

Frank McCourt: from New York to Limerick

A leading literary Limerick figure

RACHAEL KEALY

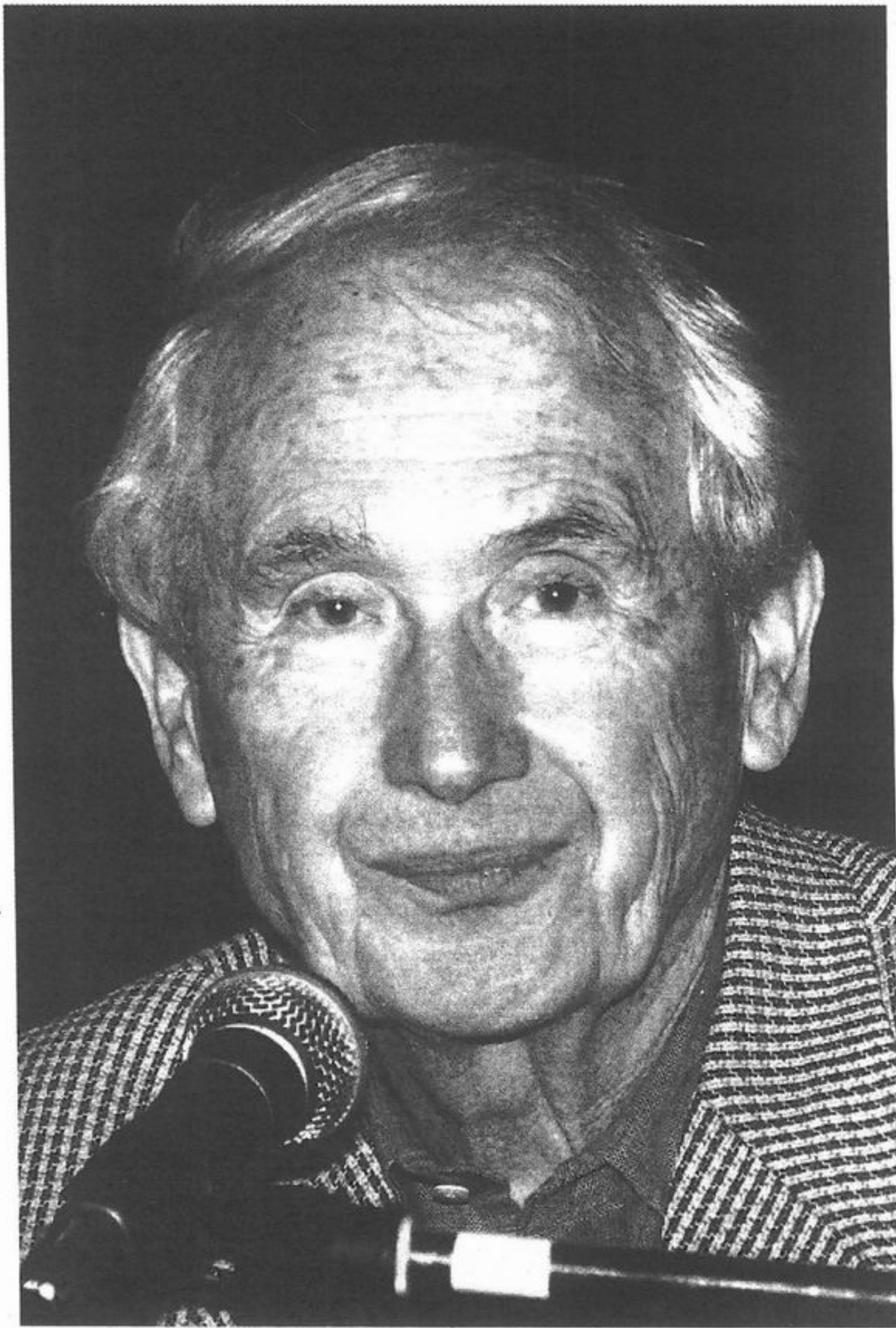
For a man most famous for writing about his childhood in our city, Frank McCourt was actually born in Brooklyn, New York in 1929. His father, Malachy McCourt, couldn't claim Limerick as his birthplace either, as he came from Antrim. It was only his mother, Angela McCourt (née Sheehan) who was born here. It was for her that his most seminal work was named, Angela's Ashes.

The young Malachy and Angela

met in Brooklyn, and married when Angela discovered she was pregnant with Frank, who was to become the eldest of seven children, only four of whom would survive to adulthood.

Malachy worked odd-jobs in New York, but much of his earnings were spent in the pub and as the Great Depression fell over the city, his alcoholism worsened and the situation for the family grew dire. Frank's baby sister, Margaret, died at just 21 days old. She was buried in a mass grave for poor children, in

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Queens.

Mired in grief and struggling to survive, the family made a fateful decision to move back home to Ireland. Angela's mother sent enough money for the tickets and in 1934, when Frank was four, they sailed back across the Atlantic. They landed in Donegal and made their way first to Frank's paternal grandfather's house, in Antrim. It was there, he would later recall, that he and his brother Malachy Junior first encountered cows, goats and sheep.

While initially welcomed, the family felt they should move on, and it was to Dublin they turned next. Malachy – who had been active in the periphery of the War of Independence – sought out a version of a pension from the IRA. No record could be found to corroborate his claims and he was turned away empty-handed by an official in Terenure. "This is new Ireland," Frank remembered his father saying, "little men in little chairs with little bits of paper."

With no funds to support them in the capital, the family took refuge in a Garda station, where they were treated with kindness. They enjoyed bread and butter while the sergeant's wife offered them boiled eggs. Brought by motorcar to Kingsbridge Station (now Heuston), they were delivered onto a train to Limerick,

the fare having been paid by a collection among the Gardaí in the station.

Grandma Sheehan met them in the station – Frank remembered a white haired, sour-eyed, unsmiling woman – and brought them to their first home in the city, on Windmill Street.

The 1930s was a time of economic hardship in many parts of Europe and Limerick city hadn't escaped its share of poverty and social problems. Roden Lane was probably one of the most deprived areas of the inner city; from descriptions in Angela's Ashes, the street was overcrowded, infested with vermin, with poor drainage and just one dirty toilet for the use of a number of families squashed into two-up, two-down houses. The McCourts shared one bed in a single, damp room, while Malachy worked odd jobs, never holding down a position for long. Frank's twin brothers died soon after their arrival in Ireland; first Oliver, and then Eugene about six months later. The pneumonia that killed them was likely brought about by the unremittingly damp environment and lack of access to nutritious food and medicine.

Two more sons were born – Michael and Alphonsus (Alfie) – and with World War Two underway, Malachy left his wife and four remaining children for England, hoping to find work in a munitions factory in Coventry. Soon afterwards, news filtered

back across the Irish Sea that he was drinking as much as he was earning, and getting into trouble with the local police. Every Friday, the children would anxiously wait for the messenger boy, hoping he would be bringing some money from their father. More often than not, he was empty-handed. Eventually, all con-

tact from Malachy would cease.

In a time before social welfare and with little governmental assistance, utter destitution was a real risk for Angela and her children. Frank later wrote that the children went barefoot and were always hungry and cold, begging for food or collecting coal chips from the street outside in an attempt to keep warm. The children grew sicker and Frank himself suffered from severe eye infections and rotting teeth. When he was ten, he almost died from typhoid fever, a deadly disease usually found in areas of poor sanitation. This fraught period was not without its eventual benefits though – sequestered in a fever hospital for some 14 weeks, the young Frank passed the time by reading and chatting to fellow patients. There, he discovered poetry, Shakespeare, fiction and history, forming a bedrock of literary appreciation that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

The family lived hand-to-mouth, surviving on charitable donations and ingenuity – at one stage they even burned some of the temporary walls in the house, for warmth. It was all well and good until the boys took an axe to a supporting wall. They moved then, into Angela's cousin Gerard (Laman) Griffin's house in Rosbrien. In the book, Frank alludes to a sexual relationship between his mother and this unsavoury relative; it may well have been the only way she could keep her family off the streets.

Frank attended Leamy National School on Hartstonge Street (now the location of the popular Frank McCourt Museum), where he wrote that "one master would hit you if you don't know that Eamon De Valera was the greatest man that ever lived, the other if you don't know that Michael Collins was the greatest man that ever lived". He left as soon as he turned fourteen, working as a telegram delivery boy, later taking on a number of different roles in an effort to boost

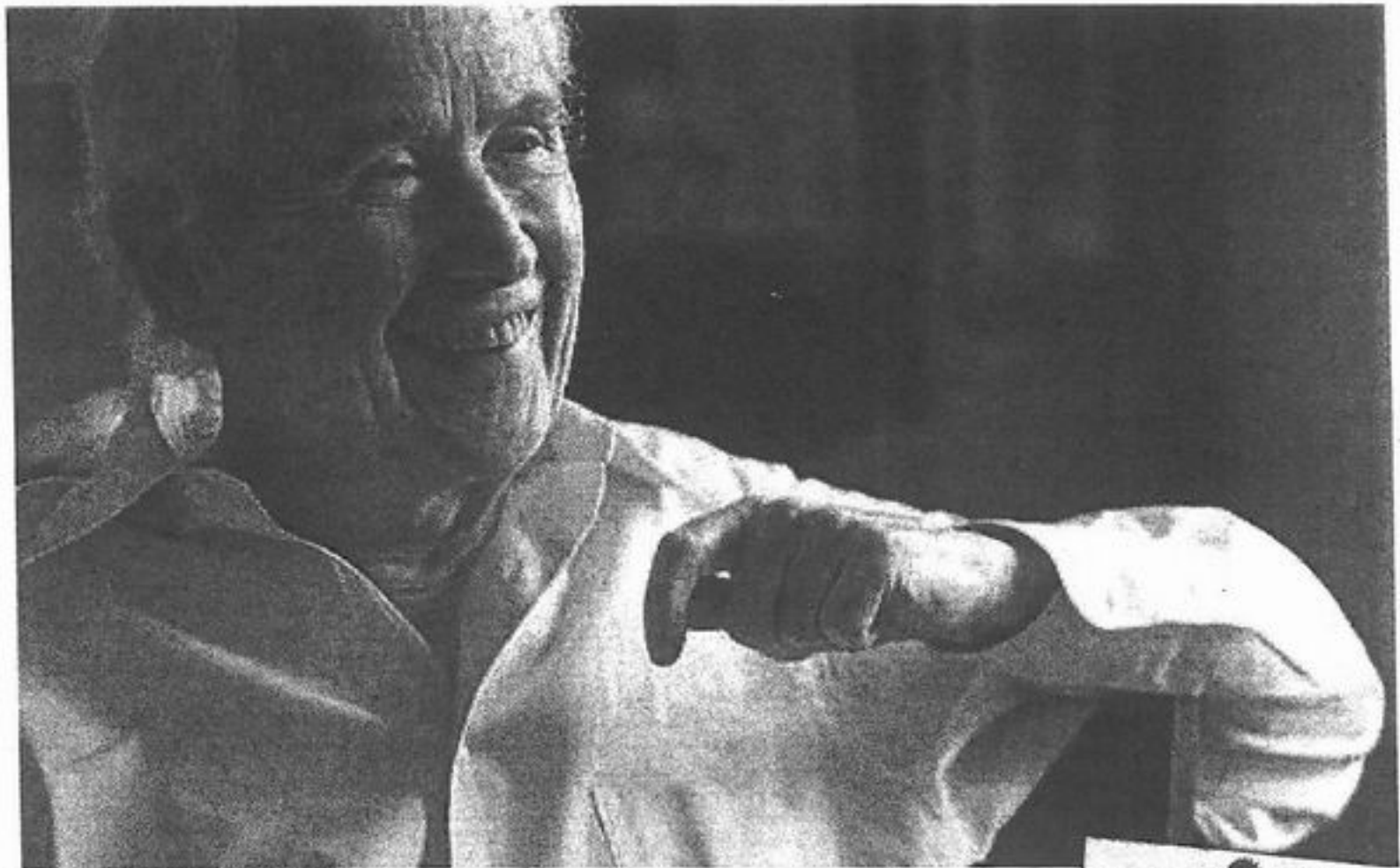
the family's coffers. In the book, he recalls writing debt collection letters for a local money lender. In one memorable scene, he capitalises on her unexpected passing by raiding her savings, using the money to pay for passage to New York in October 1949.

When he arrived, he found employment via Irish connections in the Biltmore Hotel. However, as an American citizen, he was eligible for the draft and soon called up. Although the US was engaged in the Korean War, Frank was sent to Germany after his sixteen weeks of basic training. There he was trained as a clerk, learning advanced typing and communication skills. In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, the devastating destruction had a sobering effect on the still very young Frank. In his later book, *Tis*, he recalls visiting Dachau and wondering at the propriety of saying a Catholic prayer for the Jewish dead.

While in Germany, he was promoted to Corporal, contracted mumps and was sent for two weeks' furlough in Ireland. After three years he was discharged from the army, and went on to take advantage of the GI Bill, enabling him to go to college. He achieved a degree in English and Education and by March 1958 he had secured his first job as a teacher. It was to be a turning point in his life, proving to be a vocation as well as a career.

McKee Vocational and Technical High School was an education in itself. The Staten Island students were a rag-tag bunch of trainee blue-collar workers and petty criminals. Part teacher, part correctional officer, Frank had to learn quickly how to control his students, most of whom had little patience for the stultifying world of academia.

Recounting tales of his childhood in Ireland helped keep their attention and interest, and he soon found himself practiced at the art of storytelling,



Frank McCourt in jovial mood at home



a skill he perfected in his local pubs. His brother Malachy – by now a successful television personality – had opened his own bar on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and Frank was often to be found there, regaling the punters. He settled into teaching life, moving to another tough school, Seward Park High, and marrying a young woman named Alberta 'Mike' Small in 1961. Together, they had a daughter, Margaret, who was known as Maggie. Unfortunately, the marriage didn't last, and they parted after a decade together.

In 1972, following a brief stint in Dublin studying at Trinity College, Frank returned to teaching, taking up a post in creative writing at Stuyvesant High School on the Lower West Side. He would become one of the school's best-known and much-loved teachers. Some of his works were published in magazines and newspapers at this time, but he was still struggling to convey his Irish stories in a novel format. Together with his brother Malachy, he took to the stage, performing their two-man play, *A Couple of Blaguards*.

The early eighties were a time of tumult and grief for Frank: his mother Angela died in 1981, while he received word of his father's passing in Belfast in January 1985. A brief second marriage also took place, and it wasn't until 1989 that things began to turn around. This was in large part down

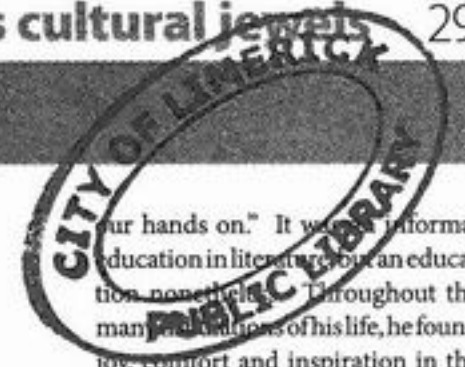
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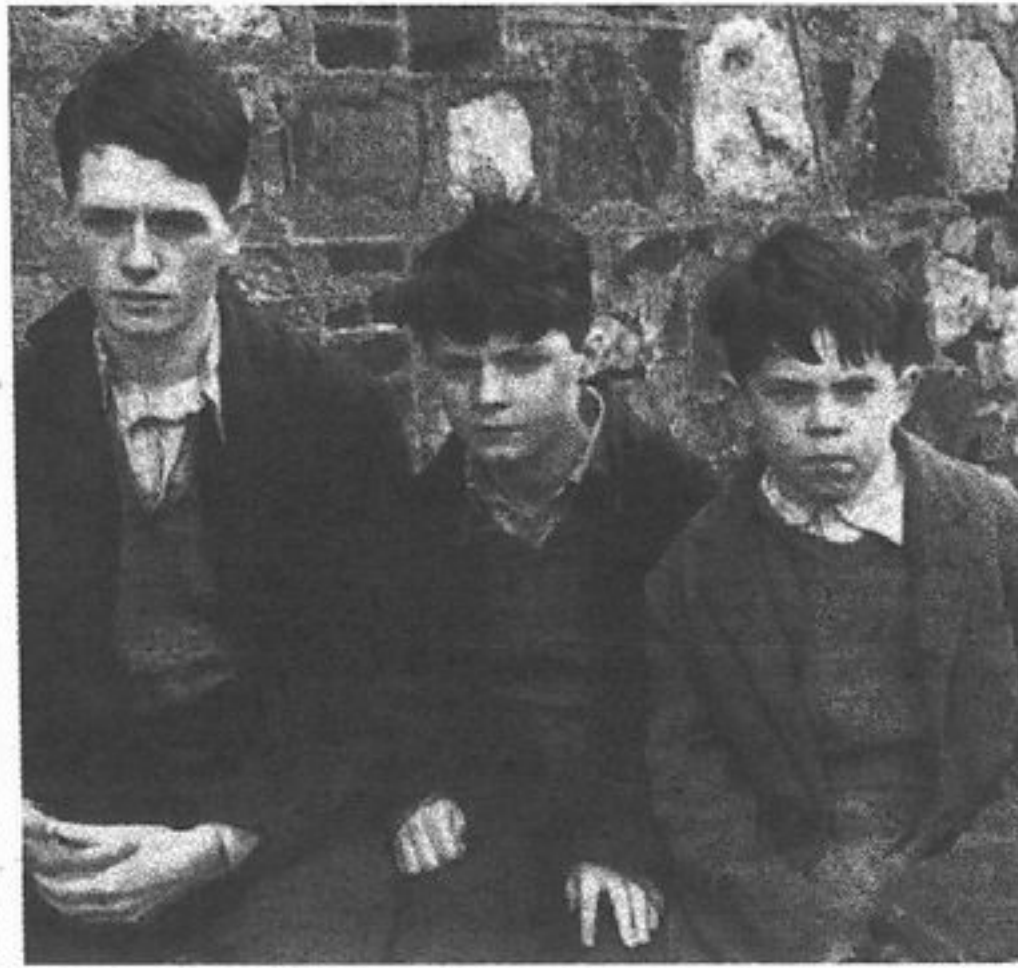
our hands on." It was an informal education in literature, but an education nonetheless. Throughout the many years of his life, he found joy, comfort and inspiration in the written word.

Frank McCourt continues to champion Irish-American literature and education, through his legacy and the tireless efforts of Ellen. The Frank McCourt High School of Writing, Journalism and Literature was founded in New York in 2009. Closer to home, the renowned Irish writer, Professor Joseph O'Connor, holds The Frank McCourt Chair of Creative Writing in the University of Limerick, overseeing what is quickly becoming one of the most esteemed writing programmes in Ireland, attracting literary luminaries such as Colum McCann, Donal Ryan and Richard Ford. The inaugural University of Limerick / New York University Frank McCourt Creative Writing Summer School, which recently took place in Glucksman House on Fifth Avenue, brought together students from all over the United States and Europe, celebrating literature and learning.

Frank McCourt lived a life that was characterised by tragic lows and dizzying highs, but riven through with creativity, a passion for learning and a courageous sense of adventure. Ever the 'teacherman', he is, years after his death, still inspiring just that same sort of adventure in today's students.



Frank McCourt teaching in New York.



Actors depicting Frank and his brothers in the movie, Angela's Ashes

to his meeting Ellen Frey, a public relations expert from California. They married in 1994, and with a newfound peace (and extra time, for he had now retired) he sat down to write in earnest. Thirteen months later, Angela's Ashes was completed, arriving onto shelves in 1996.

The highly-engaging memoir was a runaway success, topping bestseller

lists for months across almost 30 countries. The critics approved too: he won the National Book Critics Circle award in 1996, and the Boeke Prize and Pulitzer Prize a year later. Film rights were quickly acquired, and the movie version, directed by Alan Parker, was released in 1999. That same year, he released 'Tis, picking up the story in America,

recounting his life from the age of 19. This was followed in 2005 by Teacherman, a memoir of his teaching career.

The representation of a relentlessly rain-soaked, miserable Limerick in Angela's Ashes drew some fierce criticism, however, levied mainly at Frank McCourt himself, who was accused of exaggerating the poverty

of his childhood. The controversy gave rise to a book of alternative memories of Limerick, Tis in Me Ass, written by local radio DJ Gerry Hannan, intended to show the city in a more positive light.

Frank McCourt died in July 2009, leaving behind his wife Ellen, daughter Maggie and grandchildren Chiara, Frank, Jack and Avery. With

the sad passing of Michael McCourt in 2015 and Alphie McCourt earlier this summer, there remains only one McCourt brother - Malachy - who shares the memories described in Angela's Ashes.

In an interview in his latter years, Frank recalled, "we didn't have television or radio or anything like that, so we read everything we could get



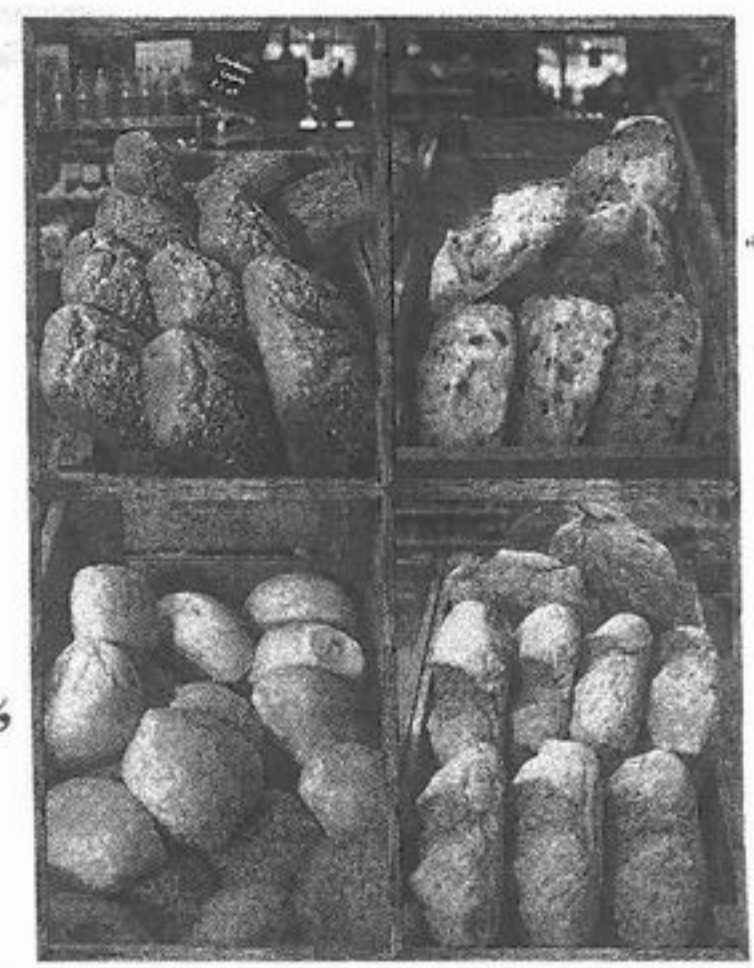
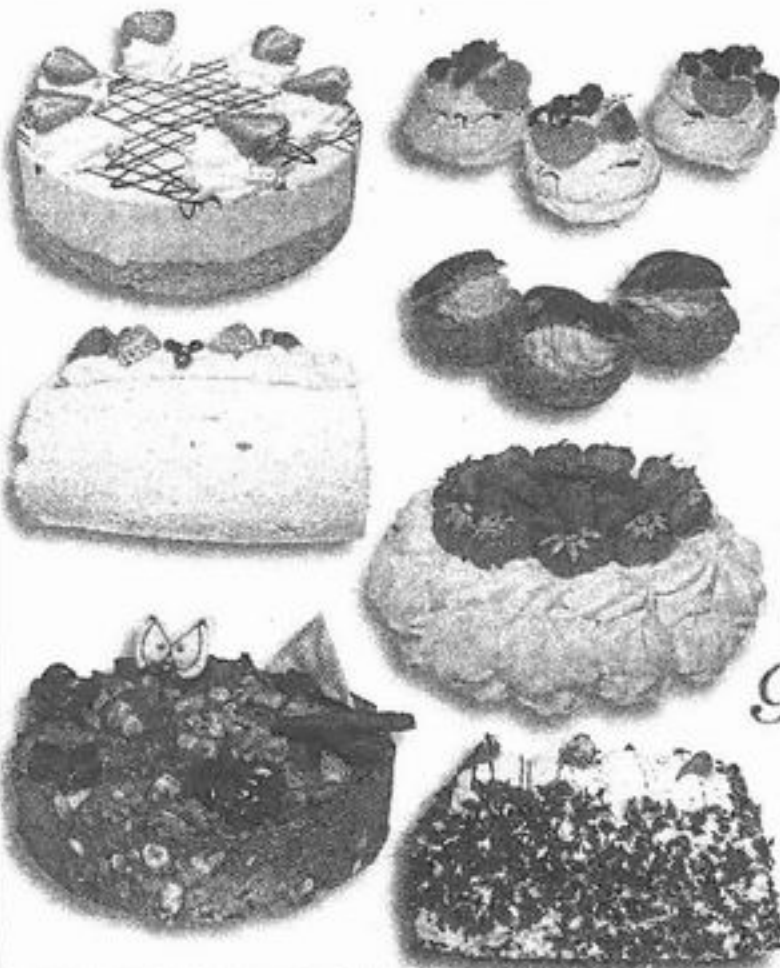
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