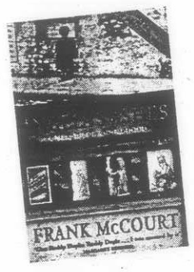
Ashes that keep on burning

books



Two years after it was published, the memoir Angela's Ashes is emerging as the biggest-selling book of the 1990s. With an introduction by Cormac Kinsella, NUALA O'FAOLAIN explains why the world keeps buying Frank McCourt

Angela's Ashes' incredible success has seen no equal in recent years. In the autumn of 1996 Frank McCourt gave a reading in Dublin. He had been on The Late Late Show the night before and was pleasantly surprised at the large number of people who came into town on a Saturday afternoon to hear him. That was October — by Christmas he was a superstar.

The hardback edition went on to be reprinted nine times, and by the time the paperback edition hit the shops it was already sold out. The paperback edition has been reprinted 26 times, having sold millions around the world. The hardback edition is still one of the 20 best-selling books in the United States. It is now being turned into a film by the director Alan Parker, who has spent the past few weeks filming in Cork and Limerick.

That autumn, the Irish book trade had another surprise. An Irish journalist published a powerful and poignant memoir whose title was based on the refrain its author heard when she met people who hadn't met her before. Are You Somebody? went on to become a huge success in Ireland, then in Britain and the United States. Nuala O'Faolain was one of the earliest champions of Angela's Ashes. Here, she outlines the reasons she felt so strongly about a memoir by a retired Irish-American schoolteacher whom nobody had previously heard of.

There has never been an Irish book with a destiny like Angela's Ashes. It arrived on the scene from nowhere, the work of a nobody, and proceeded to lay claim to a territory where nobody had been before. It neither set off to scale the heights of art, nor settled for the mild plain of the conventionally popular. It isn't Ulysses, though its worm's-eye Limerick is as impeccably remembered as Joyce's Dublin. It isn't, on the other hand, a reassuring moral tale, such as Maeve Binchy tells, to huge international success. Yet it has had, and even surpassed, Binchy's popular success while being certain to join Ulysses among the classics of Irish writing.

It defies categorisation. It is memoir, yet shaped as much by Frank McCourt's artistry humorous that it makes the reader helpless with laughter. It is utterly Irish, yet there is nothing parochial about its appeal, and it has sold in millions all over the world, including countries where English is not spoken and Ireland barely known. It calls out its story from the bottom of society, a place that most of the systems of the world have decreed does not have a voice — the place of the pauper underclass.

Angela, the mother in Angela's Ashes, owns a few things. Jam jars, for instance, in which she serves her family's tea. Old coats to put on their bed. She is one with all the women in the world who have two bowls, or a tin plate and a mug, or a single blanket and nothing else to furnish wherever they call home. The child Frank and his brothers are one with all the barefoot children, or children in home-made boots, who stare out at us with bewildered eyes from photographs of the ghettos of the poor.

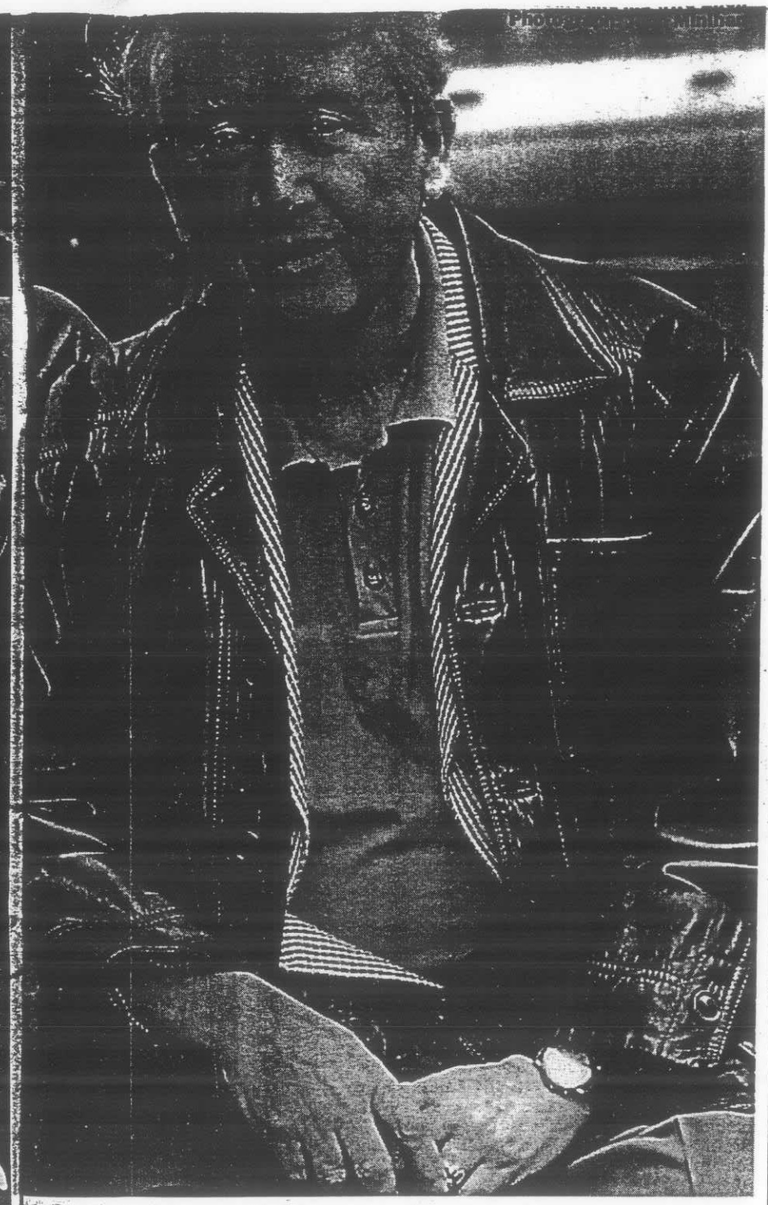
Even readers who neither know nor care about material poverty know the other kinds of empowerment the McCourt children know. All children must depend on the strength and goodness of their parents. All children are helpless when parents fail in these things, as Frank McCourt's parents failed.

When his father, Malachy McCourt, drank the money for their food and medicine, he was every father who, though painfully loved, did not love enough.

Not that Malachy. didn't try. Few things in Angela's Ashes are more tellingly done than the glimpses of the father's dumb inner life; in his long walks, his refusal to eat, his leaving them to go back to England, to his real life as a drunk, on Christmas Day.

Most readers hardly notice how effectively Frank McCourt does quiet things like that, overwhelmed as they are by the book's unforgettably painful passages, such as the surviving little twin, Eugene, seaching for his dead brother. He calls Ollie's name at first whenever he sees a fair-haired child and then, losing hope, "he doesn't say Ollie anymore. He only points". And then Eugene dies himself.

God asks too goddamn much of this family, as a passing doctor says. He took their mother's hope, and the children's trust, when they searched Brooklyn for their errant breadwinner.



by alcoholism. He almost took the life-chances of the boys who survived.

But, above all, he took the fellow with the odd manner from Northern Ireland and the sweet, feckless Limerick girl he got pregnant, and he handed them lives in which on even the longest walk it would not be possible to make out the operations of justice or mercy. And when Malachy disappeared, there was nowhere for Angela to go but further down. Begging outside the priest's house. Selling her pride to her cruel cousin.

But even as the parents decline, the boys grow up, vigorous as weeds reaching for the light. The glory of the book is its double perspective — the reader sharing the doctor's outraged and heartbroken overview of the McCourt family, but at the same time looking up at the rich life of that family and its place and time from the point of view of the child Frank.

The wake, for instance, for poor little dead Eugene, is peopled by the fierce granny, the uncle who hasn't been right since he was dropped on his head and the uncle who was gassed by the Germans and doesn't give a fart. As an event it is lent magic by food and

And the room is often the scene of tenderness, humour, and a creativity of idiom so unforced that the family doesn't even know that these qualties it possesses are gifts. The same is true of Limerick itself: on one level so hard and hypocritical, on another, so eccentric in social character that people of absolutely no property can survive there.

Survive, even, with wit, as in the savage verbal antics of the teachers Frank encounters. Survive in good company, because the boys with whom the McCourts share the great events of childhood — like saying the rosary over a dead greyhound because it is very likely a Catholic greyhound, or trying to see a girl's body — are not much better off than they.

Survive with grace, as in the scene with the much worse-off Clohessys, where Angela sings a last Oh, The Nights Of The Kerry Dancing with the dying man in whose arms she once danced light as a feather.

The Clohessys, like the McCourts, are within their fate. They live it as it comes. But if their world is full of suffering borne as uncomplainingly as if it were deserved, it is also full of goodness. From the Jewish and Italian

who relieves him of his guilt about his dead lover, Theresa, individuals shine in the mire like stars.

But the saviour of Frank McCourt — and all that in him which made Angela's Ashes — was not a person but a place. The United States of America is the hero of this book, longed for as the place of health and opportunity, and entered (as it transpires) through the accident of a few hours with a generous party girl from Poughkeepsie, triumphant with joyful love-making.

If, therefore, this is a great Irish book, it is also one that could not have existed without America. The suffering is Irish: the genial entertainer who puts it before us is Irish-American. That word has long been synonymous with the trite and the kitsch: Angela's Ashes reclaims it for the true heart and for art. □

This article appears in Waterstone's Guide to Irish Books, edited by Cormac Kinsella

Assem work

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Factories aren't all boring o
Two new plants in rur

Odd, isn't it? You wait a deca or so for an architecturally a bitious big new factory to t up, and suddenly two co along at once. We are genera as bad at making them as at hanging onto t jobs inside them and in the current econn climate you wouldn't expect much to chan In the north, it hasn't. In the south, it h Welcome, Motorola. Welcome, Dyson.

In the long history of British industry, ru Wiltshire tends not to spring to mind. E Wiltshire has Swindon, once the epicentre the world's railway industry, today focused on new technologies, which now includes a gleaming new cellphone equipment factory for Motorola.

Wiltshire also has Dyson Appliances. James Dyson's phenomenally successful vacuum cleaner company has made him one of Britain's richest men. Since he has no shareholders, he is free to plough big wedges of money straight back into the business. Having previously bought an off-the-peg factory shed, he has now doubled it in size with a pair of new buildings as clearly architectural as his products are designerly.

Pipes dream

Step forward Chris Wilkinson, a man with a high-tech pedigree who has emerged as o of the big names in Britain's 1990s archite ture revival. Wilkinson is best known for h highly original bridges from the Thames the Tyne, but he is also a "supersheds" m For all its clever glass and tensioned-fab entrance details and unexpected interior c ours (Lilac? In a factory?), the wavy-roof Dyson building is, indeed, just a big shed. E then so was west London's famous art de Hoover factory of 1935: a plush facade, tr but with a plain box behind it.

I think that Graham Anthony, who d signed Motorola's Swindon building, h achieved more, against the odds. Motorola a vast international conglomerate driven accountants, not a British-based, one-locati concern driven by a design personali Moreover, Anthony does not come from openly high-design practice such as W kinson's. On the contrary, he is a new partn of one of the country's largest, oldest a most anonymous architectural firms, She pard Robson, which had lost its way and w producing some very glum stuff by the 198 But he shares a pedigree with Wilkinso Both worked in the early 1980s for Richa Rogers, now Lord Rogers, as part of t superteam that Rogers assembled to desi the Lloyd's of London building. They a