

Darkly funny Irish stories

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Ireland gave birth to many famous writers - Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce to name just a few. But its literary tradition hasn't ended with these "classics". A book written by a renowned 20th century Irish author is a perfect example of the great ability of Irish writers to merge serious and comic, sad and humorous.

Angela's Ashes

by Frank McCourt

"When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I managed to survive at all. It was, of course, a **miserable** childhood: the happy childhood **is hardly worth your while**. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood..."

These are the memorable lines from the beginning of Frank McCourt's autobiography. They **sum up** the book **fittingly**.

The McCourts are Irish immigrants living in New York

when Frank is born. However, things don't go well for them in America, so they return to Ireland – and find themselves in an even worse situation.

Frank's mother Angela has several small children and no money to feed them. Frank's father Malachy is unemployed most of the time, and even when he finds work, he spends all the money on drink. Little Frank **constantly** searches the pubs for his drunk father, he wears shoes repaired with **tyres** and he is hungry. The extreme **poverty** and frequent illnesses result in the deaths of several of his **siblings**.

This may sound like a **weepy**, tragic tale. But Frank McCourt doesn't tell his story



In 1999, *Angela's Ashes* was made into a movie, starring Emily Watson and Robert Carlyle as Frank's parents.

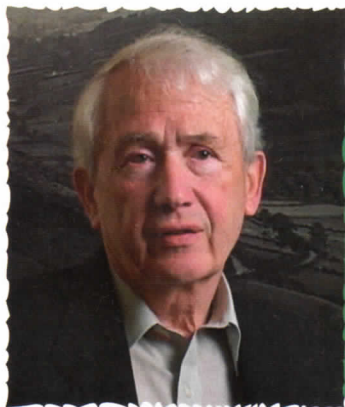
with **self-pity** – despite all the tragedies, it is funny. Some of Frank's childhood adventures are **outright hilarious**, for example when he describes how he tried to learn Irish

dancing, or his job as a **newspaper delivery boy**. And as the **excerpt** below shows, even very serious topics, such as death, **are treated** in a light, almost comical way.

Excerpt

Frank's family lives in Limerick, and the book shows the industrial city going through the 1930s depression era, which has left many people unemployed and poor. Because of poverty and damp weather, people are dying of galloping consumption (quick tuberculosis). However tragic it is, Frank and his friends sometimes take advantage of it.

"I'm nine years old and I have a **pal**, Mickey Spellacy, whose **relations are dropping one by one** of the galloping consumption. I **envy** Mickey because every time someone dies in his family he gets a **week off** from school and his mother **stitches a black diamond patch on his sleeve** so that he can **wander** from lane to lane and street to street and people will know he has the **grief** and **pat** his head and give him money and sweets for his **sorrow**.



Frank McCourt (b. 1930) moved to the US when he was nineteen. He became a teacher, and he published *Angela's Ashes* – his first book – only when he was over sixty. It received the Pulitzer Prize for best biography, and has become popular with readers around the world, encouraging him to write two **sequels** (*Tis*, *Teacher Man*).

→ Vocabulary

renowned [rɪˈnaʊnd] - uznávaný
to merge [mɜːdʒ] - spojovat
miserable [ˈmɪz(ə)rəb(ə)l] - bídný, nešťastný
is hardly worth your while [ˈhɑːdli wɜːθ waɪl] - nestojí za řeč
to sum up [sʌm] - shrnout
fittingly [ˈfɪtɪŋli] - výstižně
constantly [ˈkɒnst(ə)ntli] - v jednom kuse
tyre [taɪə] - pneumatika
poverty [ˈpɒvəti] - chudoba
siblings [ˈsɪblɪŋz] - sourozenci
weepy [ˈwiːpi] - ufnukaný
self-pity [selfˈpɪti] - sebelítost
outright hilarious [aʊtˈraɪt hɪˈleɪəriəs] - přímo legrační
newspaper delivery boy [ˈnjuːzpeɪpə dɪˈlɪv(ə)rɪ] - doručovatel novin
excerpt [ˈɛksəːpt] - úryvek
are treated [trɪːtɪd] - jsou podány, vylíčení

depression era [dɪˈpreʃ(ə)n ˈiərə] - období hospodářské krize
damp [dæmp] - vlhký
to take advantage of [ədˈvɑːntɪdʒ] - těžit z
pal [pæl] - kamarád
relations are dropping one by one [rɪˈleɪʃ(ə)nz ˈdrɒpɪŋ] - příbuzní umírají jeden po druhém na
to envy sb. [ˈɛnvi] - závidět (někomu)
a week off - týden volna
stitches a black diamond patch on his sleeve [stɪtʃɪz ˈdʌɪəmənd pætʃ ˈsliːv] - mu našije na rukáv černý kosočtverec
to wander [ˈwɒndə] - potulovat se
lane [leɪn] - ulička
grief [grɪːf] - žal
to pat [pæt] - poplácat
sorrow [ˈsɒrəʊ] - smutek
to waste away [weɪst] - stonat, chřadnout
around the corner [əˈraʊnd ˈkɔːnə] - za roh
pray for Brenda to hang on till [preɪ ˈhæŋ] - pomodlíme se za Brendu, aby vydržela až do

what's in it for us - co z toho budeme mít my
my mouth is watering at the thought of the feast [maʊθ ˈwɔːtərɪŋ θɔːt fiːst] - sbíhají se mi sliny při pomyslení na hostinu
to yell [jɛl] - křičet, řvát
slams the door in our faces [slæmz] - zabouchne nám dveře před nosem
from now on - odted
is carried off by - umírá na
sequel [ˈsiːkw(ə)l] - pokračování

• Glossary

I get me - slang for "I get"
ye - slang for "you"
wake - a gathering of family and friends held after a dead person has been buried, at which they eat, drink and talk about the person's life

But this summer Mickey is worried. His sister, Brenda, is **wasting away** with consumption and it's only August and if she dies before September he won't get his week off from school because you can't get a week off from school when there's no school. He comes to Billy Campbell and me to ask if we'll go **around the corner** to St. Joseph's Church and **pray for Brenda to hang on till** September.

What's in it for us, Mickey, if we go around the corner praying?

Well, if Brenda hangs on and I get me a week off ye can come to the wake and have ham and cheese and cake and sherry and lemonade and everything and ye can listen to the songs and stories all night.

(...) One of our prayers must have been powerful because Brenda stays alive and doesn't die till the second day of school. We tell Mickey we're sorry for his troubles but he's delighted with his week off and gets the black diamond patch which will bring the money and sweets.

My mouth is watering at the thought of the feast at Brenda's wake. Billy knocks on the door and there's Mickey's aunt. Well?

We came to say a prayer for Brenda and Mickey said we could come to the wake.

She **yells**, Mickey! What?

Come here. Did you tell this gang they could come to your sister's wake?

No.

But, Mickey, you promised...

She **slams the door in our faces**. We don't know what

to do till Billy Campbell says, We'll go back to St. Joseph's and pray that **from now on** everyone in Mickey Spellacy's family will die in the middle of the summer and he'll never get a day off from school for the rest of his life.

One of our prayers is surely powerful because next summer Mickey himself is **carried off by** the galloping consumption and he doesn't get a day off from school and that will surely teach him a lesson."

Irish bronze WRITERS

In Dublin, you'll find not only pubs and great historical buildings, but also many statues. Some show real people, some show folk tale heroes, some commemorate historical events. Naturally, prominent Irish writers have their statues as well.



Oscar Wilde

You'll find Wilde (1854 – 1900) **lounging** on a large rock in Merrion Square, a fashionable **residential** area where his family used to live. Wilde, one of the most successful playwrights of his time, and celebrated for his **sharp wit**, left Ireland when he was 24, and returned to his native country only for short visits. Later, he was **imprisoned** for "indecent" and spent the last years of his life in poverty.



Patrick Kavanagh

The poetry of Kavanagh (1904 – 1967), a famous Irish poet, celebrates the land and scenery of the Irish countryside and **deals with** the lives of farmers. His best-known poem, *On Raglan Road*, is about his girlfriend and it is performed as a song by many musicians, including Sinéad O'Connor, The Dubliners, and Mark Knopfler. Kavanagh often used to sit by the Grand Canal in Dublin and that's why his statue stands – or sits – there now.

Brendan Behan

Behan (1923 – 1964), one of the most popular 20th century Irish playwrights, was also a poet, short-story writer and novelist, writing both in English and Gaelic. From an early age, he was a republican and soon became a member of the IRA. His political activities got him into serious trouble – as a teenager he was **arrested** for carrying explosives **intended for use in IRA bombings**, later he was imprisoned for shooting at policemen in Dublin. In prison, he began to write plays and short stories. **His major breakthrough came** in the 1950s with the play *The Quare Fellow*, based on his prison experiences. Behan was a heavy drinker (he jokingly described himself as "a drinker with a writing problem") and died aged 41. His statue can be found by the Royal Canal in Dublin.



James Joyce

Although Joyce (1882 – 1941) spent most of his adult life outside Ireland, his writings are deeply **rooted** there, and often take place in Dublin, where he was born. *Ulysses*, his famous novel follows the main character Leopold Bloom through the city during one day, drawing parallels with Homer's *Odyssey*. The day on which the book takes place, June 16, is now celebrated by Joyce's fans as Bloomsday. Joyce's statue, showing the writer with a **walking stick** in his hand, stands on North Earl Street.

→ Vocabulary

to commemorate [kə'meməreɪt] - připomínat
prominent ['prɒmɪnənt] - přední, význační
to lounge [laʊn(d)ʒ] - polehávat
residential [ˌrezɪ'denʃ(ə)l] - obytný
sharp wit [ʃɑ:p wɪt] - ostrovtip
to imprison [ɪm'prɪz(ə)n] - uvěznit
indecent [ɪn'di:snsɪ] - neslušnost
to arrest [ə'rest] - zatknout
intended for use in - které měly být použity při
his major breakthrough came ['breɪkθru:ɪ] - prorazil
to root [ru:t] - zakořenit
walking stick [stɪk] - vycházková hůl
deals with - zabývá se