



“Teacher Man” by Frank McCourt

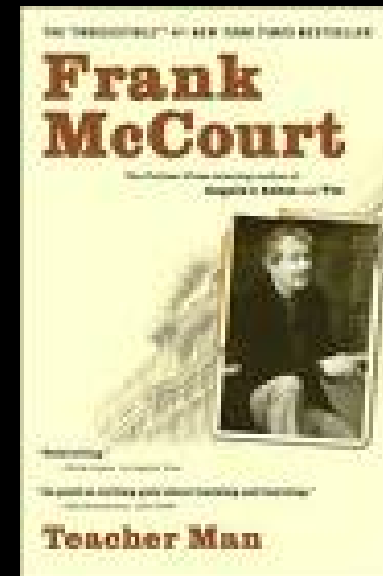
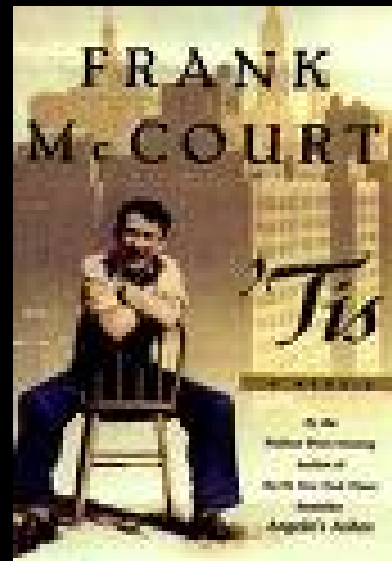
Presentation by Janet Ngai
and Susan Adamthwaite

Who is Frank McCourt



- Born in Brooklyn to Irish immigrant parents
- Lived in Ireland from age 4 – 19
- Quit school at age 13 to work odd jobs to help his family
- Returned to American at 19
- Joined the Army and received NYU degree

McCourt the Author

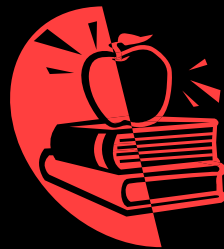


Summary

In “Teacher Man”, Frank McCourt shares his experiences as a 30 year New York City teacher in his candid, witty story telling style. This novel follows his first two biographical novels, “Angela’s Ashes” and “Tis” and takes the reader on a journey through the ups and downs of his teaching career. The novel is full of recounts of his students, teenagers and adults, who walked through his classrooms and into his life. McCourt used humor and empathy to convey what it is truly like to be a teacher, and what he thought of education.

Throughout the novel, McCourt struggles with finding his place in the classroom and from the opening page to the last, he continuously asks himself whether he belongs there at all.

“How I became a teacher at all and remained one is a miracle and I have to give myself full marks for surviving all those years in the classrooms of New York.” (p. 1)



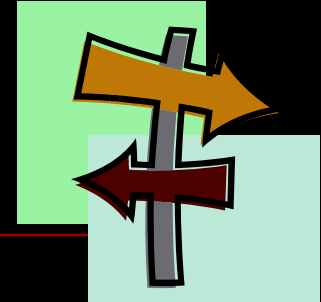
In the Beginning

- 1958, McKee Vocational school
- “a new teacher learning on the job.”
- 160 students, 5 classes
- Future mechanics, beauticians, plumbers
- A red pen as a weapon
- Uncomfortable with the bureaucrats in charge
- Educational philosophy undefined
- Memoirs become classroom fodder
- Professors of education stressed “posture and placement”, “identity and image” but left out how to teach youth that don’t want to be there

I’m not prepared, trained or ready for this. It’s not teaching. It has nothing to do with English literature, grammar, writing.” (p. 22)



Moving on...and on



- 8 years teaching, new Master's degree, good-bye McKee
- 1 year at NY community college, adults "working by day and studying by night"
- 1 term at the Fashion Industries high school, "it was clear my future was not in this school" (p. 122)

- Seward Park, a melting pot school

"A few years earlier I could have been one of them, part of the huddled masses. This is my immigrant comfort level." (p. 130)

- Failed Ph.D. at Trinity College, Dublin

Being the Teacher Man

- McCourt analyzed the role of the teacher and explores the stereotypes and attitudes towards teachers. It is quite humorous and TRUE what he says people think about teachers. They go home and have a cup of tea before grading papers. They have suburban homes, a spouse and do not do much except yard work and go to the movies once in a while for entertainment. Teachers in America are also not as respected, because everyone seems to think that they know the job of a teacher and can do it better. After all, most of us have to see a teacher almost everyday for twelve years of our lives.

McCourt explains that being a teacher is much more than what students and parents see. He emphasized that the term “teacher” does not come even close to encapsulate all that role entails.

“I was more than a teacher. And less. In a high school classroom, you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher, a collaborator, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-father-sister-brother-uncle-aunt, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw.”
(p.19)

“Coming Alive in Room 205”

- Literature and Creative Writing teacher, Stuyvesant High School, top high school in the city
- Administrative support - “In my years of teaching this was the first time I felt free in the classroom.” (p.185)
- Student Scholars – “If you asked (them) to write three hundred and fifty words...they might respond with five hundred.” (p.187)
- “this is their last high school class, and mine.” (p.257)



“Someone calls, Hey, Mr. McCourt, you should write a book.
I’ll try.” (p.258)

“So, yo, teacher man, what else happened in Ireland?” (p.66)



McCourt shared personal stories in class, and in turn, his students shared theirs. There were intimate moments where McCourt was awed at what the students told him. Yes, there were times when he got uncomfortable. What is one supposed to say when a supposedly rich little snob reveals that his Dad is dying in the hospital while he ate dinner alone at night. Or what the correct protocol is when a girl's essay reveals that perhaps her stepfather has indecent intentions towards her.

“Instead of teaching, I told stories.
Anything to keep them quiet and in their seats.
They thought I was teaching.
I thought I was teaching.
I was learning.
And you call yourself a teacher?” (p.19)



The Teacher

- Frank McCourt saw himself as a learner as well - someone who was learning to be a teacher. Kids can relate to his style because he is casual and inquisitive like they are. He does not pretend to have all the answers, but explores with his students.

“ At the start of each term I told the new students of creative writing, We’re in this together. I don’t know about you, but I’m serious about this class and sure of one thing: at the end of the term, one person in this room will have learned something, and that person, my little friends, will be me. “ (p.199)

The Students

“No one had ever told them they had a right to think for themselves. I told them,” (p. 119)



“Serena, the bright one, raises her hand like an ordinary kid in an ordinary class. I stare at the hand.” (p. 145)

“Never liked you Bob? Are you joking? It was a joy to have you in my class.”
(p. 240)

Lessons Learned in the Trenches

“Watch your step, teacher. Don’t make yourself a problem” (p. 68)

“I was learning that teachers and kids have to stick together in the face of parents, supervisors and the world in general.” (p. 71)

Old-timers in the teachers’ cafeteria told me, the little bastards have to kept under control. Give’em an inch, kid, and you’ll never get them back.” (p. 76)

“He said new teachers in this system were treated like dirt, or worse. You sink or swim.” (p. 108)

The Successes

McCourt believed in relating learning to practical situations and materials. For example, he would a writing class based on forged “excuse notes” that students hand in. This aligns with most educator’s view on making learning meaningful. McCourt shows that learning material is everywhere if you use a little creativity.

“The class is alive. They tell one another this is wild, the very idea of reading recipes, reciting recipes, singing recipes...” (p 209)

“I wrote it on the board: ‘An excuse note from Adam to god’ or ‘ An excuse note from Eve to God.’ The heads went down. Pens raced across paper.” (p. 87)

McCourt used constructivism without even realizing it. One of the most memorable lessons was when he taught poetry (p.208). He got each child to read recipes, and the class analyzed on their own why recipes are poetry. They suggested adding music etc. and got into it and were learning skills such as critical thinking (what poetry really means), cooperation (helping expand one another’s ideas), and learning for pleasure.

Inspiration for Teachers

- McCourt drove home the point that teaching is not just a job, it is much more than that. When you accept fate and dedicate yourself to your profession, you reap rewards that are measured beyond the traditional compensation of money and power. The human factor is much more present in teaching than most other professions. Some students get underneath your skin. They teach you something about yourself and you remember them, and they stay with you for the rest of your life

We invite you to.....

- Think about your experiences and how they transformed you as a teacher and make learning more meaningful for his students?
- McCourt reflected upon the education system and the teaching profession in general. What is your opinion?

“Find what you love and do it”

