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• The Irish guide to Irish culture.

Review

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With more personal tensions than you ever see in the Intensive Care unit, BBC's 'Casualty' lurches from one drama to another

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MUSICAL MAESTRO

It's easy to knock Lloyd Webber. But just how good is the creator of 'Phantom of the Opera'?

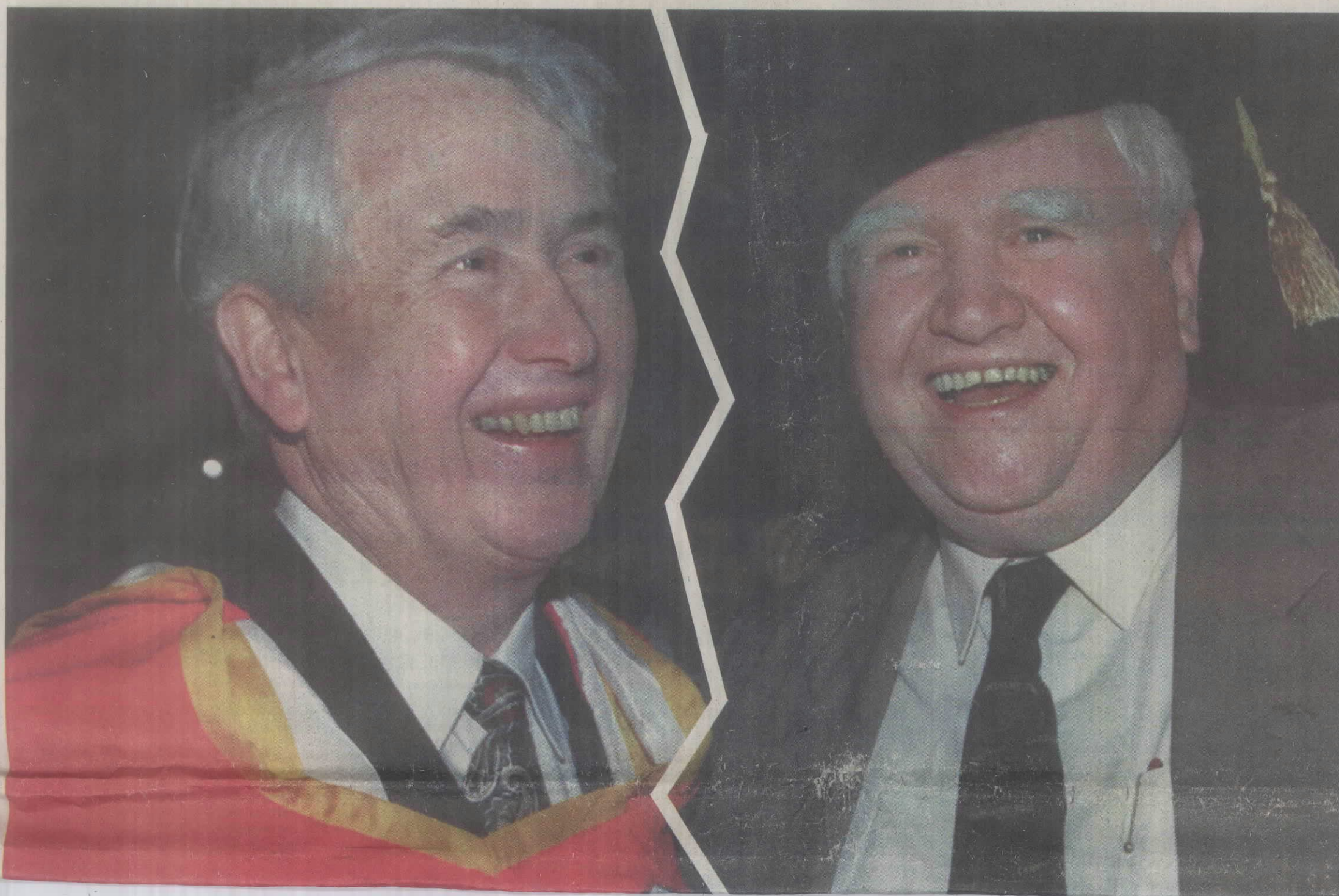
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Whose life is it anyway?

FRANK McCourt isn't exactly jumping around the room with joy. Indeed, as he relates the quite remarkable

couple that he and his brother have pulled off, you think you glean resignation in his voice, a sheen of ruefulness appearing in the squinty, blindy eyes that he himself has immortalised.

Their achievement is this: he and his younger brother Malachy are the first ever authors from the same family to have books in the *New York Times* bestsellers' list at the same time. Of course, Frank McCourt could almost claim squatting rights in this most famous and prestigious of best-selling lists, *Angela's Ashes* being a permanent fixture there since its publication in 1996. Recently, though it has been joined by Malachy's memoirs, *A Monk Swimming*. If Frank's success was surprising and unexpected, Malachy's success is surprising and inexplicable.

Inexplicable, because – how can I put this diplomatically? – Malachy's book is a crock of shite, an appallingly bad book, with bloated prose, a superabundance of adjectives and a rambling, pointless, storyline.

Notwithstanding those minor flaws, it has been a sensation in the States. It has savoured the thin air at the top of best-seller lists all over America (Number 3 in New York and Number 1 in San Francisco and Los Angeles) and in Australia (where it went to Number 1). The book may yet prove to be an inspiration to bad authors everywhere.

Frank McCourt and his brother Malachy are both on the *New York Times* bestsellers' list.

And are they happy about this? Well, Malachy certainly is. They talk, separately of course, to **Harry McGee**

"I'm told that this has never happened before, two brothers being on the bestsellers' list at the same time," Frank says drily. He could be telling you that it's a dull old day and there's rain expected. Later, his brother Malachy will also reflect on it, but his voice will be full of marvel: "Imagine that, not bad for two laners from Limerick!" he enthuses.

Frank's attitude to Malachy's book could be summed up by that slightly obtuse word: philosophical. He's not jealous of Malachy nor resentful of the book but you get the distinct impression that his welcome for it was not exactly unqualified.

He doesn't beat around the bush when saying that Malachy's book has scaled the heights because it has cashed in on the success of *Angela's Ashes*.

"(Malachy) said himself that Frank has long coat-tails. It's a piggyback book," he says bluntly. "It's riding in on *Angela's Ashes*. Everybody admits that."

One of the problems that *A Monk Swimming* presents for Frank is that it treads some of the ground that Frank will revisit in the sequel to *Angela's Ashes*. He has slaved over the book for the past two years and is now over half way through it. He hasn't read Malachy's book and won't until his

own book is completed. He thinks that perhaps Malachy should have spoken to him before embarking on it.

"I'd have liked it if Malachy said he was writing a book and sat down and told me: 'I have a story to tell. There's something I have to say.'"

Malachy, for his part, responds to that simply, almost unarguably: "Frank did not consult me on *Angela's Ashes* and I did not consult him on *A Monk Swimming*."

ANOTHER source of concern is encapsulated in a headline from a recent edition of the *New York Times* to which both of them aver. It reads: "Have you tired of the McCourts yet?"

Angela's Ashes has, in the past two years, spawned a veritable range of McCourt literary and dramatic products. There are two revivals of Frank's and Malachy's own play, *A Couple of Blaggards*. Then there is Malachy's book. And the two documentaries by Malachy's son, Conor, *The McCourts of Limerick* and *The McCourts of New York*. On top of all that, director Alan Parker has begun shooting the film version of *Angela's Ashes*. Within the next year and a half, too, both Malachy and Frank will publish the sequels to their books.

Is there a danger that the McCourts are Behanising themselves, over-mining what is, after all, a thin and exhaustive seam of gold? "Inevitably, if there is too much, people will begin to yawn," says Frank. "When it comes to the book that I'm writing and it's integrity, I can't help what my brother or my nephew do. I can't tell them what to do."

"Even my younger brother Alfie has started to write a book. My other brother Michael is the only one who has no interest. He was asked in San Francisco, 'when are you going to write a book?' 'When the other f**ers are dead!'"

Interviewing the McCourts in fairly quick succession is a strange experience, given that the brothers are as different in bearing and personality as Laurel and Hardy. I meet Frank in the rather fancy Castletroy Hotel on the outskirts of Limerick city, where coffee is sold at an outrageous £1.50 a cup. For a man of 68, he is in robustly good health.

I draw the rather obvious comparison between this monument to the affluent '90s and the slum lanes where he grew up. It is the day after he has dropped the salient little nugget that the film of the book will be shot in Cork because Limerick no longer has any slums.

"I went with the location

people and my wife this week and I could not find the lanes. All I found was the semblance of a lane. It's all gone."

All gone, but still there are some Limerick people who contest that it was never there. McCourt's description of poverty in Limerick when he was growing up in the late '30s and '40s is so good that the grime almost lifts onto your fingers as you turn the pages. But some have claimed that he exaggerated, transmogrified Limerick into Dickensian swill. During the US President's visit there last month, Clinton sensed the crowd's coolness when Bertie Ahern mentioned Frank McCourt's name and riposted beautifully with: "Frank, you made a lot of money from the old Limerick, but I think that I like the new Limerick better."

"Some people say I had attacked Limerick. *Angela's Ashes* was more of an explanation than an attack. A lot of people did not understand that the book was not about Limerick, it was about poverty."

WHEN Frank McCourt talks, he is writerly, deep, serious.

Writing for him has never been about verbosity; it's always been about reduction... chewing a sentence until there's nothing left but the bone. Hemingway, in his estimation, was the master of that. *Big Two Hearted River* is one of McCourt's favourite stories. He talks about the way in which, with one sparse unfattened sentence, Hemingway can create such a rhythm and invoke such powerful feelings and senses.

Angela's Ashes is also



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ERATELY SEEKING SOMETHING

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SHOW GOES ON Documentary

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who served in the North

African campaign in World

War II 5.00 File on Four:

Major British and foreign

issues, repeated from

Tuesday 5.40 Feedback:

listeners' comments 6.00

News 6.45 Pick of the

Week with Chris Serie 7.00

The Archers: Aistialic 7.15

Room for Improvement:

Self-improvement 8.00-

10.00 (LW only) Open

University 8.00 Spangles

n. Tights: Comedy serial

8.30 Word of Mouth 9.00

Science followed by Connect:

Business series 9.30 In

Business: Can all British

companies cope with the

global depression? 10.00

The Westminster Hour

11.00 Brain of Britain

1998 11.30 Something

Understood: Autumn: A

source of inspiration for

poets 12.00 News 12.15

Experimental Feature:

Thoughts on the cosmos

12.30 The Late Story:

Chlorine by Bridget

O'Connor, read by Nadia

Sawalha 1.00 As World

Service