



Teacher Man: A Memoir (The Frank McCourt Memoirs)

By Frank McCourt

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Nearly a decade ago Frank McCourt became an unlikely star when, at the age of sixty-six, he burst onto the literary scene with *Angela's Ashes*, the Pulitzer Prize - winning memoir of his childhood in Limerick, Ireland. Then came *Tis*, his glorious account of his early years in New York.

Now, here at last, is McCourt's long-awaited book about how his thirty-year teaching career shaped his second act as a writer. *Teacher Man* is also an urgent tribute to teachers everywhere. In bold and spirited prose featuring his irreverent wit and heartbreaking honesty, McCourt records the trials, triumphs and surprises he faces in public high schools around New York City. His methods anything but conventional, McCourt creates a lasting impact on his students through imaginative assignments (he instructs one class to write "An Excuse Note from Adam or Eve to God"), singalongs (featuring recipe ingredients as lyrics), and field trips (imagine taking twenty-nine rowdy girls to a movie in Times Square!).

McCourt struggles to find his way in the classroom and spends his evenings drinking with writers and dreaming of one day putting his own story to paper. *Teacher Man* shows McCourt developing his unparalleled ability to tell a great story as, five days a week, five periods per day, he works to gain the attention and respect of unruly, hormonally charged or indifferent adolescents. McCourt's rocky marriage, his failed attempt to get a Ph.D. at Trinity College, Dublin, and his repeated firings due to his propensity to talk back to his superiors ironically lead him to New York's most prestigious school, Stuyvesant High School, where he finally finds a place and a voice. "Doggedness," he says, is "not as glamorous as ambition or talent or intellect or charm, but still the one thing that got me through the days and nights."

For McCourt, storytelling itself is the source of salvation, and in *Teacher Man* the journey to redemption -- and literary fame -- is an exhilarating adventure.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

For 30 years Frank McCourt taught high school English in New York City and for much of that time he considered himself a fraud. During these years he danced a delicate jig between engaging the students, satisfying often bewildered administrators and parents, and actually enjoying his job. He tried to present a consistent image of composure and self-confidence, yet he regularly felt insecure, inadequate, and unfocused. After much trial and error, he eventually discovered what was in front of him (or rather, behind him) all along--his own experience. "My life saved my life," he writes. "My students didn't know there was a man up there escaping a cocoon of Irish history and Catholicism, leaving bits of that cocoon everywhere." At the beginning of his career it had never occurred to him that his own dismal upbringing in the slums of Limerick could be turned into a valuable lesson plan. Indeed, his formal training emphasized the opposite. Principals and department heads lectured him to never share anything personal. He was instructed to arouse fear and awe, to be stern, to be impossible to please--but he couldn't do it. McCourt was too likable, too interested in the students' lives, and too willing to reveal himself for their benefit as well as his own. He was a kindred spirit with more questions than answers: "Look at me: wandering late bloomer, floundering old fart, discovering in my forties what my students knew in their teens."

As he did so adroitly in his previous memoirs, *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, McCourt manages to uncover humor in nearly everything. He writes about hilarious misfires, as when he suggested (during his teacher's exam) that the students write a suicide note, as well as unorthodox assignments that turned into epiphanies for both teacher and students. A dazzling writer with a unique and compelling voice, McCourt describes the dignity and difficulties of a largely thankless profession with incisive, self-deprecating wit and uncommon perception. It may have taken him three decades to figure out how to be an effective teacher, but he ultimately saved his most valuable lesson for himself: how to be his own man. --Shawn Carkonen

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. This final memoir in the trilogy that started with *Angela's Ashes* and continued in *'Tis* focuses almost exclusively on McCourt's 30-year teaching career in New York City's public high schools, which began at McKee Vocational and Technical in 1958. His first day in class, a fight broke out and a sandwich was hurled in anger. McCourt immediately picked it up and ate it. On the second day of class, McCourt's retort about the Irish and their sheep brought the wrath of the principal down on him. All McCourt wanted to do was teach, which wasn't easy in the jumbled bureaucracy of the New York City school system. Pretty soon he realized the system wasn't run by teachers but by sterile functionaries. "I was uncomfortable with the bureaucrats, the higher-ups, who had escaped classrooms only to turn and bother the occupants of those classrooms, teachers and students. I never wanted to fill out their forms, follow their guidelines, administer their examinations, tolerate their snooping, adjust myself to their programs and courses of study." As McCourt matured in his job, he found ingenious ways to motivate the kids: have them write "excuse notes" from Adam and Eve to God; use parts of a pen to define parts of a sentence; use cookbook recipes to get the students to think creatively. A particularly warming and enlightening lesson concerns a class of black girls at Seward Park High School who felt slighted when they were not invited to see a performance of *Hamlet*, and how they taught McCourt never to have diminished expectations about any of his students. McCourt throws down the gauntlet on education, asserting that teaching is more than achieving high test scores. It's about educating, about forming intellects, about getting people to think. McCourt's many fans will of course love this book, but it also should be mandatory reading for every teacher in America. And it wouldn't hurt some politicians to read it, too. (Nov. 15)

From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

The pathos McCourt created in his first two memoirs just may be wearing thin. While some critics thought *Teacher Man* focused, fresh, and exciting, others saw a self-deprecating author at work, his prose littered with clichés. No doubt *Teacher Man* is darkly entertaining: what other teacher during class would ask children to write suicide notes or describe their own murderous thoughts? But too many anecdotes about McCourt's childhood, sexual adventures, and marriage (all found in his previous books) often disembowel his poignant, life-learning teaching experiences from their context. Still, the memoir rings true for teachers in its depictions of daily classroom trials, and McCourt's honesty and storytelling gifts remain unsurpassed.

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Jerry Ingle:

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