



Inventing the Truth

The Art and Craft of Memoir

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EXPANDED and with a NEW INTRODUCTION

edited by

William Zinsser

MARINER BOOKS

FRANK McCOURT

Learning to

Chill Out



I'm often asked when I decided to write the memoir that became *Angela's Ashes*. I must have wanted to write, because I was always scribbling when I was a kid. But I'm quite sure I didn't want to write about growing up in the shum in Limerick. Nobody coming out of that miserable childhood would; you can't write about that kind of childhood until you're mature enough, until you have some self-esteem.

I thought everything you wrote had to be about England; nobody told me you could write about growing up in Ireland. Everything we were exposed to was English. The first book I ever owned was *Tom Brown's School Days* — my mother bought it for me when I was eight. I don't know why I chose it out of all the books in Woolworth's. My father didn't like that idea; it was English.

The first piece of literature in my life — if you go back to what you might call the intellectual or spiritual activi-

ties — was the Catholic catechism, the little green book that had the questions and answers that prepared us for first confession and first communion. The first question was “Who made the world?”

“God.”

“Who is God?”

“God is the creator and sovereign lord of heaven and earth and of all things.”

“Why did God make the world?”

That’s where I got into trouble. I forgot the answer. So I said, “So we all have something to stand on.” That was my first encounter with theology, and an unfortunate encounter it was.

After my first confession and first communion we continued to have that little green catechism book. We had to keep memorizing it, and the teachers would develop the themes and make us conscious of so much of our daily procedure. I realize now that everything is procedure. We were made especially conscious of sin, because in Limerick everything pleasurable was a sin. First they taught us the seven deadly sins, which were pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Then there were the Ten Commandments, and then there were the seven virtues. Everything seemed to be sevens except the Ten Commandments. You were made conscious all the time, for instance, of how you had to prepare to go to confession. You had to examine your conscience.

This was a form of introspection that was imposed on us. But it was valuable. It forced us to think, “Were we good?” or “Were we bad?” and to think about our various

transgressions. Before you went to the confession booth you would go over the seven deadly sins to see if there was one you ought to mention. The one that always confused me was pride. How could pride be a sin? In America you hear, “Walk tall, be proud of your heritage.” But we were taught that pride is what got Lucifer kicked out of heaven because he thought he was equal to God, if not greater. You were supposed to think little of yourself. Get rid of that evil.

So you’d examine your conscience. Can you imagine an eight-year-old saying, “Was I proud this week?” or “Was I lustful?” We were told that the Sixth Commandment was “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” We didn’t know what adultery was, so we were told it was impure thoughts, impure words, and impure deeds. We boiled it down to dirty things in general: that was adultery. Of course we were curious about genitalia, and girls, and things like that, so we could always confess to that one. But you always felt the guilt, whatever you confessed.

Next came confirmation, and we got a bigger catechism book — the big red catechism, which required more memorizing. Everything was memorizing, memorizing, memorizing. You were never encouraged to look at yourself as a future memoirist, never encouraged to look inward. You were forced to look at yourself from the point of view of the church. The laws were laid down. Nothing was for yourself. You never asked, “Am I happy?” or “Why am I unhappy?”

Of course the main thing about my life was my father’s alcoholism. That was the central event. But, again, we

was a feast for us. You were allowed to take out one book every two weeks; even if you finished a book you had to wait two weeks to take it back. So we set up an arrangement, myself and all the other kids in the lanes. My brother would get his turn and we'd just pass the books around, so it was a revolving library. Then we'd all take our books back on the same day and the librarian would examine our hands to see if they were clean. I would sit in the library for hours, mesmerized by a large book on Indian religions and mythology that had tremendous pictures of the various Hindu gods and goddesses. That attracted me for the first time to another set of beliefs.

In the meantime I was trying to write. At school we were never encouraged to write about ourselves, or about our families, or anything like that. We always had to write about an event in Irish history, particularly how we were betrayed. "They went forth to battle and they always fell," the history books said. We were always on the verge of winning but we were betrayed: 1601, 1641, 1691. We would have beaten the English countless times but there was always an informer. That's the most hideous word in Ireland.

This was the material of a life. Everyone in my generation went through it: the history of the Anglo-Saxon tyranny. "Under the heel of the Saxon." Then the church. Then the poverty. Then my father going off to England. It was essentially an English Victorian culture, with threads of Irish left in it. But when I sat down to scribble things, what was staring me in the face was the reality of being Irish, and that was the last thing I wanted to write

weren't analytical about it. Drinking was drinking. Everybody drank. It was a drinking culture — that's what a man did. You'd hear things like, "You can't trust a man who doesn't take a drink." Or, if you went into a pub and there was a group of people enjoying their drinks, you had to buy your round. If there were six people you drank six pints, but you had to buy your round. That led to alcoholism, which, in our case, led to our descending deeper and deeper into poverty when my father went away. This central event — the drinking — provided the material for what I would write in *Angela's Ashes*.

Meanwhile, the entire time I was growing up I was scribbling and reading. Reading was very hard to do because we didn't have books. When you look around the average American living room it's books, books, books. People throw them out; I wince when I walk around the streets of New York and see books thrown out on the sidewalk. My father had one book, *Jail Journal*, by an Irish patriarch named John Mitchel. Then I got *Tom Brown's School Days*, so we had a huge library of two books. Then I discovered the most remarkable writer of my life, P. G. Wodehouse. When I was about eleven I started reading the adventures of Jeeves and Bertie Wooster. I would read every Wodehouse book I could get my hands on. My brother and I would act out the parts of Bertie and Jeeves and Agatha and all the other characters, and that kept us going until I left Ireland when I was nineteen.

Besides Wodehouse, there was always Dickens floating around somewhere: *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. Then the children's library opened in Limerick, and that

about — the horror of the poverty all around us and the characters all around us in Limerick. Madmen. People walked in the streets who would have been locked up in any other civilization. But we thought they were touched — touched by God, touched by grace.

There were so many extremes in the schools and in the church. The priests were so extreme, and the stuff they preached — the hellfire and damnation. You see it in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Everything was banned. One Sunday morning our priest got up and started ranting about somebody I'd never heard of called Ernest Hemingway, this immoral American who married a Catholic woman and turned Catholic just to marry her and then left her and abandoned his faith. He also fought on the wrong side of the Spanish Civil War. He fought against that fine man Franco, who was a good Catholic. So he's ranting for twenty minutes, and I say to myself, "Who's this Hemingway?"

Now at about that same time my mother used to read a lot of romances, particularly books by a writer named Charlotte M. Braeme, the Barbara Cartland of her time. I think she wrote four or five hundred novels — you know, the usual. Then my mother began to behave in a very strange way. Ordinarily she would sit up in bed at night and read by the light of a candle or a kerosene lamp; we were all in one room. She would leave her book on the table next to the bed, and she'd resume the next evening. One day I noticed that her book wasn't being left on the table; it was being hidden. So where was it? When she went out I ransacked the house looking for the book, and I

found it pushed far in under the mattress. It was Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

"Well," I said to myself, "if she's being so secretive about this there must be some juicy stuff in it." I sat down to read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and plowed my way through it. I was eleven years old. For an eleven-year-old that book is not the liveliest reading. When I came to the end I felt cheated because nothing happened except this one scene where Robert and Maria got into the sleeping bag and the earth moved. I didn't know that was the dirty part — the part that, along with Hemingway's being anti-Franco, caused the book to be banned in Ireland. I was furious that I had read that whole book for nothing. Later I began to hear more about Hemingway and other American writers because the American consulate in Dublin made a gift of two hundred books to the Limerick Public Library, a lot of which went to the children's library. So I began to look at books about America and about New York. I'd sit there for hours looking at the New York skyline. When I finally sailed there many years later I knew the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building and all the other buildings.

But as far as writing was concerned, I was floundering, trying to write detective novels like Edgar Wallace and espionage novels like E. Phillips Oppenheim. I tried to imitate them. I simply didn't know that my own experiences were of any value. Nobody told us anything about that. No teacher ever said, "Go home and write about your family. Go home and ask your father about where he came from, or your mother." It was all Irish history, or the lives of the saints — something like that. So when I came

to New York from Ireland at the age of nineteen I had no self-knowledge at all. Physically I was less than prepossessing. I had bad eyes, bad teeth, and no self-esteem; no education, no skills, nothing. Again, it became a matter of procedure: you land on these shores, where do you go now? That's the next book I'm writing — what happened to me in America. Because the more I look at it, the more I wonder how I survived.

The only thing I had was a kind of energy and a stubbornness rooted in anger. Somewhere in the dim regions of my mind I knew that I felt cheated. I had seen other people in Ireland who were better off and going to secondary school, and I thought I was equal to them in intelligence. So when I saw people on the New York subways with their books that said New York University and Columbia University I thought they were God's elect. I dreamed that someday I might be able to do something like that. But I felt hopeless about it, and I took a series of menial jobs.

All the time, however, I was reading. My reading was eclectic, everything from *Ben Hur* to Lloyd Douglas's *The Robe* and Henry Morton Robinson's *The Cardinal* — all that bestseller stuff. Jesus, where are those writers now? Who's ever heard of them? But then I got to the main library at 42nd Street, which was the great discovery of my life — discovering that you can go into the library and nobody will bother you. In Limerick they were always throwing us out of the library. They acted like sentries, as if they were guarding the books against us. In New York I discovered — my God! — that you can get a library card

and take out three or four books, and you can take out books every day if you want. You can go up to the main reading room on the third floor and stay there all day; it used to be open on Sundays. I was in heaven. I would read with no set program at all. Whatever I could lay my hands on, that's what I read with great enjoyment.

The Korean War rescued me from all those menial jobs and from that part of my life. I was sent by the army to Germany for two years. They had a good library on the base, and I was reading all the time. When I came back I was entitled to the G.I. Bill of Rights. But I thought, "What the hell is the use of having the G.I. Bill? I don't even have a high school education." People said, "You'll probably use up your whole G.I. Bill just getting your high school diploma." That made me feel cheated again.

Well, maybe it was because I had a few beers one afternoon in the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village, but I put my beer down and my half-eaten knockwurst and stalked out of the place determined to do something. I didn't know where I was going; just that I had to *do* something. I stalked across Bleeker Street and found myself in Washington Square. Maybe something was leading me. I went into N.Y.U. and asked, "Where's the admissions office?" They showed me, and they gave me a form, and I applied. They wanted to know where I went to high school. I said I never did. They all started laughing at the cheek of this character coming in who never even got to high school. But I managed to tell them that I had been in the army and that I had the G.I. Bill and that I had been to

school in Ireland. They were somewhat impressed by my going to school in Ireland, so they admitted me on probation for a year, provided I maintained a B average, which I was able to do.

Something happened at N.Y.U. that was a turning point. I was in an advanced composition class, and the instructor told us to write about something concrete, some object from our childhood. So I chose the bed that I occupied with my three brothers when I was a child. It was a disaster of a bed: a huge mattress with red hair sticking out, collapsing in the middle, fleas jumping all over us. I described that, and the teacher gave me an A plus. He said it was very vivid, very powerful, and would I read it to the class? Oh no, I wouldn't read it to the class because the anger was there and the shame that accompanies it. There were girls in the class that I wanted to go out with, and I didn't want them to know what I came from.

But it stuck in my head that the teacher liked it, and I continued to write in that vein. I went from the bed to the room itself, and then to the kitchen downstairs, and then to my father's drinking. Even before that, for some reason, I had been making notes — making lists of streets and neighbors and shops in Limerick. I started making these notes not long after I came to New York, living in a furnished room on East 68th Street, just because I was lonely. It was one way of keeping in touch. That's the strange thing about it: I came from this absolutely miserable childhood, and I'm feeling nostalgic for Limerick. Can you imagine that? Why? I would turn on the radio and hear Irish music and break into tears and want to go home

again. I would write to my mother and say I was coming back. But of course I didn't go back because I couldn't afford to. I might have gone back if I had been able to rustle up the money for a ticket. Instead I was writing in a notebook, putting down the names of priests, things the priests said, things my mother said, things the neighbors said, and I still have a duffel bag full of those notebooks.

After N.Y.U. I got a job as a teacher, at McKee Vocational High School on Staten Island. That's when I came up against another kind of reality. I would open my mouth and I'd hear: "Yo, Teach, you talk funny. You Scotch or somethin'?" The students were curious — I was an exotic because of my accent. So I had to explain what I was. But it was very difficult because, again, I didn't know how to proceed. I knew nothing about American high schools or about schools in general. All I knew was that the schoolmasters back in Limerick had beaten the shit out of us, knocking learning into us with the stick and the strap and the cane. And they made us memorize everything. They asked the questions and you answered. It was a continuation of the catechism: question and reply, question and reply.

As a beginning teacher I was timid and fearful. One day I was ranting at the students like a typical schoolmaster, and a little girl, a little black girl, raised her hand.

"Mr. McCourt."

"Yeah?"

"Mr. McCourt, chill out."

I chilled. That was another turning point. First the bed, and then this kid telling me to chill out.

Because I wasn't like the other teachers, the students wanted to know where I came from and what the circumstances of my life were. I was reluctant to tell them. They wanted to know what my father did for a living. I told them he was a postman — I thought that was the highest you could aspire to in this world. But after a while I said, no, my father was a laborer. Then they were *very* interested. They wanted to know how I became a teacher if I had no high school education. I could see from their expressions that they were puzzled and curious. And I became curious myself. How *did* I get there? If you had told me when I was nineteen that eight years later I would be standing in front of a class at a vocational high school in New York, I would have said, "Oh no. I'd be glad to have a job in an office. Maybe the office of a loading dock in a warehouse, or something like that, because that's where I used to work. The office would be inside, it would be dry, it would be warm. I would have a pet, and a wife named Bridget out in Queens, and a couple of kids running around." That's all I wanted. I never thought I could be a teacher. I must have had some kind of drive to get through N.Y.U. and then take the teaching exam.

Even now when I look back on it I think, Jesus, the gall to have had no high school diploma and no knowledge of how to behave in class or how to deal with the different schools of educational philosophy. Sometimes I would be like the schoolmaster and have the kids telling me to chill out. Then I'd go up to the teachers' cafeteria and there they were, the old-timers and the younger ones. The old-timers with their old-fashioned views: "You're

the teacher. You're in charge. You tell them what to do. Don't give an inch. Don't tell them anything about yourself. Don't tell them anything private." And on the other side you had the progressives, the latter-day John Dewey-ites, saying, "Well, you know they're children, and we have to meet their felt needs." Whatever a felt need was. I didn't know. So I was steering a middle course until I discovered my own style, my own way as a teacher, my own method. It took at least ten years until I began to feel comfortable.

In other words, I became more human in the classroom. Instead of being the schoolteacher, I had to open up. I had left Ireland, this nation of poetic, mercurial, singing people who are all inhibited until they drink, and I didn't know anything about "connecting," as we say nowadays. Human relations. The human heart. I knew nothing about that. I knew nothing about love. God is love. Nobody ever talked about that. There was none of that in our family or any other family. So it was the students, with their curiosity and their openness, who opened *me* up, first at McKee, and then at Seward Park High School on the Lower East Side, and then at Stuyvesant High School. That's where I finally became a human being — a man. The kids at Stuyvesant were more perceptive because they were mostly upper middle class. Many of them had parents who were psychoanalysts, and they might have been in therapy themselves.

I taught at Stuyvesant for eighteen years. That's where I learned to drop the mask. I went in there like the schoolmaster with the act, though I didn't have a stick in my

hand, it was there. But I knew the students were thinking, "What the hell is he up to?" and I became more natural and open and honest. I couldn't have written *Angela's Ashes* without becoming that person. Whatever I did in the classroom spilled over into the book. If I had become a university professor it wouldn't have happened, because high school kids are more direct and less patient than college students. They'd say, "Aw, come on, Mr. McCourt," and I was forced to loosen up.

We would discuss a poem — perhaps Gerard Manley Hopkins or John Donne — and they'd ask, "What does it mean?" and I'd say, "I don't know any more than you do. We're discussing it, aren't we? Do you know what life is? The poem is a mystery." I never said to them, "What does the poem mean?" I said, "When you were reading the poem, what happened?" If they said, "Nothing," I said, "All right, that happens to me too." "Oh, you mean we don't have to understand it?" "Nobody understands it in the long run." I'm saying this to them, but I'm also discovering it myself. The education of Frank McCourt.

All the years I taught at Stuyvesant I was trying to write this book about my childhood. My style was very literary, and when I look back on that period now I despise myself. But I was going through my Joyce phase and my Hemingway phase and my Faulkner phase and writing those sentences that go on for 126 pages. You get so far in that you think you'll never get out. I still have that version of my book, which was called "If You Live in a Lane." It was fiction, thinly disguised; the main character's name

was Philip. But it didn't work because I wasn't able to continue with the fiction — the reality kept intruding. I really wanted to tell the story. But I thought, "Oh God, no, I can't do that," especially while my mother was alive. I certainly couldn't write those parts about her affair with her cousin Laman — she would have denied everything. She used to get furious when I was an adult in New York and we talked about the poverty back in Limerick, about the lavatory that everybody shared. "For Jesus' sake, put that behind you, you're in America now."

I retired from teaching in 1987. By then I was fifty-seven, and I was still poking at this book, still trying to write it — I had notebooks, notebooks, notebooks — and not knowing what ailed me. The paradox is that I used to tell my students at Stuyvesant: "Forget about writing. Just scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble. Put down *anything*. Write honestly. Write from your own point of view and your own voice, and it eventually takes form. There's no such thing as writer's block." So why didn't I go home and do it myself? Why didn't I just tell my story naturally? With all those years of notebooks piling up, and the tremendous desire to write this book, and knowing that if I hadn't written it I would have died an unhappy man?

After I retired in 1987 I did a theater act in New York with my brother Malachy about growing up in Limerick and about our adventures in America. That might have been one way of putting my boyhood into literary form. But as it turned out, it wasn't honest. It was an entertainment. I don't even like it, though we made some money out of it. I was in conflict with my brother and the pro-