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MEMOIR LASHED, AND LOVED 'ANGELA'S ASHES' AUTHOR FINDS FOES, FRIENDS IN LIMERICK

By Kevin Cullen

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LIMERICK, Ireland -- When he came back to this city that he hates, loves, and can't get over, Frank McCourt brought along his three brothers because, as he put it, "In Limerick, you've got to watch your back."

McCourt, whose memoir of growing up destitute here, "Angela's Ashes," won the Pulitzer Prize for biography, returned yesterday to the city he has made famous to receive an honorary degree and take up his post as writer-in-residence at the University of Limerick.

But while McCourt's poignant, unflinching account of how poor people were marginalized by the wider society and humiliated by the Roman Catholic Church is as wildly popular in Ireland as it is in the United States, there are some here who do not share the enthusiasm for a book that has sold more than 1 million copies worldwide.

It wouldn't be Irish if there wasn't a split, and the split here is between those who see "Angela's Ashes" as an exaggerated, mean-spirited attack on the city and its people, and those who embrace the book's art, humanity, and the attention, whether good or bad, it has brought Limerick.

Long derided as a backwater, and more recently as "Stab City" for its rough neighborhoods like Southill, Limerick has always had something of an inferiority complex. But as this city of 150,000, like the rest of Ireland, undergoes an economic renaissance, some people bitterly resent the image McCourt has presented to the rest of the world.

Gerard Hannan, who runs a bookshop here, has written what he calls "the other side of the story," an account of those who grew up as poor and as disadvantaged as McCourt but who look back on those days fondly. Hannan claims McCourt embellished much of the misery

contained in "Angela's Ashes." His literary retort to McCourt's book is one of his own called "Ashes," a title that he says, with something less than conviction, was a coincidence. Hannan's book, which he published using his own money, is a view of Limerick through glasses far more rose-colored than McCourt's.

"I loved 'Angela's Ashes.' It was beautifully written," Hannan says, sitting in the lounge of the Castletroy Park Hotel, just yards from where McCourt was celebrating yesterday with friends and family. "The problem with it is that it's just one side of the story. Frank McCourt had a miserable life. Lots of people grew up under the same conditions and don't consider their lives miserable."

Hannan says McCourt gets Limerick wrong. For example, McCourt ends his book with the single word "Tis" on the last page. Hannan says real Limerick people would say "T'was."

It was inevitable, McCourt says, the confrontation between him and those who took his book the wrong way. "Begrudgers," he says. "What would Ireland be without them?"

Everything is personal in this town. Hannan is angry that McCourt's brother, Malachy, dismissed him as being from "the lower orders."

"Do the McCourts know that I am a direct descendant of Bridey Hannan, who saved the life of Michael McCourt, Frank McCourt's brother, as he was choking, something Frank McCourt writes about in his book?" Hannan asks.

The local newspaper, the Limerick Leader, has made disparaging McCourt a regular feature. Over the weekend, it published a half-page of pictures showing McCourt in a Boy Scout uniform, with a headline asking, "Is this the picture of misery?"

Brendan Halligan, editor of the Limerick Leader, denied that the paper was engaged in an ongoing campaign to discredit McCourt, even while citing recent stories that purported to do just that. One story noted that Mrs. Clohessy, the woman whose home McCourt described as the ultimate in squalor, was still alive at 94. Another quoted McCourt's scoutmaster as saying he gave McCourt a job fixing bicycles at a time when McCourt claimed he was scrounging for work.

Halligan says many people in Limerick resent McCourt's book, and says attempts to dismiss critics as a few isolated cranks are misleading. But while his paper frequently attacks McCourt, Halligan, who is friendly with McCourt's brother, Alfie, says he considers the book "a work of art."

"It's the truth," Halligan says. "Despite its factual inaccuracies, it

faithfully captures the impressions of a child who grew up here in the 1930s and 1940s."

McCourt is alternately annoyed and bemused by all this.

"Some people are running around town saying I made all this suffering up," he says. "I wish I did. I would have had a nicer life. My sister and two brothers wouldn't have died as children."

McCourt always knew that some here would hate his book. In July, when he did a book-signing at O'Mahony's, a bookstore he got thrown out of as a child, one of his contemporaries, Paddy Malone, stood before him and denounced him while tearing up a paperback copy of the book. Malone was a classmate of McCourt's at Leamy School, which McCourt portrayed as a place where most teachers delighted in humiliating the students, especially those who came from the lanes, the slums that housed the poorest of Limerick. While he complains about McCourt writing about people without their permission, Malone's real beef seems to be that McCourt somehow got hold of a school photograph that appears on the book's cover. Malone, who is one of the schoolboys in the sepia photo that captures McCourt's sad, tortured eyes, says he owned the original photo. Malone has retained a lawyer and talks about copyright infringement.

University of Limerick president Edward Walsh scored a coup in getting McCourt to agree to return here. But after the news emerged, the university received telephone threats against McCourt. If McCourt is worried about his physical safety, he isn't showing it. His family came here en masse, in a show of solidarity and pride.

"If the begrudgers want a piece of Frank, they'll have to take on the lot of us," says Malachy McCourt, who was a little brother in the book but has grown up to be much bigger than Frank.

Yesterday, however, as Ed Walsh handed a diploma to Frank McCourt, there were no begrudgers in sight. The pomp and circumstance were punctured by Malachy McCourt, who bellowed, "Good on ya, Frank!"

Frank McCourt began his address by thanking his three brothers. And then he wept. And then he composed himself and looked about the Jean Monet Theater and pointed out his old friends, the Souths, the Costellos, Eric Lynch, and his best friend Billy Campbell, the same Billy Campbell who would an hour later, when the crowd had melted, press into his hand a piece of pavement taken from the street in front of Mrs. O'Connell's shop, the shop where young Frank McCourt begged for food, the shop that has been razed like much of the Limerick that Frank McCourt has preserved for posterity.

"Limerick," Frank McCourt says in closing, his voice steady, his eyes bright, "is as beautiful as everybody knows."

Reaction: I think Kevin was fair and honest in his reporting. He took both sides of the debate into consideration and wrote fairly and squarely with compassion for McCourt and his critics.

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