



# CHASING **McCourt**

*One writer's story of finally tracking down the elusive Irish author.*

By Siobhan Fitzpatrick

I admit, it seemed like I was stalking him. But I didn't know Frank McCourt was going to be walking down West 81st Street on that cold, gray morning last winter as I sat in my 1991 Toyota Corolla station wagon, sipping my coffee and tapping my feet to "Twist & Shout" on the radio, waiting for the street sweepers to go by. Still, I wanted to make sure it was the author himself before I launched in.

"Excuse me sir," I said, rolling down my window, hoping he wouldn't notice I was in my pajamas, "do you have the time?"

"Nearly 11:30," he said in his lilting Irish brogue. Bingo!

"Hi Mr. McCourt, I'm Siobhan Fitzpatrick. I don't know if you remember me, but we met several months ago, when you spoke at the Bridgehampton Library and you promised I could interview you but when I called and left a few messages (maybe three or four or five) you never called me back." He looked stunned.

"Ummm, I'm sorry. I don't ever listen to my machine. I just press delete, delete, delete. Anyway, I'm busy working on a novel now," he said. Me too, I countered.

"Can we wait to meet until after Christmas," he pleaded.

"Sure, but I hope you'll listen to your messages this time. When you hear one from me, will you please save it? Remember, my is Siobhan Fitz—"

"How could I forget a name like that," he interrupted.

So I called him a few months later in February of 2003 and left a few messages. Four or five or six. All in vain. This was beginning to mirror my 30-something love life and I was starting to get a complex; but I wasn't after Frank for love—his old enough to be my father—just his words.

Finally, I gave up. But fate intervened again about five months later when I was innocently sitting at an outside table at my favorite French café, busily working on my novel, when Frank walked by. I leapt out of my seat, knocking my chair over, and ran to him as he stood paused, waiting for the light to turn green on the corner of 79th and Amsterdam.

"Frank, it's Siobhan Fitzpatrick. You blew me off—again!" I blurted out. He paled a bit.

"Now you're making me feel guilty, Siobhan." Thank God for Catholicism, even if he still didn't technically practice it. Then, "Why do you want to interview me now? I haven't even finished my book," he said. The truth was, I didn't really know why, besides the fact that I so admired his writing, his story.

"I, I love your writing," and realized how lame I sounded.

"Thank you."

We made a little bit more small talk and then he asked me which publication I was writing the article for. I didn't know.

"Well, you have my number, so give me a call," he said, and walked down Amsterdam Avenue.

The next day, I left Frank a message, but this time just one; I had my pride. A few weeks later, I got the call, "So, do you want to meet at your fancy French café?"

I was embarrassed. I didn't want him to think I was some snob—I mean, my blood line was as Irish as his, though I had grown up in Westchester County relatively spoiled, and not in Limerick, dirt poor. I insisted he choose the location, and we met at a café on the upper west side that I had never been to. He talked to me about the book he was working on and his days teaching high school in New York City.

"What was I doing for 30 years? I have no idea," he began. Then he backtracked, and started to explain why he had gone into teaching. "I didn't want to do anything predictable," he said, "including going into the bar business, like my brothers." And so many other Irish immigrants at that time.

I asked him if he had ever frequented Jimmy Ryan's, a bar on West 52nd (aka Swing Street) that my great uncle, who the bar was named after, and my grandfather, owned for four decades.

"Yes, that was the last jazz bar I've ever been to, in fact." Then he squinted his eyes, looking at me a little more closely and said, "Those were your people, Siobhan?"

Frank said he also chose a career in teaching because of his aversion to working for a company. As he recounted in his second memoir, *Tis*, he was 23 years old, a Korean war veteran and miserable in his Blue Cross insurance training program. One day he just up and quit and started walking towards downtown Manhattan. He didn't stop until he arrived at the New York University admissions office, where he managed to enroll as a freshman student with an eighth grade education that he had gotten back in Ireland.

"That must have taken courage," I said.

"It wasn't courage. It was desperation. That and an inability to accept my low rating in life." The only thing he said that took a lot of fortitude was moving to New York from Ireland when he was 19 years old with less than fifty dollars in his pocket, not knowing a soul. That was in 1949.

By 1957, he had earned his bachelor's degree from NYU thanks to the GI Bill and working nights, and began teaching at a vocational school on Staten Island, and then later, Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. He said it was during his days teaching when he finally blended into "main stream American life".

"My students would notice my brogue for the first two weeks, and then forget about it. Then I just became their teacher. I liked that."

But when his first memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, was published in 1996 and became a best seller in the US and abroad, thrusting him into the limelight, he said he was no longer part of the melting pot.

"Suddenly, I was thrown back into the muddy 'Irish Catholic' stream again—and it wasn't great. I just wanted to wake up and be nothing."

Another trying aspect of having *Angela's Ashes* published, Frank said, was sharing with the world the period of his life when his mother had to sleep with her cousin in order to keep a roof over her children's heads.

"That time in my life was horrible beyond description," Frank said, adding that he was going to leave that portion of his childhood out of his memoir, "but there would have been a gaping hole in the book."

Sipping my green tea watching Frank's big brown eyes grow sad at the memory, I wanted to say to him that I was grateful that he had shared his story with readers all over the globe; that his sorrowful words wrapped in humor resonated with people everywhere, and were healing.

A few days after the interview I was back at my café—not the French one, but another favorite—busily writing, when who walked in but Frank and his wife, Ellen. I'll admit, I thought about joining their coffee klatch, but caught myself mid stand-up; then it would really have seemed like I was stalking Frank McCourt.