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ANGELA'S ASHES

all a load of blarney?

Frank McCourt wrote about his mother and his childhood growing up in poverty-stricken 1930s Limerick in the award-winning book, *Angela's Ashes*. But, now, locals say Angela would be turning in her grave

There's nothing to mark the spot where Angela McCourt's ashes were scattered beside the ruins of Mungret Church in the Irish city of Limerick. Not even a simple cross bears her name in the crowded graveyard, where generations have been laid to rest. Yet her memory, more than any other, haunts the city.

It was awoken by her son, Frank McCourt. His searing account of growing up in the Limerick slums in the 1930s has sold five million copies and won him the Pulitzer Prize. The book, *Angela's Ashes*, has also been embraced by Hollywood and, this month, the film opens in New Zealand.

There is just one problem. While the critics have called Frank a genius, locals in Limerick, including those who grew up alongside him, claim he is a hoaxter and liar who has embellished the past for his own gain.

They have accused him of painting a sensationalist portrait of their city, littered with vicious half-truths which exaggerate how poor he really was.

In total, they have counted "117 lies or inaccuracies" in the 426-page book, which range from obscure details to wrongly accusing one local man of being a peeping Tom. They believe Frank, who has lived in New York for the past 50 years, has won fame and fortune at the expense of their neighbours and relatives who are no longer alive to defend their names.

Paddy Malone, a retired coach driver who appears in the frayed school photograph on the book's cover, is among the author's most furious detractors. He, too, grew up in the lanes of Limerick. As a boy, he walked the same streets as Frank, went to the same school, the same Scout group and church.

"I know nothing about literature but I do know the difference between fact and fic-



Frank McCourt



Robert Carlyle and Emily Watson star as Frank's parents in the upcoming film version of *Angela's Ashes*

tion," says Paddy. "Frank McCourt calls this book a memoir but it is filled with lies and exaggerations. And the McCourts were never that poor. He was after more sympathy. He has some cheek."

Frank describes a childhood of aching misery and squalor in the back lanes of Limerick, where it was always raining; mattresses were riddled with fleas; they wore cut-up old tyres for shoes; fought for docketts

for food, furniture and medicine; suffered the cruel indifference of the Roman Catholic church; begged and lived beside a stinking lavatory shared with six other houses.

His mother, Angela, is presented as a broken, chain-smoking woman and his father, a feckless alcoholic. When his father abandoned them altogether, his mother had "excitement" – sex – with her own cousin, in return for a roof over their heads.

According to Paddy, the truth is different. There is no mention in the book of the pleasant green lawn at the back of McCourt's house, the holiday trips which Frank went on with the Scouts, his expensive uniform and the fact his mother was overweight, despite his claim she was forced to beg for scraps from the priests' dinner table.

"The only thing which rings true is the toilet," says Paddy. "It was terrible. But I tell you there's more s*** in that book than ever went down that toilet at the house on Roden Lane. And I should know. I lived there, too. As for his dear mother – she was a lovely woman."

When Paddy first read *Angela's Ashes*, he was so incensed he went to confront Frank at an author's signing session at O'Mahoney's bookshop in Limerick. He took his copy and tore it into four pieces in front of the writer as a protest.

"I told him who I was and I said, 'I don't like what you write, especially about my friends and neighbours'," says Paddy. "He started quoting Shakespeare at me. I said, 'I never learned Shakespeare but start saying your prayers for your mother, who you prostituted in your book'."

At midnight, red lights flash fiercely on the switchboard at Gerry Hannan's Limerick radio phone-in show in the city centre. For the past three years, Gerry has spear-

headed the campaign against *Angela's Ashes* and he has led much of his assault from the local airwaves.

Although Gerry is only 40 and has no memory of Limerick in the 1930s, he is convinced Frank has twisted the city's history to make his book more shocking.

"As far as I'm concerned, he's a con man and a hoaxer," says Hannan. "He knew the right things to say to get the result he wanted. He's a darling on TV. He's got this beautiful brogue and he can put the charm on. And don't get me wrong – the book is beautifully written. But it's not true.

"I've never felt so strongly about anything.

her family together and earned the title "Angel of the Lanes" for her kindness to others.

No one doubts the poverty of Limerick in the 1930s – they were tough times. But, despite the collapse of a number of industries, including ale, paper and linen factories, there was still a lot of work. There was also a dual welfare system – backed by the Roman Catholic church and state – for those who did run into trouble.

Bacon curing was Limerick's chief asset, with four factories in the city. The flour mills and cement works also gave many men work, albeit on low pay. And those who could not find a job struggled to make ends

of England or the Pope himself – it's our duty to point out the truth."

What seems to bother Frank's detractors most is he has made Limerick famous for its squalid past, not its thriving present. The misery-drenched city he remembers, in the late 1930s and 1940s, has almost disappeared. And no one, apart from the McCourts, seems very interested in remembering the suffering.

So much of Limerick has changed, the film-makers were forced to go to Dublin and Cork to shoot most of their location shots.

"I can't get concerned with this," Frank has said. "There are people in Limerick who want to keep these controversies going."

'There's more s*** in that book than ever went down the toilet at Roden Lane'

He's written about ordinary folk who did the best they could. They pulled together, they came through and they built this city, while the likes of Frank McCourt swanned off to New York. They deserve better than this."

As the calls pour fast and furious into his show, everyone wants to talk about "that book" again. Their three biggest criticisms of the book, aside from the endless misery it depicts, include the description of a local boy, Willy Harold, as a peeping Tom who spied on his naked sister. It turns out Willy, now dead, never had a sister – which Frank has since acknowledged.

Then, there's the account of his sexual relations with Teresa Carmody, when he was 14. Teresa was dying of TB at the time and locals are outraged he could sully her memory.

And, perhaps most of all, there's the unflattering portrait of his mother, Angela. Those who remember her insist she was a delightful woman, who struggled valiantly to hold

meet between the dole office and the St Vincent De Paul Society.

Many locals argue the system worked, by-and-large. The bacon industry meant there was always cheap food and – despite what Frank says in his book – there was no shame in eating pig's head, even on Christmas Day. It was "half a crown for half a head".

Frank Prendergast, a former Limerick mayor and local historian who grew up within 200m of Frank's house, says, if he did suffer, it was because he had a feckless father, not because of the failings of the city, the church or the neighbours.

"He suffered a unique poverty because his father was an alcoholic, not because he lived in Limerick," says Frank Prendergast. "But he has traduced people and institutions which are very dear to Limerick people.

"If you see someone coming into your community, saying something monstrously untrue – I don't care whether it's the Queen

Of course, Frank has his followers in Limerick, too. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the university. And he has brought tourists flocking to the city. There is now a walking tour in honour of *Angela's Ashes*, which has attracted 3000 visitors. The proceeds go towards projects for old people.

Michael O'Donnell, who runs the tours, also grew up in poverty in the city. He remembers the fleas, the consumption, the severe austerity of the church and how the Christian Brothers beat an education into him. Now the city is thriving, he wonders if people are reluctant to face up to the past.

"A lot of people are in denial," says Michael. "They don't think it was that bad. People in Limerick have done very well and they don't like to be reminded of the past. I'm very proud of Frank McCourt and the fact a Pulitzer Prize winner came out of the slums of Limerick."

Rebecca Fowler

The lanes of Limerick, as depicted in the film

