

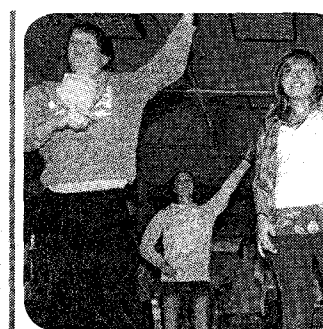
Leader2

Saturday, July 23, 2011

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'Serendipity brought us together'

Frank McCourt's third marriage to Californian Ellen Frey, 24 years his junior, was his longest and happiest marriage. She tells **Anne Sheridan** her memories of Frank to mark the two-year anniversary of his death

IT WAS a cold day on December 4, 1989, when a man swept into the Lion's Head bar on Christopher Street in New York.

At once, Frank McCourt, wearing a dramatic long Irish coat and an Afghan hat, addressed the bar: "Are any of my ex-wives here?"

His two ex-wives were nowhere to be seen, but his future wife - a 35 year-old public relations consultant from California, Ellen Frey, was sitting at the bar.

It was not the most romantic opening line, but it certainly caught her attention.

She had often frequented this "literary hangout", where there was no TV but a "great jukebox", and so did Frank, then 59, but their paths never crossed until now. "We met sort of serendipitously," she says, recalling that a friend of hers was dating a friend of Frank's at the time.

"He was really quite unlike anyone I had ever met. He was handsome, witty in an original way"

- Ellen Frey McCourt

Before long they quickly hit it off.

"I thought he was hilarious," she said with a laugh. "I was a little wary because he does have an ironic sense of humour. He was really quite unlike anybody I had ever met. I thought he was handsome, witty in an original way, not just spouting learned phrases, but that he had genuinely original observations and an off-beat take on things. He had a lot of energy, even though he was older than me, and a lot of spirit and verve."

Frank would later joke that "there were

two women at the bar, a blonde and a brunette, and he didn't know which on to put the moves on". He made the right choice.

Nor did the age difference put a dampener on her affections for him.

"It really didn't [matter]. He didn't seem 24 years older than me. He was perpetually young spirited and young spiritually. It didn't seem like there was a big gulf between us, even though when you think about it, we were from completely different backgrounds, completely different places.

But fate works in mys-

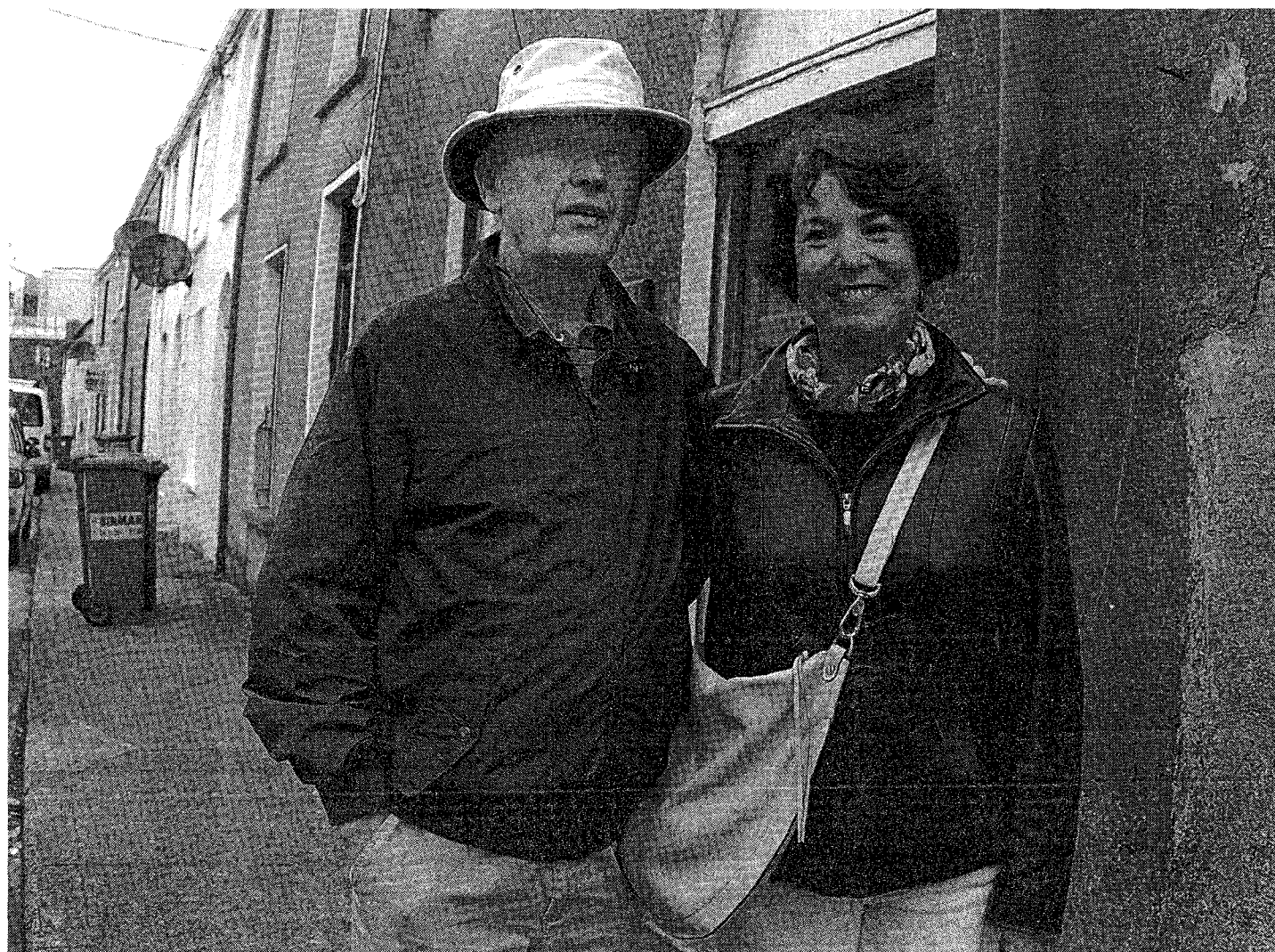
terious ways. "It was by design that we should meet," she said.

Ellen is from Palos Verdes, an affluent area of California, while Brooklyn born Frank had a self-confessed miserable childhood in Limerick, which she feels had a "profoundly moulding experience" on his life.

"We were generationally different and culturally different," she said, "but somehow we got along."

This was seven years before 'Angela's Ashes' was published; his breakthrough first memoir which went on to sell over six million copies.

It said something that Frank's favourite bar was full of writers and reporters. It would later prove befitting that the bar was covered with framed jackets of book covers by famous authors, especially those which frequented this pub in



Frank McCourt and his wife Ellen taking part in the Angela's Ashes walking tour in Limerick for the first time in 2008

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'Frank lives on in my heart'

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Greenwich Village.

Ellen recalled that Frank, a born raconteur, was envious that "he couldn't stay up all night drinking the way the newspaper guys and the writers did. He had to get up and teach."

While he had yet to be catapulted to world-wide fame and be honoured with the Pulitzer Prize for biography, McCourt was nonetheless gathering a steady cohort of fans and admirers in his own way.

"It's not as though I hadn't heard of him," she says.

Even before he wrote 'Angela's Ashes', Frank and his brother Malachy became well-known in Irish-American circles after staging their autobiographical two-man play, A Couple of Blaguards in the mid-1980s in the Village Gate, which was later brought to the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick.

And he was already "a huge star in the classroom" after a career spanning 27 years in New York city schools.

"Before he became a writerly celebrity, he was constantly being stopped in the street by students, they just loved him."

Christmas intervened and soon they became a couple.

One of her more vivid memories of Frank is of him vacuuming in the nude in her apartment, after he moved in - wearing nothing but a cowboy hat.

She remembers him praising the thickness of his towels in his own apartment, not far from her, only to find they were not towels but bathmats.

On August 31, 1994, the couple married on the banks of the Delaware River in Milford, Pennsylvania. Incidentally, all three of his marriages occurred in August - in August 1961 he married Alberta Small, with whom he had one daughter Maggie, and they remained together for 18 years. Five years later in August 1984 he married Cheryl Ford, but they divorced a year later.

"I have to be wary when August comes," he once joked.

This time, Ellen was delivered to the edge of the riverbank in a canoe, while a saxophone played one of Frank's favourite songs, 'I can't give you anything but love, baby'.

There was a big party on the lawn, with a band playing music from the 1920s and 30s, and everyone dressed in F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda outfits. A reporter with the New York Times would comment that "Ms. Frey looked like a cross between Zelda Fitzgerald and Pocahontas", but funnily enough, it was Frank who picked it out.

Now, with a steady companion by his side McCourt would settle down to write his most famous work - and Ellen would be his audience.

It has been said that had he not met Ellen he might never have lifted his pen onto the blank page, for she was the one who urged him "to stop talking about it and write it," as one friend recalled.

"I remember sitting on the couch overlooking the [Delaware] river," she said, "and Frank said 'I'm going to read the first couple of pages of this book I'm writing'. That's really how I read Angela's Ashes.



The official unveiling of a bust of Frank McCourt outside Leamy's School by Ellen Frey McCourt

He would read it to me every morning."

Immediately she thought his writings were terrific, and that it had something indefinably special. Frank always got up early and made the coffee, and then they would sit in bed and he would read what he had written the day before.

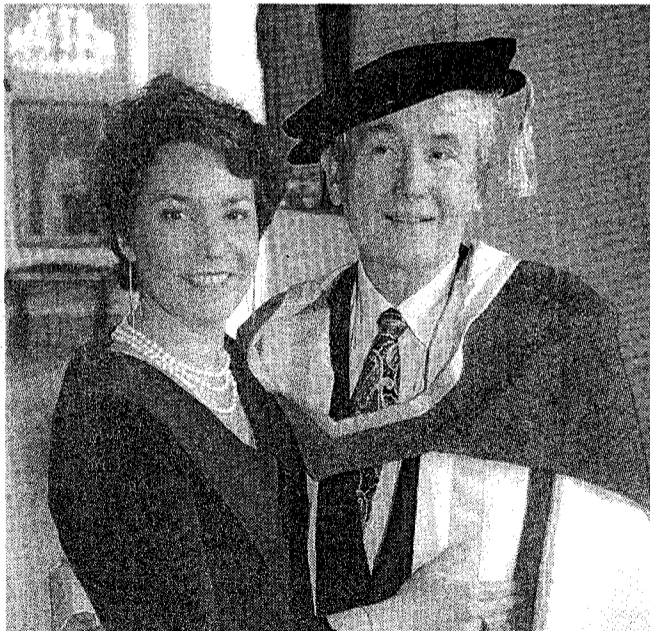
"I had a sort of narrated version of the whole book. It was wonderful. I said 'This is going to be a sensation.' But he did not believe it. He said who's going to want to read about a miserable childhood. I said 'It's not so much the story as the way you've written it.'"

While the book was fanned with controversy in both the States and in Limerick, she believes Frank was largely under-estimated by this negativity.

In a sense, she said the controversy was a "funny thing", in that it was "fuelled by a very small group of people, one of whom had access to the airwaves. I think it was a little bit of a tempest in a teapot. It probably opened a door to a part of Limerick and Ireland people didn't want to look at, and was before even more scandalous events. I think in Limerick there was a bit of shame involved in it.

"He didn't take those things seriously. He knew what he knew, and he knew what he was writing was the truth. For somebody who wasn't even there to say this didn't happen, it was water off a duck's back. It just wasn't plausible."

After Alan Parker's film of



Ellen and Frank during Frank's conferring with an honorary doctorate from the University of Limerick

Angela's Ashes came out in 1999, a group of Irish Americans in Long Island had planned to organise a book burning, but the act was roundly condemned in the press as a form of censorship.

Back on the book tour, Frank got a call from the New York Times, asking him for a comment about the fact that his old haunt, the Lion's Head, was closing. When they got back, Mike Riordan who was running the bar, asked him to come down and served him a whiskey. "He said 'Turn around' and he had put 'Ange-

la's Ashes' on the wall. Frank said it was like receiving the Nobel Prize. For him that really was a highlight."

Suddenly - in his 60s - he was famous, and everyone was asking for his opinion, on all manner of things, such as Northern Ireland, the school system, the Catholic church, and on poverty, and he was welcomed in the fold of the "writerly milieu".

But his years as a teacher never left him, and up to a year before his death he was teaching creative writing at Stonybrook Southampton University. "He remained very loyal to

that cause. Whenever anyone referred to him, he wanted to be called a teacher first, then a writer. Let's face it he liked the recognition. He really felt fortunate to be able to do everything that he was able to do, in the latter half of his life."

With book tours, signing, and public speaking engagements, life was a whirlwind for the couple. At the point when Frank's success became overwhelming, she took a leave of absence from her job, because she thought she'd never see him. "He was travelling from country to country for what we thought would be six months and was more like 10 years."

After three memoirs and a children's book, Frank promised to write the "true story" of Limerick and how this life had changed post-1996.

"He said a lot of things," Ellen laughed.

But we would never know what he might have written. In 2005 Frank was diagnosed with the skin cancer, melanoma. He died four years later on July 19, aged 78. Ellen's father Bob had passed away the previous year, and her Dutch mother Catherina passed away six years prior to that.

Suddenly Ellen found herself with no companion, and a new battle to face. Three weeks after Frank's death she found a lump in her breast and was diagnosed with cancer.

"At the one hand it was a distraction, it made me not think so much about Frank's passing, because I had to focus

on something completely different. So maybe in one way that's a good thing. Let's put the best gloss on it," she says.

It was ironic, she said, that after spending the past several years by Frank's side and monitoring his medical progress, that she too would "end up having a medical crisis and not have him there."

Yet, in one sense she was glad that he wasn't there for that period, because she "wouldn't have wanted to put him through that."

"It's no fun to go through something like that alone, without a significant other. Yes, I've got lots and lots of friends, but you're still going home alone. That is the hardest part I think."

"I was sort of in denial about it. Everybody said it's nothing, but it wasn't. I seem to be fine now, but I will have to be monitored now, really for the rest of my life."

Life goes on, but Frank has not been forgotten on either side of the Atlantic.

For Ellen, there are a million ways to honour him publicly, but she has her own private recollections of a man who was never afraid to cry, and of his "warmth, companionship and humour".

"He was just a lovely affectionate person and was constantly trying to be a better person."

Time has yet to heal the wound of his loss, but he "lives on in the memory and in the heart."