

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Angela's Ashes

by

Frank McCourt

Book Information

Frank McCourt, Angela's Ashes

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Interest Level: UG

Frank McCourt and his siblings grow up in the slums of Limerick, Ireland, with an alcoholic father and a mother who wishes she could just feed her children.

Award: ABY Children's Award/Honor Book; ALA Notable/Best Books; Misc./Other; Nat'l Bk. Critic Circle Award/Honor; Publishers Weekly Best Book; Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Countries/Regions, Ireland; History, Emigration/Immigration; People, Family; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Alphonso McCourt (Alfie) Frank's youngest brother

Angela McCourt (Mam) Frank's mother, who has to care for her family without the help of her drunken husband

Aunt Aggie Mam's sister, who is easily annoyed by the McCourts

Eugene and Oliver McCourt Frank's younger twin brothers, who die

Fintan Slattery a boy in Frank's class who gives him part of an apple peel

Frank McCourt the narrator of the story, who describes his poverty-stricken youth

Laman Griffin a cousin who allows Angela and the McCourt boys to live in his home

Malachy McCourt Frank's younger brother who often tries to pull the family together

Malachy McCourt (Dad) Frank's drunken father, who eventually abandons the family

Margaret McCourt Frank's younger sister, who dies in America before the family returns to Ireland

Michael McCourt Frank's younger brother who is born shortly after the twins die

Mr. Hannon a neighbor who asks Frank to help him work on the coal floats

Mr. Timoney a man to whom Frank reads aloud

Mrs. Finucane one of Frank's employers; Frank steals some of her money after she dies

Paddy Clohessy one of Frank's friends with whom he skips school

Patricia Madigan Frank's friend from the hospital who dies of diphtheria

Seamus the janitor who recites poetry to Frank in the fever ward

Uncle Pa Keating Aunt Aggie's husband, who has a soft spot for the McCourt boys

Uncle Pat Sheehan Frank's uncle who is also known as The Abbot

Vocabulary

affliction condition of pain or suffering

Angelus a bell used as a call to recite a prayer

catarrh inflammation of the mucous membranes

catechism a brief summary of the basic principles of a Christian denomination

consumption tuberculosis

pious exhibiting reverence; devout

pram a baby carriage

speakeasy a place for illegal sale of alcoholic drinks

typhoid fever a highly infectious disease transmitted by contaminated food or water

Synopsis

Angela's Ashes is the true account of Frank McCourt's childhood. Frank is born in Brooklyn, New York during the Depression. His mother and father, recent immigrants from Ireland, move the family back to Limerick, Ireland after their daughter, Margaret, dies. Frank's family is poor throughout his childhood because his father uses his wages for drinking and rarely keeps a job.

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After Frank's younger twin brothers die, Frank's father's behavior worsens. Soon, Frank's mother, Angela, gives birth to another boy. With Frank and his two remaining younger brothers, Malachy and Michael, to feed, Angela is forced to beg for charity. Not long after Michael's birth, Frank makes his First Communion, an event that is usually pleasant. Yet, Frank gets sick and regurgitates his communion wafer in his grandmother's back yard, which angers her. Later, when Frank's father takes him to church to offer him as an altar boy, they are refused because they are too poor. When Frank is nine years old, his mother gives birth to another baby, Alphonso, who is called Alphie. Frank, after telling his mother that Alphonso is a stupid name, is slapped and sent upstairs by his mother.

When Frank is ten years old, he comes down with typhoid fever and spends fourteen weeks in the hospital. Frank returns to school, but is placed below his class level because he missed two months of school. After he writes a composition about Jesus growing up in Limerick, he is allowed to go to the sixth class.

Since there are very few job opportunities in Limerick, Frank's father goes to England to find work. When he leaves, he promises to send home his wages, yet he does not. Soon after his father leaves, Frank must go to the eye ward because of a terrible eye infection. Frank returns home and must steal bread and lemonade for his sick mother and starving brothers. Then Angela comes down with pneumonia and must stay in the hospital. The boys are forced to stay with their Aunt Aggie, who acts disgusted with them. Frank's father returns to Limerick but leaves as soon as Angela is able to go home. He makes the boys promise to be good and obey their mother. Near Christmas, Frank's father writes the family to inform them that he is coming home for the holiday. The family waits at the platform for their father, but he does not appear. The next morning, Frank's father walks in the door and is confronted by his whole family. After a Christmas dinner, Frank's father leaves for England once again.

Soon, the rent man visits the McCourts and evicts them for not paying rent and for burning wood from the walls. The family goes to live with a man named Laman. Angela is forced to become Laman's personal maid in exchange for rent. When Laman backs out of his promise to allow Frank to use his bicycle, Frank leaves the house and lives with his Uncle Pat Sheehan. Eventually the rest of his siblings and Angela leave Laman's and live at Uncle Pat's home. During this time, Frank works several jobs to earn money for his trip to America. When Mrs. Finucane, one of Frank's employers, dies, Frank steals some of her money and, at nineteen years old, sets sail for America. The boat Frank sails on eventually stops for a night in Poughkeepsie, New York. That night, Frank and several men from the boat go to a party, and Frank is convinced that America is a "great country altogether."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Frank's father is obsessed with "dying for Ireland." Why do you think his father feels this way? How do you feel about his father's love for his country but seeming lack of care for his family?

Frank's father had fought in the Irish army in the past. His father is still a very patriotic man who often asks his sons to promise to die for Ireland. Though his love for his country is obvious, his love for his family is not. Frank's father often drinks away his wages and forces his family into starvation. Most students will be appalled by this man's behavior. Students may also be confused because Frank's father claims to love his family, but he does not provide for them.

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Literary Analysis

During the time period of this story, many people died in Ireland. According to Frank's father, why did this happen? Based on your knowledge of the novel, why did so many people die?

Frank's father believed that the River Shannon's dampness killed many of the people in Limerick, including his children. However, it is easy to see that malnourishment and diseases such as diphtheria and typhoid fever were also to blame. Because many of the people in Limerick were poor, they could not afford decent clothing or food and therefore were more susceptible to diseases.

Inferential Comprehension

During his childhood, Frank is fascinated with the idea of the Angel on the Seventh Step. Why do you think Frank is so interested in this "angel"?

Frank is enthralled with the Angel on the Seventh Step because his father tells him the angel brings babies to his mother. Frank, who always loves hearing his father's stories, thrives on this story that he feels is his alone. The story gives him confidence and hope. He confides in the angel and feels very close to it. However, when Frank learns the truth about sex, he becomes disillusioned with his father and his stories. He then concludes the angel does not exist.

Constructing Meaning

During Frank's schooling, many of his teachers are too unbending and often cruel. How do you feel about their teaching style? How do you think you would have reacted if you were in Frank's place?

Many students will say they feel outraged by Frank's teachers. His teachers resent questions and rule through ridicule and embarrassment. These students may indicate that they would have tried to stand up for themselves, but it may not have gotten them very far.

and suffering. Ask your students to make a list of how major characters in the story died. Then ask the students, in small groups, to research each disease, such as typhoid fever, consumption (tuberculosis), etc. Each group should give a short presentation about its findings.

Recognizing Setting Most of this story takes place in Ireland. Have your students create a map of Ireland. They should include places mentioned in the story such as Limerick, Dublin, the River Shannon, and Toome. The students could also make a specific drawing of the neighborhood and the lane where the McCourts lived throughout much of the story.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors When Frank is in the hospital for typhoid fever, the nurse mentions that Frank is in the ward that was used during the great potato famine that struck Ireland. Ask your students to research the potato famine. Then ask them to write a one or two-page report on their findings.

Responding to Literature This story contains many sad stories and scenes. Ask your students to pick out the scene that most affected them as they were reading. Then ask them to review that scene and write a brief response that explains how it affects them.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details This book is filled with death