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A portrait of the artist as a confused memoir writer

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•Frank McCourt: accused of confusing real life with what he read in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the memoirs of Seán O'Casey (LL)

By MARTIN BYRNES

FRANK McCourt "lifted without a by-your-leave" for the writing of Angela's Ashes, according to a new controversy brewing in London.

And the same debate has questioned the value of "a 200-acre Famine Theme Park" on Knockfierna in the centre of County Limerick.

The row is over the publication of a new book *The Irish Story*—telling tales and making it up in Ireland by Roy Foster, the Carroll Professor of Irish History at the University of Oxford. And helping to widen the controversy is Craig

Brown, critic with *The Mail* on Sunday.

The events and motivations, even the basic facts of Angela's Ashes and of its sequel *Tis*, are called into question, and Mr McCourt is as much as accused of confusing real life with what he read in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the memoirs of Seán O'Casey, both of which were about Dublin poverty of half a century earlier.

The author of the new book is, says Mr Brown "from a long line of Irish Protestant historians who have valiantly held out against the ruthless sentimentalisation of the past that until very recently—perhaps only a fortnight ago—had its

gnarled hand firmly on the rudder of Northern Ireland".

That said, the questioning of everything about Angela's Ashes is relentless and Prof Foster writes that: "it is impossible to escape the sneaking feeling that the literary classics devoured by the youthful McCourt ... have heavily influenced his 'memoirs'." And Mr Brown remarks on Prof Foster's merciless use of inverted commas, and gives examples of what he calls "McCourt's shaky hold on truth".

Having described the somewhat odd tourism which has developed since the launch of Angela's Ashes, Mr Brown says that: "Prof Foster is immune to the Angela's

Ashes industry, and he approached the original source like a man with a chemical hose, clad in a decontamination suit". Among the other apparent enigmas looked at in the new book are Sinn Fein's leader Gerry Adams' autobiography in which he seems to avoid all reference to the IRA, Hugh Leonard's naming elements of a fictitious hotel after events in Irish history in which the restaurant is called "the Famine room", and the Knockfierna brochure which invites the visitor to the famine theme park to "experience first hand" how 1,000 people struggled for survival a century-and-a-half ago.

Frank McCourt