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COMING TO AMERICA

March 17, 1999



In part one of the interview, Frank McCourt discusses the impact of *Angela's Ashes* on his life and his first impressions of America.

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MR. SMITH: We'll slate this as an interview with Frank McCourt in Room 213 of the old Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. Frank, it has been about three years since "Angela's Ashes" was published. What a phenomenon. What an extraordinary reception.



MR. McCOURT: Well, especially when you consider that I, I--when I started writing, I didn't even know I'd have a publisher. I was just dreaming, and if, if I'd written the book and nobody wanted it, I would have put it in the drawer and said, "Well, I did that." And then they--I was fortunate, I had--I said, "Well, you could call it the luck of the Irish." I didn't have to struggle at all to get an agent and a publisher. Everything fell into my lap. Well, why shouldn't it? I was 66 years of age, 65 at that time. So I--struggle--

MR. SMITH: It's about time

MR. McCOURT: Struggle would have killed me. But everything fell into my--everything fell into place, they took the book and they said they'd print a, a first run of 27,000 copies, and they'd be very pleased if that sold, and I'd be very pleased if they sold, and I, and I might have to go back to teaching. I'd have a little money to get me over the "hump" that I had at the time, and I would have, I would have gone back to teaching. I would have been in some classroom like this.

MR. SMITH: Like this one here-

MR. McCOURT: Standing in front of the board, writing something about dangling participles or, or crazy gerunds, and then I'd have a heart attack, and, and I'd be carried out, feet first, like a warrior--a pedagogical warrior.

MR. SMITH: Right. Instead, not only those 27,000 sold, but to--to date, how many copies?

MR. McCOURT: Well, in this country, in the USA, it's 2.5 million, and overseas is another 1.5 million, at least.

MR. SMITH: So 4 million copies of this book--

MR. McCOURT: Yeah, four, at least 4 million; yeah.

MR. SMITH: In how many languages and how many countries?

MR. McCOURT: Twenty-two. Twenty-two languages.

MR. SMITH: Twenty-two languages

MR. McCOURT: Yeah; yeah. The last one was, was Estonia, and before that was Bosnia. Don't they have enough troubles of their own?

MR. SMITH: I don't know. How do you read in Estonian? Do you-

MR. McCOURT: I don't know. I haven't, I haven't received my copies yet, but I loved--I love to look at the ones from China and Israel -- sometimes, I look at these titles and I don't know what country they are because I don't know the languages.

MR. SMITH: Right. Or the alphabet

MR. McCOURT: Yeah.

MR. SMITH: Has it, has it changed your life?

MR. McCOURT: Well, it has because I'm not my-- I'm not in control anymore, for some time. Sometimes, I try to take charge. When I was a teacher, I'd walk into the classroom, I stood at the board, I was the man. I directed operations. I was an intellectual and artistic and moral traffic cop, and I, and I would direct the class, most of the time. Sometimes, they would take it away from me. But now, I have to go--I do book tours and I do lectures, and so on, and, and I can't resist, I can't say no to anything to do with children, or schools. So I -- or libraries. So I go all over the place, signing books and lecturing. So --it's changed my life. Also, it has given me a bit of money, and that--I don't have to worry about that anymore, except that I have to hire people to take care of everything, because I don't, I don't know what the difference between a bond and a ... what do you call 'em? A stock--



MR. SMITH: A stock.

MR. McCOURT: I don't know anything about--a stock!

[Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: I have no idea. And I don't care.

'Tis: A Memoir.

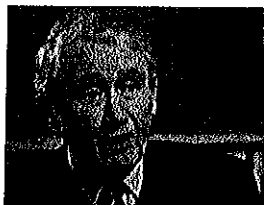
MR. SMITH: But it's been extraordinary. Now "Angela's Ashes," and as the young Frank McCourt arrived in the United States, the new book, and the last word of the book was "'Tis"?

MR. McCOURT: Yeah.

MR. SMITH: And the title of the new book

MR. McCOURT: "'Tis."

MR. SMITH: So you're picking right up



MR. McCOURT: I'm picking right up; yeah. Just going on into, into my--the menial jobs I had around New York, various menial jobs in the--

when I was a barkeeper in the Biltmore Hotel, and then I was drafted into the Army, and into the Canine Corps. This is a natural progression, from canaries to German shepherds.

MR. SMITH: To Canine-

MR. McCOURT: And then, and then I came--I became a teacher. So it was birds, dogs, and kids.

MR. SMITH: So it's a story that carries your life right from where you left off with "Angela's Ashes"

MR. McCOURT: Right.

MR. SMITH: And carries it up to the present?

MR. McCOURT: No; not quite.

MR. SMITH: No?

MR. McCOURT: No. I'd--probably up to the day I retire from teaching. And it's the--the parallel story--the parallel story is the story of my family--of me becoming a teacher and then my three brothers and their adventures, and, and then my mother's, you know, her sad life. The sadness continued.

MR. SMITH: She came, finally, from Ireland. Did you bring her over?

MR. McCOURT: Yeah; yeah.

MR. SMITH: She came here. In fact the whole family.

MR. McCOURT: Oh, the three brothers came over, at different times than my mother. My mother came 10 years after me. So all my brothers went into the, the bar business, initially. Eventually, Alfie opened up a, a Mexican restaurant, which was very successful, on the Upper West Side, Los Panchos. Malachy went-- became an actor and a radio-television personality, and Mike moved out to the West Coast.

MR. SMITH: It's become almost a cottage industry, the brothers McCourt

MR. McCOURT: Yeah; yeah.

MR. SMITH: Films.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah.

MR. SMITH: A film coming up, not only of "Angela's Ashes", but about--there was the "McCourts of Limerick," that was one film, and now there's the "McCourts of New York."

MR. McCOURT: Well, that's my, my nephew, Malachy's son, Connor, he did that, the "McCourts of Limerick" and that was about our growing up in Limerick, and then he didn't want to leave it. That's why now he's done "McCourts of New York," which is going to be on HBO. And then there--there's the film of "Angela's Ashes" which they, which they finished before Christmas in Ireland.

MR. SMITH: And which will come out

MR. McCOURT: That's coming out in November.

MR. SMITH: Of this year

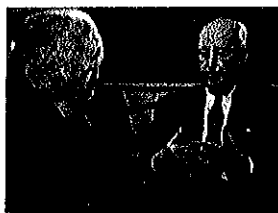
MR. McCOURT: Of this year; yeah.

MR. SMITH: And have-

MR. McCOURT: Just before Thanksgiving.

MR. SMITH: --you seen the film

MR. McCOURT: No. I haven't seen. I don't want to. I don't want to see it in, in any raw state, or I don't want to see bits and pieces of it. I was in Dublin when they shot, they started shooting, the first couple of days, but I, I went into the classroom where they were shooting a scene from "Angela's Ashes", and I, I thought--it



disturbed me, there was all these --well, I was standing against the wall with my wife, Ellen, and, and Emily Watson, who plays my mother, and we saw all these kids that were in the seats and they have shaved heads, and they're ragged, and urchins, bare feet, scabby, and, and it--it--and then the master's talking--I thought I was back in school--

MR. SMITH: They looked as you looked.

MR. McCOURT: Oh, yeah; yeah. The ragged urchins. And there's a little fellow playing me, Joe Breen is his name, and when they finished shooting the scene, Ellen Parker, the director--I was standing against the wall-- Alan Parker comes over and says, "Joe, do you know who that man is over there?" And Joe: "No." "Well, that's Mr. McCourt. That's what you're going to look like when you grow up." And Joe didn't look a bit happy.

[Laughter.]

Coming to America.

MR. SMITH: Do you remember--and your first impressions when you came to this country--

MR. McCOURT: Of New York?

MR. SMITH: And of New York, particularly.



MR. McCOURT: Oh, God! Gold. That was the main thing, because I sailed in on an October morning, one of those glorious autumn mornings, coming in--that's before the Verrazano Bridge was built. You sail into the harbor and Staten Island is on your left --

and then you see the Statue of Liberty. This is what everyone in the world had dreams of when they think about New York. And part--obviously, I was also interested, because I knew something about the history--in, in Ellis Island. Because my mother came through there, and it was a very--

MR. SMITH: Originally.

MR. McCOURT: Originally. It was a very sad--my father came through Ellis Island, and it was very sad to look at. It was crumbling, you could see, and there was a ferry sinking in the water, and, and I thought this is--this is a monument, and, for years, I watched that. But when I--we came in at dawn, and it's almost as if somebody had written a script. The sun was glinting on, on the towers of Manhattan, turning everything to gold, and all these cars were going along the highways, and they all looked--they all, they were all glistening,

and I said, "My God! I'm in heaven. I'm going to be Fred Astaire. I'm going to dance down Fifth Avenue with Ginger Rogers. This was going to be my life--all glamour...

MR. SMITH: How much money did you have in your pocket?

MR. McCOURT: \$50.00.

MR. SMITH: Fifty-

MR. McCOURT: Or less than \$50.00. I had spent some of it. So the, the ship didn't dock--it was supposed to dock in New York but they got orders to go up to Albany. So we got off at Albany and then I had to spend more money to come down to New York. But that was my--that was my--that first experience--I didn't have to go through Ellis Island because I'd been born here. So, so my entrance-- the -- my entrance to New York, or New York's appearance to me was pure - - pure fantasy. I thought this--I thought I'd have this feeling for the rest of my life.

MR. SMITH: And today, a mere 40 years later?

MR. McCOURT: Yeah.

MR. SMITH: It is made of gold.

MR. McCOURT: It is made of gold, because --it--but it took a long time, and what has happened to me is, is beyond the wildest imagination of any screenwriter, any novelist, be certainly beyond my imagination -- because I never expected this. I never expected to write a book about a slum in Ireland that was going to catapult me, as they say, into, into some kind of--into-- onto the best seller list

MR. SMITH: Right.

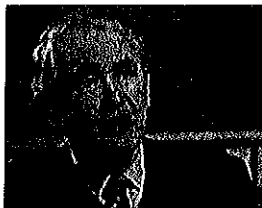
MR. McCOURT: It's, it's--

MR. SMITH: Couldn't, couldn't have imagined it?

MR. McCOURT: I couldn't have imagined, no, because I used to-- I've been reading newspapers and book, book sections all my life, and I would look at these best sellers, and I'd live in a state of envy, and I said, "My, these are--these were exalted people." I used to go into the Lion's Head bar in the Village and you-- you'd see the likes of Pete Hamill coming in there, and, and Norman Mailer. They--for me, they were, they were up there with the saints, and I, I never thought I'd achieve anything near what they had achieved.

MR. SMITH: In the excerpt that was published in the

New Yorker of "'Tis," of the new book, you describe going into Tim Costello's famous Irish saloon. Tell me about that.



MR. McCOURT: Tim was-- Tim I found--Tim was, was a very famous character. I think Brendon Gill wrote about him in a book, and he was very cranky and I, I was just off the boat, practically, and I went in, in there, and he came out, and I suppose the bartender was gone to the toilet or something--very good--and, and he said, "Are you--you," he says, "You 18 years old?" 'Cause at that time you only had to be eighteen. I said I am. "Well, how would I know that?" And I said, "I have my passport." And I had my--which was an American passport. He said, "What's an Irishman doing with an American passport?" And I had to explain that to him, and he said--

MR. SMITH: That you'd been born here

MR. McCOURT: That I'd been born here and how -- "Now the thing for you to do," he says, and he allowed me to have two beers, two of these little miserable beers they used to serve in those days. "What you do now," he says, "go up 42nd Street there, go west on 42nd Street, and you'll see two big stone lions. Go between them lions and get yourself a library card, and go into the library and get a -- and join the library." And then he said, "Read Samuel Johnson's 'The Lives of the Poets' and stay away from the Irish dreamers, a bunch of bog trotters, these dreaming Micks. Read your Samuel Johnson and it'll give you some strength in your mind." And I did. I went up the--and I, I walked. I couldn't believe you could walk in off the street and get a library card. And, and the librarians were--they were charmed that I--here was this 19-year-old looking for "The Lives of the Poets." So I got "The Lives of the Poets" and I walked back down to Costello's, and he said, "Well," he said, "You may have the--you may have "The Lives, Lives of the Poets" under your oxtter" --which is under your arm--"but you don't have it in your head, so go home and read it."

[Laughter.]

MR. SMITH: The library was, was a wonderment.

MR. McCOURT: Oh, that 42nd Street library. If I had millions and millions and millions of dollars, I'd leave a large portion to the 42nd Street--42nd Street Library. That's why--that was my hangout. That the, the main--the reading rooms, the north and the south reading rooms. I'd go there. I thought, "My God!" I couldn't believe I, I had access to all of these books. And then they had the, the circulating library on the street floor,

on the 42nd Street. I was in heaven. I could go in there every day and change books every four--exchange four books every day, if I wanted to.

MR. SMITH: So-

MR. McCOURT: That -- that was my university.

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