



CELLULOID DREAM: Bobby Carlyle and Emily Watson as Frank's parents

As a boy, Frank McCourt ran barefoot in the slums of Limerick, scrabbling around to find food and coal for his poverty-stricken family.

His home was damp-ridden and filthy, sewage ran from the outside toilet and there was no knowing where the family's next meal would come from.

At least that was his life in Limerick as a child, according to Frank McCourt and his blockbusting novel *Angela's Ashes*.

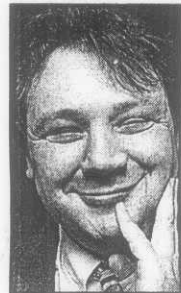
But while McCourt's story of growing up the poorest of the poor in Forties Ireland won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1997, it has also earned him undying hatred in his home city.

The people of Limerick were appalled by what they saw as a slur on their city.

And they have not been slow to let Frank McCourt know what they think of *Angela's Ashes*, which has now been made into a \$50million film starring Robert Carlyle.

Paddy Malone queued patiently at O'Mahony's bookstore in Limerick, as McCourt signed copies of the book.

But when it came to his turn, he stared down at his old classmate McCourt and ripped the pages from the book.



VITRIOLIC: Gerry Hannan

forms the focus of McCourt's literary phenomenon.

The book, which recounts the gruelling poverty of McCourt's childhood, has sold five million copies worldwide. This week, Parker's film version of the best-seller, starring Carlyle and Emily Watson, premiered in London.

Both book and film have received rave reviews.

And Limerick has seen a boost in tourism as readers make the pilgrimage to see where little Frankie and his brother Malachy, who is also an author, walked the streets in search of dropped pennies and firewood to take home to their mother Angela.

But some residents are not amused at the attention the town has attracted.

Along with Malone, they grew up in the same cobbled lanes as McCourt. And they say both *Angela's Ashes* is nothing more than a distorted character assassination of the dead.

Malone says: "My mother always said never humiliate anyone and never mock the dead. McCourt has done both."

McCourt's book, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1997, is a chronicle of a youth dogged by an alcoholic father, a care-worn mother, cruel neighbours and the dictatorship of the Catholic Church.

He wrote: "When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at



LEARNING EXPERIENCE: Frank McCourt, front right, with his third year class. Paddy Malone is back row, second left



AT THE COURT OF McCOURT: Frank and Malachy McCourt in Kilkee around

PORTRAIT OF AN UNHAPPY

By ANNIE BROWN

all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while." And a happy childhood makes less interesting reading, as McCourt knows.

He has come under fire for exaggerating his poverty and suffering to add drama to his prose.

And a mini-war has been raging in Limerick since the publication of *Angela's Ashes* in 1996.

Lambasting

Campaign headquarters is local pirate radio station Limerick 95 and at the helm is the vitriolic Gerry Hannan, a DJ who has devoted the last three years of his life to lambasting McCourt on the airwaves.

Each night his lines are jammed with callers decrying McCourt. Most are elderly and Catholic - and dismissed by the writer as "begrudgers".

McCourt claims Hannan is an opportunist hoping to profit from the

two books he has written as direct ripostes to McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and the follow-up *Tis, called Ashes and Tis in Me Ass*.

Hannan concedes that McCourt's book is a "literary masterpiece". But he argues that isn't the point. He claims McCourt's dirt-poor childhood is a fairy-tale and that he has defamed the dead.

He says: "The book contains lies. Lies that painted a picture of Limerick as a miserable living hell, which is not true."

Hannan is too young at 40 to remember how it was, but witnesses for the verbal prosecution of McCourt, such as Paddy Malone, are happy to back Hannan's claims.

Malone's family were previous tenants in the house of McCourt's childhood. In the book, it is portrayed as squalid with damp dripping to the floors and the rank smell of the outside toilet wafting through the rooms.

But Malone says: "It wasn't like that. It was basic, but it was clean and cosy. The toilet was outside, but there was no smell. It is rubbish."

Malone was at school with McCourt and claims the writer was not the pathetic, ragged urchin he claims, saying: "He was one of the best dressed boys in the class."

Jackie Brosnan, who ran the St Joseph's Scout Group, in Limerick, remembers Frank and his brother Malachy were the only boys in the town kitted out with the full uniform paid for in cash.

He says: "They were on every trip to camp going."

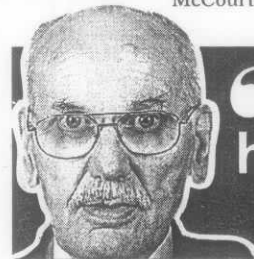
Jackie also remembers employing McCourt in his bicycle

shop for three years after he left school. There is no mention of that regular wage coming in to the McCourt household and, when McCourt eventually decides to go to live in America, he claims he had to steal the money for the fare.

But the anger goes beyond McCourt's portrayal of his own life.

Hannan said: "His biggest sin was to use the real names of the people in the book and, in many cases, he demolished the reputations of people who were deceased and could not defend themselves."

One of the main victims, according to



My old mother always humiliate anyone and ne dead - McCourt has d



PERFECTLY PREPARED: Malachy, Frank and Michael McCourt, all in their Scout uniforms in 1943



OLD PALS ACT: Eddie Donnelly – the camp cook – Frank McCourt and Jackie Brosnan enjoy life at a Scout camp in Kilkee



BOOK STAR: Angela, Frank's mum

Frank McCourt's best-selling book Angela's Ashes has sold millions world-wide. The film version is tipped for Oscar glory. But the people of Limerick say McCourt's harrowing tale of growing up dirt poor in 1940s Ireland is nothing more than literary licence

OF MY CHILDHOOD?

ldy Malone, was McCourt's mother
gela herself. Paddy's mother
phine and she were best friends.
e says: "Angela was called the Angel
he Lane. She was a robust, loving,
ng woman – not the cold drudge that
Court paints."
McCourt's claim that she slept with
first cousin Laman Griffin in the
illy home is also a lie, according to
one.
e says: "She was a very religious
nan. I don't believe she did that.
I cannot think of anything more
ng than to tear Angela's name apart

**said never
ver mock the
one both**

like that. She had been let down by men
all her life and in the end Frank did the
same thing."

McCourt has admitted one falsehood.

In the book, his schoolmate Willie
Harold is depicted as having sneaked a
peek at his sister's naked body.

Harold didn't have a sister and, in the
advanced stages of cancer, he went to a
Mccourt book signing to set the record
straight.

McCourt says he gave him a free copy
and Harold was fine, but the old man
died before the story was corroborated.

He was also accused of scandalising
the family name of Teresa Carmody by
writing of a sexual encounter with her
days before she died of TB. When he was
accused of lying by her relatives, he
claimed the name was made up.

Even those who support McCourt
admit that using real names showed a
lack of wisdom on his part.

Eugene Phelan, news editor of local
paper the Limerick Leader, says: "I
don't think there would have been the

fuss otherwise, but even with that, most
people in Limerick love the book."

At the signing for Tis, a queue of
hundreds of local fans snaked its way
through Limerick's streets.

Limerick University recently made
the writer an honorary doctorate and
many locals are grateful that he has put
the town on the map.

Slums

Phelan says: "I think McCourt has
done far more good than bad for
Limerick. There are more tourists and
walking tours to places that would never
have been heard of if it wasn't for him."

The lanes are gone now and Alan
Parker struggled to find locations that
reflected the slums of the book, but he
shot some scenes in Limerick and used
locals as extras.

Phelan says: "There is a pride here
about McCourt. He is one of our most
famous sons and his book is a work of
genius."

Support has also come from the most

unlikely quarters. Paddy Clohessy's
family were neighbours of McCourt and
he now lives in London.

*His family life is portrayed as both
feckless and crude, yet he is one of
Mccourt's greatest defenders.*

He says: "I thought the film was a very
deep and moving experience. It really
hit the nail on the head. It is mainly
telling the story of the way things really
were."

McCourt, who now lives in America
with his third wife, has laughed off the
vendetta against him.

In a televised confrontation on the
Irish chat show The Late, Late Show,
Mccourt told Hannan: "I don't know
why you are so obsessed with me. Why
don't you get a life?"

Success has come late in life to
Mccourt and he is grateful.

He says: "I know if I was a success
earlier in life, I would have squandered
cash on making myself unhappy."

*Still, unhappiness, like poverty, is the
stuff of the gritty best-seller.*

**UNHAPPY
SUCCESS:**
Frank
Mccourt
dismisses
critics as
"begrudgers"

