

Obituaries

Frank McCourt

Writer who told of grim childhood with humour

FRANK MCCOURT, who has died aged 78, was the author of *Angela's Ashes*, the best-selling memoir of a his childhood in a Limerick slum.

The book describes Roden Street, a laneway of seven houses sharing a single outside toilet, dwellings flooded by incessant rain, a home infested by rats.

Despite the horrors of his childhood, he told his story with humour, brilliant description and deep compassion for his family, even for the shiftless father who instilled in him a love of language and storytelling.

Published in 1996, *Angela's Ashes* spent 117 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines selected it as the best non-fiction book of the year. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1997.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930, he was the first of seven children of Malachy McCourt of Toome, Co Antrim, and his wife Angela Sheehan from Limerick. In

1934, unable to find work in the depths of the Depression, the family left New York and returned to Ireland.

The family was met at Limerick railway station by the grandmother he had never met. "Grandma, with white hair, sour eyes, a black shawl, and no smile for my mother or any of us."

McCourt's father, an alcoholic, was unable to hold down a job and eventually abandoned the family, leaving them penniless.

Three of McCourt's siblings died in childhood, of diseases aggravated by malnutrition and the squalor of their surroundings. He himself contracted typhoid fever at the age of 10 and was treated in a sanatorium.

He later became the family's financial mainstay, working as a newspaper boy and delivering coal while still at school. His primary education ended when he was 13 and shortly after he began working as a telegram boy. He supplemented his wages by writing threatening letters to debtors on

behalf of a moneylender. When he had saved enough money he returned to New York. It was a brave move for a 19-year-old who was, in his own words, "unequipped [with] no education, no self-esteem".

He worked at odd jobs until he was drafted into the US army at the start of the Korean War. He spent the war stationed in Germany. On his return to civilian life, he took advantage of the GI Bill to pursue a college education. Although he had not attended secondary school, he persuaded the admissions office of New York University to accept him as a student.

He studied English, continuing an interest stirred by reading books such as *Tom Brown's School-days* and *Huckleberry Finn*. While his childhood interest in language and storytelling were fed by creative writing classes and his own constant reading, he did not feel ready to pursue a career as a full-time writer. After graduating, therefore, he completed a Master's thesis on Oliver St John Gog-

arty at Brooklyn College.

He made a career in teaching and, working for the New York City public school system, taught creative writing for almost 30 years. He sought to convince his students of their worth as individuals. He instilled in them the confidence to write their own stories.

"So they took the plunge and they wrote, and some were willing to read to the class and I think they were glad they did," he said.

His students in turn asked him to do likewise. "And I did - more and more."

He spent his summers working on a novel based on his youth in Ireland, but was unable to find his own voice until he retired from teaching. Anger was a major impediment. "It was only when I felt I could finally distance myself from my past that I began to write about what happened, not just to me but to lots of young people."

Closer to Gorky than to Joyce, *Angela's Ashes* is deliberately non-literary. "I was lucky I found a voice that made the book pos-

sible... I'm not knocking Joyce, we all owe him a debt, he's the one who made so much possible. But this book is an outsider's life. It's my life, the story I knew."

The writer George O'Brien, reviewing the book in this newspaper, described it as "an unlikely but undeniable treat to read and an undoubted feat to have written". However, it received a mixed reception in Limerick. There were many detractors, the most prominent of whom alleged that there were major inaccuracies in the memoir, and said it should be reclassified as fiction.

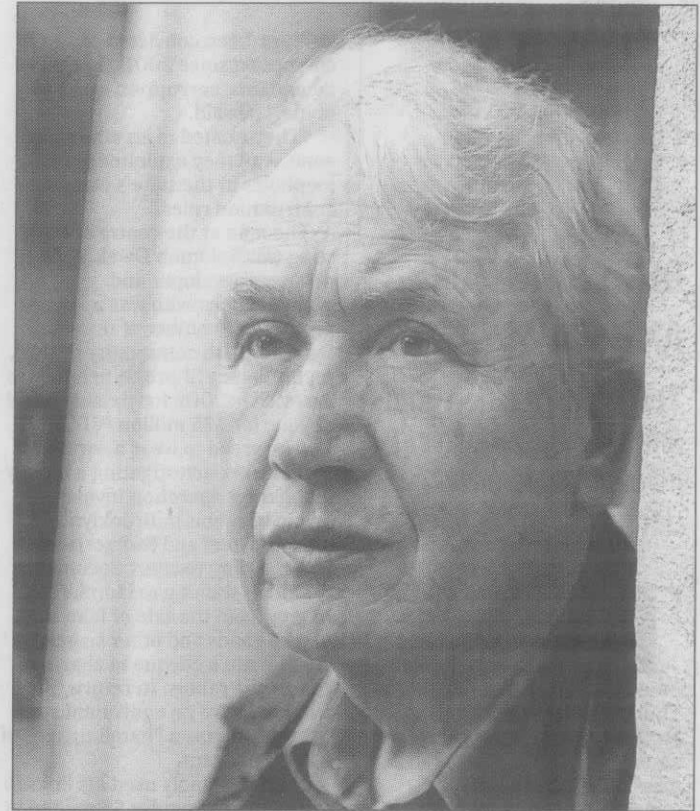
Nevertheless, it sold over four million copies, was published in 27 countries and translated into 17 languages. The film adaptation, directed by Alan Parker, was released in 1999. With his brother Malachy he was the author of the play *A Couple of Blaguards*. The second volume of his memoirs, *'Tis*, was published in 2000, and also was a best seller. *Teacher Man* (2005) describes his experiences in the classroom.

He took a sabbatical in the 1970s to work on a PhD at Trinity College Dublin on Irish-American literary relations, but abandoned it. However, he was conferred with an honorary doctorate by the University of Limerick in 1997, and was the recipient of an honorary degree from the University of Western Ontario.

He was in no doubt as to the source of many of Ireland's problems. In 1996 he told *The Irish Times*: "I'd say the worst thing that ever happened to Ireland was the coming of the Catholic Church and the incredible power it was to enjoy for such a long time. All the lives it ruined with its bullying. It left a legacy of retarded sexuality. You can't forgive damage like that." Asked if he believed in God, he said: "Yes I have my God, I see him as a long wave breaking."

He is survived by his wife Ellen Frey and daughter Maggie, from an earlier marriage.

Frank McCourt: born August 19th, 1930; died July 19th, 2009



Frank McCourt: 'the worst thing that ever happened to Ireland was the Catholic Church'. Photograph: Michael MaSweeney/Provision

Leszek Kolakowski

Philosopher who loathed Stalinism

FROM THE confines of a number of academic armchairs, on either side of the Iron Curtain, Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish-born philosopher and one-time communist, who has died at the age of 81, understood better than most the true nature of communism in practice.

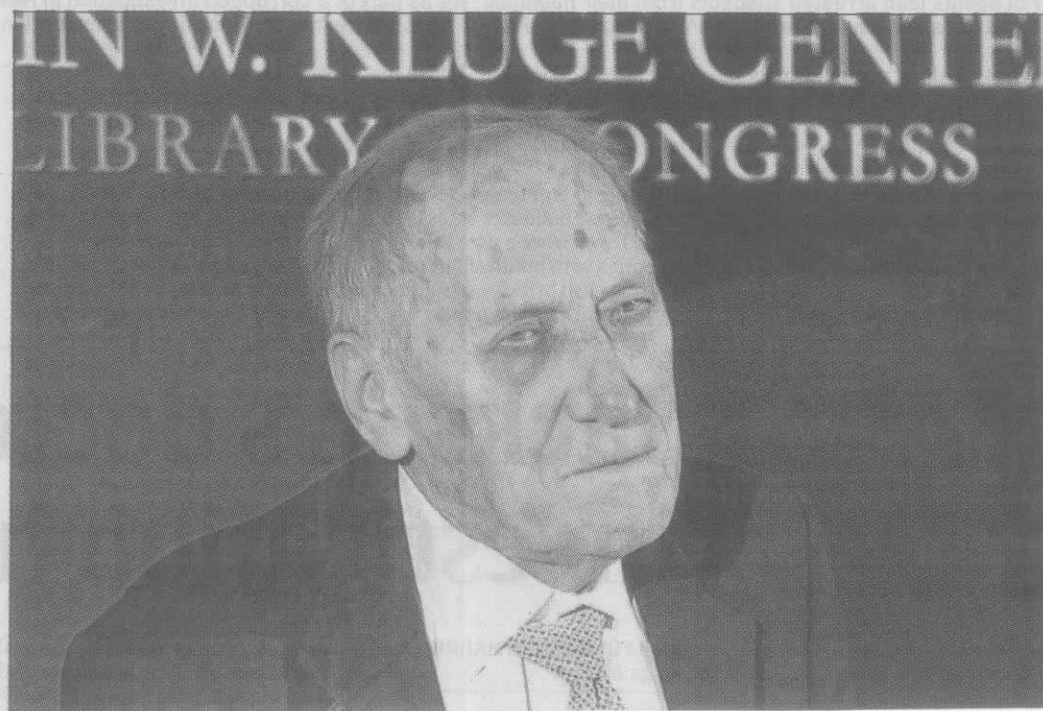
He had joined the Polish Workers' party - as the communists called themselves - while a teenager as it took power after the second World War, and went on to become one of its most distin-

try's then political leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka, had, in effect, lost control, and the hoped-for "social and cultural renewal" had failed. "The October events," he wrote in 1976, "started a process of reversal".

In another essay, published in 1971, he declared that "intellectuals are necessary to communism as people who are free in their thinking and superfluous as opportunists. Theoretical work cannot be useful to the revolutionary movement if it is controlled by anything besides scientific stringency

to be planting his ideas. Writers and artists chose the time of the "Polish October", as their Czechoslovak counterparts did in Prague in the late 1960s, to experiment in the way they expressed themselves.

Repeatedly, Kolakowski would emphasise what he saw as the moral dimensions and the humanist potential of Marxism, fusing the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre with those of Stalin. In one notable essay, purporting to be a dialogue between a priest and a jester, he gave his backing to the



Walter Cronkite

Trusted television anchorman who broadcast all the news that fits

THE DEATH at 92 of Walter Cronkite, the CBS television news anchorman whose solemn tones heralded his country's best of times and worst of times, means the passing of a man who was repeatedly voted the most trusted man in America. In the 1960s and 1970s, millions of Americans relied on his richly reassuring bass to inform them of

Nuremberg Nazi trials and was appointed UPI's bureau chief in Moscow, as the Cold War began. He returned to the US in 1948. In 1950 he was poached by Edward Murrow of CBS to develop news coverage at the network's Washington TV station. "We literally figured it out as we went along," he said. Television, as Marshall McLuhan observed, itself became the message, and