FM: I've been writing in notebooks for forty years or so. But then when I started writing it, notebooks would jog my memory somewhat, but the writing itself took its own shape. I would just circle around certain incidents, like a vulture with carrion until it yielded up some incident in my childhood, especially the religious stuff: the sacraments, the First Communion, and Confession, and Confirmation, and all of those turning points in the life of a little Irish Catholic boy. And the stuff about my father going to England. That was easy to evoke because it was so traumatic.

UM: My first thought was that I don't remember much from when I was five and six and younger, but then my childhood was fairly normal compared to what you went through.

FM: Happiness is hard to recall. Its just a glow. There wasn't much of a glow, we had a lot of jagged edges.

UM: Did you always know that you would write this memoir?

FM: Oh, yeah, I knew I had to write it. First of all there is always that artistic challenge of creating something. Or the particular experience to take slum life in that period and make something out of it in the form of a book. And then I felt some kind of responsibility to my family.

I think even though in some cases we don't come off in a very positive light in the book, it had to be recorded. And it just shows mainly how we handled adversity. Even though a lot of the times we weren't thinking in any intellectual way or any conscious way about our circumstances. We were just slogging on from day to day and making the best of it. But with a light at the end of the tunnel...AMERICA!



UM: So that always kept your spirits up?

FM: Like the Chinese idea of the Golden Mountain, it was always there.

UM: You wrote vividly about your early years in America. Was America what you expected when you returned?

FM: America? Well, you see my childhood here, as you remember, was very limited. So it was a long, long time before I actually went out to Brooklyn where these early events occurred. There's a playground in the book where I was on a seesaw with my brother, and I went there and that's a parking lot. Somebody told me it was. It had been the playground. It's all changed now because the BQE cut right through Claussen Avenue where that took place.

And then there's a church near there, well I was baptized in Courtery, Brooklyn, but I think my brother Malachy was baptized in the church near Claussen Avenue. I was just trying to bring back these images. And I was beginning to think that you could some how miraculously dig down into your memory and bring back stuff that is stored there.

Samuel Beckett was saying, in a new biography, that he could remember being in the womb, which, of course, is a bit farfetched. But he's an Irishman

so nothing's too farfetched. But I was able to lie in bed here... insomnia can (help me) just walk through parts of my life, chronologically, and evoke images that I thought I'd forgotten. Scenes, for instance, in school when I was very small. I'd just go into a room in my memory and just look around and start seeing things that I'd forgotten, like the alphabet on the blackboard in Irish, which we had to chant every day for months and months and months. I remember the Gaelic script and things like that. And this awful, putrid lavatory that we used outside.

UM: Do you ever try to use smell or tastes to help remember?

FM: Yeah. The smell of the milk in the lunchroom that we had and the fresh bread, the fresh buns, the so-called raisin buns. All those smells... and the kids, we were the great unwashed... nobody ever knew what a shower was... We washed maybe from eyebrow to chin, week after week after week. Our crotches were innocent of water. You wouldn't want to go back in time, yourself, and mingle with us. You'd run for the hills and jump in a river.

UM: On this side of the Atlantic the reputation of the Irish is that they are friendly and hospitable. But you've mentioned in other interviews the inability of Irish people to show affections toward their own families. Can you elaborate on this?

FM: Well, you know, when I first came to New York and saw Italian families and their displays of affection, I was taken aback a bit because it was uninhibited. (Italian accent) [base "]Hey, Joey, how ya' doing, Maria...' And the embracing and all the physical stuff. We didn't do that. You go to Ireland and you see... you know how it is in Hollywood, everybody kisses everybody. It's a hand-shake in Ireland. And a kind of tentativeness. Except when it's mothers and small children.

You never see fathers putting their arms around their son's shoulders the way they do on AT&T commercials. And I think historians have wondered about this because they know from certain documents they've found and so on, in earlier times, before the famine, which was in the 1840's, that was an emotional turning point, that they were very open, demonstrative people. There are various documents showing how the Elizabethan English, in particular, were shocked by Irish displays of affection, by the way women acted toward strangers, walking up and putting their arms around them and kissing them right full on the mouth.

But something happened to the spirit in the famine and they retreated into their caverns and into themselves. And they haven't come out. I think it's changing, though. I think they're becoming more and more uninhibited. And also there are the restrictions of the church about being physical.

UM: Do you think that had anything to do with it? Because that is actually opening up, especially with reproductive rights?

FM: And divorce. Only about 15 years ago, there was an item in my hometown paper, the Limerick Leader, about a young couple arrested on the main street in Limerick for kissing, and fined for public displays of something or other. Well, public displays of affection, you're not supposed to do that. That's all changing now. But I think that the famine and the church, the church's hostility toward any kind of physical expression outside of getting on your knees. And, of course, they've always condemned dancing. You know, you might touch a member of the opposite sex. And you might get excited and you might do something natural.

UM: Well, dancing has always been a big part of the Irish tradition, but not touching in dancing.

FM: No, no, straight up and down. Keep your hands by your side.

UM: Elbows out to keep your distance.

FM: That's right. And look straight ahead.

UM: When I tell people about the book I usually find myself saying something like, [base "]It's about this poor Irish family and the father is a drunk and a lot of people die of disease and it's really funny.' And they think I'm nuts. Is there an Irish tradition of humor in tragedy, or is that your own take?

FM: Yeah, I was in Limerick a few weeks ago and we were with the CBS crew and they did a CBS Sunday Morning program. Here's a quote that somebody handed to me. Somebody wrote this on a kind of parchment paper, it is a quote from William Butler Yeats. And the quote is, [base "]Being Irish, ' he's writing about somebody else, [base "]he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy.' I think that explains it.

We were in the cemetery in Limerick with the CBS crew and it is an ancient cemetery that my mother's family was buried in, a graveyard, and it's so bad that graves are collapsing, the tomb stones are collapsing, and all along you see handles from coffins, and bones. And we started throwing bones at each other. And then we started singing, [base "]Isn't it grand, boys, to be bloody well dead.'

So, I suppose you don't want to stand there misty-eyed and weeping so you sing and carry on. You do the reverse of what people usually do. If you're Jewish you sit in the corner and you sit Shiva and you rock back and forth and you rend your clothes, you scream your grief. We had, in the old days, in the country, the Irish wake, and women would engage in what they called keening, screaming for the mourning, and lamenting. But they were almost professionals, they did that for the family.

UM: It was almost an art form.

FM: Yes, it was an art form. It was a form of chanting, music.

UM: I guess that comes from the Irish tradition of the wakes where there's eating and drinking and boisterousness. When did that begin?

FM: That is an old, ancient way of handling grief. Because you have the alternative to sit there and suffer. So the community would come and console you. And they'd eat, well, they'd drink more freely, the eating wasn't really that significant. And then they'd start telling stories about the man or the woman dead in the bed, and then they'd sing. If the dead person could resist getting up then he was indeed dead.

UM: Did you have to work at the humor in the book, dealing with the tragedy?

FM: It's there. There's so much absurdity. Poverty is so absurd. What people have to put up with...

UM: And how did you feel about the desperate situation you found yourself in, did it change or affect your outlook on life for you as an adult?

FM: Well, it had a very damaging effect. The poverty and the influence of the church were very damaging. It damaged all of us emotionally. To be poor deprives you of self-esteem. Kids are constantly comparing, especially teenagers, constantly comparing themselves with other people. And when you're ragged and you're physically, almost repulsive, as I was with infected eyes and rotting teeth and so on, and clothes that were ragged, I had no self-esteem. How could I? I had no accomplishments except surviving. But that isn't enough in the community where I came from because everybody was doing it. So I wasn't prepared for America, where everybody is glowing with good teeth and good clothes and food.

UM: Did you ever come to terms with the religion? You said the church was the other damaging influence. Some people here call themselves [base "]recovering Catholics.' Although it was funny at times, the way you illustrated your grief over some sin that you committed, underneath that you had to feel sorry for this poor boy who was completely tormented.

FM: I was tormented. Fear and trembling. And a sense of doom. A literal belief in hell. That if you, as they say, [base "]interfered with yourself,' self-abuse, self-pollution, and you died that night, that's it. Hell for eternity. With devils chasing you for eternity with pitchforks. I trembled. I couldn't go to sleep for fear I might die and wake up in hell. I was in agony. It wasn't fear [~] it was pure agony.

UM: At what age did you realize that you'd have to find your own way...

FM: It was slow. It took me a long time to... Because I'm not really... I'm not one of those James Joyce intellectuals who can stand back and look at the whole edifice and say, [base "]I reject that.' It was a slow process for me to just crawl out of it like a snake leaving his skin behind. [OE]Til I began to look at other religions, Buddhism and so on, and realized there is another way of looking at life. A more benign way of looking at life. [OE]Til I could convince myself there's no such thing as hell. That was the big thing they hang over us: HELL. So I just couldn't believe it anymore.

I had to divest myself that there's any idea of a... I had to get rid of any idea of hell or any idea of the afterlife. That's what held me, kept me down. So now I just have nothing but contempt for the institution of the church. And the priests who should have known better, who were of no... not just of no use to us, they just ignored us. Except to threaten us. Come to pay our... although we didn't have it. They were always looking for money. And they lived well. They were nice and fat, glowing. They had cars, they had crates of whiskey and wine delivered to their houses, and they preached poverty.

UM: So you have no use for the organized Catholic religion?

FM: Oh, no, no. I admire certain priests and nuns who go off on their own and do God's work on their own, who help in the ghettos, but as far as the institution of the church is concerned, I think it is despicable.

UM: I assume you have some kids...

FM: One daughter.

UM: How did you raise her. Just let her find her own way?

FM: Yes, let her find her own way. I don't think it's going to bother her. Although, on the other hand, as I've said before, there were positive things

about the church, that is in the European cultural sense, the architecture, the liturgy, the music, the art, such as it was, the stations of the cross in the church, the tradition, and the atmosphere of awe and mystery in the mass. The atmosphere of miracle, one of mainly mystery, that's what fascinates me, that you can intellectually and theologically, reach a certain point in argument and discourse, but after that, after that, at this point, it's a mystery [~] you have to have faith. Which is all right with me. Because I will have the faith... not the faith they want me to have, but another kind of faith which is of my own invention.

UM: I was really intrigued by an aspect of the way you wrote about your family, and especially about your father, because it didn't put anyone in a good light, but him particularly in the worst light. My father was a bit of an alcoholic and never had much to do with the kids, but one thing I can say for him is that he did provide monetarily. I don't have many good memories and I usually don't have that much to say about him. And your father did you many wrongs but you never spoke resentfully or angrily about him. I was just wondering if that was intentional or you just didn't feel that way.

FM: He had the disease. The alcoholism. Which I've only begun to understand lately because I have three brothers now who don't drink and my brother Malachy is very involved in AA, the 12-step program, and he's the one who talks about it, they, AA in general, talk about it as a disease. But it is, I accept that up to a point, except that you can walk away from the bottle, and you can walk away from the pack of cigarettes, you can't walk away from cancer. So I don't absolve my father completely of his responsibility for what he did to us. Although, I feel compassion, maybe. He had his demons. But I still can't understand how a man can walk away from children. And leave them to starve, as we nearly did, if it wasn't for my mother going out and begging. But I think one of the reasons I wrote about it in the way I did, is that, apart from the drink, he was almost the perfect father. That he was kind and good humored and so on. So he had every promise of being the perfect father, so... And at those moments, you know, you look back and say [base "]the growing moments,' that I had with him anyway, in the mornings when there was, what would you call it, possibility. If it hadn't been for the drink.

UM: There was a feeling that he really was good with you in the mornings when he was telling you stories, and I actually said that to my wife. I said, [base "]Damn, his father was really a good guy, except for the alcohol.' And she said, [base "]He never had a goddamned job!' And then I started thinking, [base "]Okay, he was a bastard.'

FM: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah, maybe women feel stronger about this business of how you deal with children.

UM: I guess the maternal instinct kicks in.

FM: That's the primal one.

UM: Did you ever keep in touch with him after you came to America?

FM: No. No. He was in England. He stayed in England. And then he went back to Ireland, to the family, in that area outside of Belfast. And I think he was working as a laborer on various farms, a farm laborer. And he came to the States in 1963, I think with a view to making up with my mother, but that didn't work. He came for three weeks, and drank his way all over Brooklyn. And went back. I saw him again in 1971 when Belfast was in bad shape. Going up in flames with fighting all over the place. And I just visited him with

my uncle. It was a very formal conversation and I didn't know what to say to him. He said, [base "]How is your mother and how are your brothers,' and so on, and that's about it. The next time I saw him, then, he was dead in 1985. I went to his funeral in Belfast.

UM: When did you bring the rest of your family over to America?

FM: Well my brother Malachy came three years after me. Mike came four years after him. My mother and Alfie, the youngest one, came in 1959 and we were all here. Actually, my mother and Alfie came for three weeks Christmas vacation and stayed for 21 years. I guess my mother never went back because she was lonely.

UM: Did they all get along well in America?

FM: Well, they all went into the bar business. Which was a mistake, because they began to sip at the merchandise and it set them back, set us all back. Well, them more than I.

UM: And what was your life like? I know you ended up in the service, but what was it like once you came to America?

FM: Oh, it was grim. It was a series of menial jobs. But I was, I think that the Army, being drafted, was my escape route. I was in the Army for two years, and then I got the G.I. Bill, which enabled me to go to NYU and which enabled me to become a teacher. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't had the G.I. Bill. I suppose I would slogged through high school at nighttime, and done the G.E.D., something like that. I knew I had to go to college. That was my... that I HAD to do that. Just as I HAD to come to the States, just as I HAD to write this book. I don't know what I HAVE to do next. I have to write another book and probably another book and may be now on a treadmill.

UM: Your bio said something about a musical review that you and your brother Malachy did...

FM: Oh, it's not a musical review, its just a stand-up thing. The two of us telling stories and anecdotes. And singing an occasional song. I don't know why the hell they're calling it a musical review. We might sing a few songs but we're not accomplished singers by any means.

UM: And that's done in bars and pubs...

FM: No, we've done it in theaters.

UM: Do you still...

FM: No, not lately. I'm just too busy. And I'm more interested in writing than in performing.

UM: Do you make it back to Ireland often?

FM: Before this year, I've been back more this year than I have been since I left Ireland, and I've been back about six times (this year), before that would be every five years or so, which isn't a lot. But I'm more inclined to go back now because Limerick has changed so much. One of the reasons it was such a grim... or the grimmest of all towns, was that it was the only large city or town in Ireland that didn't have a university. So they put in a university about 20 years ago and it has changed the whole atmosphere of the place. Brought young people in and changed the atmosphere intellectually. So you

see the University blooming and the church beginning to recede.

UM: I was in Ireland in April of this year. I went from Dublin to Galway and all around the North. And I expected the religion to be more apparent. Maybe it is stronger in the South.

FM: Well, it is. But you don't see the streets crawling with priests and nuns the way you used to. A lot of the priests go around now in ordinary civilian clothes. And it's hard to distinguish a nun from a house wife anymore except they have a special kind of hair cut. And we were told when we were kids, [base "]Any time you see a nun or a priest, salute them.' (Laughs) We had to give them the military salute and when you pass a church you had to cross yourself. So we were very busy saluting nuns and priests and crossing ourselves when we passed churches. That presence is not as powerful as it used to be.

UM: Do you have any interest in Irish politics? Since your father was from the North, do you have any interest in the peace process?

FM: Of course, sure. I have very strong opinions about the violence. I think it's very stupid. Ghandi didn't need violence at all. And he accomplished bigger things than anybody, with peaceful methods. I think a lot of these IRA guys are just a bunch of thugs. They're gangsters now. They're embedded in the economy. So they wouldn't know what to do with themselves if peace broke out. It's a living. And they are like the Mafia, they have rackets now in Belfast and Derry. Some of them, one branch of the IRA, is dealing in drugs, and the other branch abhor drugs, so they're at war over that.

UM: I've read that they will knee-cap you if you're caught selling drugs.

FM: Yeah, but some of them have been caught peddling drugs for arms. And they go off to Libya for training. And they encounter drugs there. Its a very tormented situation. It's getting to be more than just a fight for liberation from Britain. It's taken on all kinds of new convolutions. It's not just Catholic versus Protestant any more. I read somewhere that in any construction site in Belfast, they have protection rackets. And you have to clear your trucking with the IRA, just like the Mafia here.

UM: Have you already started your next book?

FM: I'm just dabbling at the moment. It will continue. I think the main thing I am interested in is my experience as a teacher. I can't go too much into my domestic life because there are ex-wives ready to do me in.

UM: Did you try to publish anything before this book?

FM: This is the first book. I've done bits and pieces here and there. Village Voice and so on. But never tried to publish a book before. I wasn't ready.

UM: So you just waited until you actually felt ready?

FM: Well, I didn't wait. I kept fiddling with it. I hadn't found the right voice for what I wanted to say. I was being literally imitative and derivative.

UM: Speaking of voice, it moved very easily from you as an adult giving background information in the beginning to you telling the story as a four year old.

FM: That was miraculous. I don't know. I just knew I had to write that part

about the playground and being on the seesaw with my brother. And I didn't intend to continue that. I don't know really what I intended. But once I found that, once I did that playground thing I felt very comfortable with it, the kind of the continuous present tense. And I just stayed with that. I felt very, very comfortable with it, instead of writing in the past tense, kind of [base "]here we are now.'

UM: I was waiting for the metaphor about the title to reveal itself. Other than a few things I never really got a strong feeling of what that meant.

FM: That's because I think I settled on the title before I ever wrote the book. I intended to bring it up to 1981 when my mother died in New York, when she was cremated and we took her ashes to Ireland one week and scattered the ashes on her family's grave site. The title just stuck with me and I couldn't let it go even though it really doesn't have much to do with the book. Unless you want to start getting academic and start saying it was the ashes in the fire that she was gazing in.

UM: Yeah, I thought it was either the Woodbines (cigarettes)...

FM: Yeah, they killed her.

UM: ... or the fire.

FM: Scholars will probe this, I hope, in the future. It will keep them busy.

UM: Does this time of year, the holiday season, bring back good or bad memories?

FM: We never really had any kind of a Christmas. This is one part where my memory fails me completely. I started going back trying to dig up memories of Christmas and there were only one or two: one where I was invited back to the hospital after I had the typhoid fever for Christmas dinner, otherwise [~] NOTHING! A blankness. A bleakness. We never had any gathering around any kind of table. I think we might have had an occasional pigs head, or something like that. Or sometimes my mother would go out, there was a place called the Mechanics Institute where you could go and play cards, 45 or 25 or whatever it was. And sometimes my mother would win a hand. She was very lucky in that way. She'd win a hand and we'd get some potatoes and carrots and that was it. But there was no such thing as Christmas trees or wrapping presents or anything like that. We used to joke about that, about what they might be doing in America now. We'd see it in the movies: Christmas trees and so on.

UM: The movies were a big escape for you. Was that something that kept your possibilities open?

FM: Yeah, the movies weren't just an escape. They were real. That was America right before us. I didn't distinguish between fiction and reality. If we went to see James Cagney, that was America. Or Fred Astaire. I thought America was just full of Fred Astaires and James Cagneys. I had my choice of one or the other. Dance my way to the electric chair.

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