



Angela's Ashes

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Poverty, the mournful familiar of Frank McCourt's memoir, ANGELA'S ASHES, has always occupied the thoughts of great writers. McCourt dramatizes poverty's victims, destitute lives made ridiculous and anarchic. Yet he also carries from the pitiable circumstances of his youth in Limerick a reconciliation that is never self-pitying, always able to allow the comic in, and, above all, can say, with fellow writer Frank Sylvester, that "memory of the heart is the longest." The book's anchoring sentiment is contained on its opening page: "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was of course, a miserable childhood. . . . Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood."

Rarely has the want of some one thing so defined sadness: a piece of bread for one kind of sustenance, Frank's, a pint of stout for another, his father's; a penny to refresh; a pair of shoes to replace rubber-tire ones; a job for his father so his mother Angela will not have to beg and the family go back on the dole.

The McCourts dub their flooded-out and foul-smelling downstairs "Ireland" and the upstairs "Italy." Three of Frank's siblings die in the first eighty pages. At age ten, Frank himself nearly succumbs to typhoid. His father, Malachy McCourt, is the book's most memorable figure although it is his reckless drinking that almost destroys the family. With the entry of the United States on the side of hated Britain, Malachy and other Irishmen decide the war is a worthy cause and join depleted work forces in England. With the absence of Malachy, the oldest son (the narrator) works as a coal hauler, then as a telegram messenger. On his bicycle, he watches the Shannon flowing on its way to America. He dreams of returning and, at nineteen, he does.

McCourt has chronicled a painful but ultimately rewarding coming of age. ANGELA'S ASHES helps raise the currently thriving genre, the memoir, to new literary heights.

Sources for Further Study

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Angela's Ashes: Angela's Ashes

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