

MEET Frank McCourt

An award-winning author
taught himself
to read and write

Frank McCourt's first book, *Angela's Ashes*, won the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, one of the top book awards in the U.S. What makes his achievement even more impressive is that Frank never graduated from high school. And as for grammar, he admits, "I'm very good at finding the subject and the predicate. Don't ask me where the object is."

TAKING CHANCES ON PAPER

Even with his skimpy education, Frank got a job teaching English at a New York City public high school. How'd he manage that? McCourt taught himself to read and write as a kid in Ireland. When he tried to read Shakespeare, he didn't know a "thou" from a "thee," but Frank says, "The words tasted like jewels in my mouth."

His love of words and a good story made him a popular teacher at his school. "His stories," explains another teacher, "cause us to think about our own lives—to take chances with what we put on paper."

Frank McCourt taught students to be honest when they wrote about their experiences. It was his students who taught Frank McCourt to do the same. It was while teaching that "I became a man," Frank recalls. "I began to open up. The kids thought I was teaching, but I was learning."

It was when he was teaching that Frank McCourt started *Angela's Ashes*. Frank cut to the truth about his childhood poverty, an alcoholic father, a mother who was forced to beg for

food. You never heard violins playing though. Frank's story "leaps off the page in humor," wrote one critic.

Frank McCourt would agree that honesty and a love affair with the written word is all it takes to get you writing. Let Shakespeare write like Shakespeare. Frank advises: "Find your own voice." It may not be that hard with a little practice.

FINE TUNE YOUR WRITING

Each of us is a teacher or role model to someone. Frank McCourt is one to his students. Think about a person whose life you have influenced or a person to whom you taught something. (It could be as simple as riding a bike or as difficult as helping someone through a hard time.)

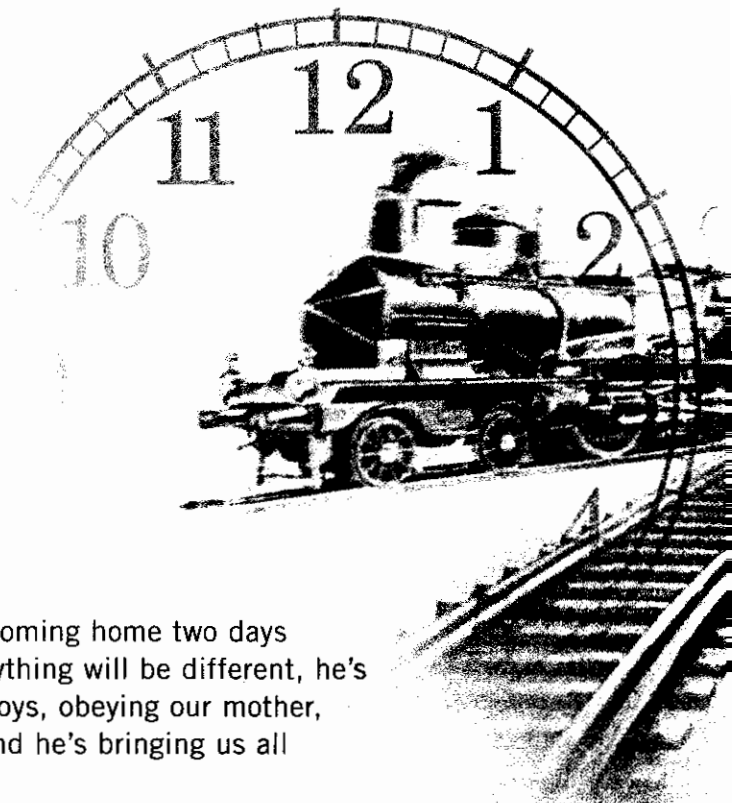
Write about it.

Save your work for
YOUR PORTFOLIO.

Angela's Ashes

by Frank McCourt

A man recalls his family, his friends and his childhood in Ireland



There's a letter from Dad. He's coming home two days before Christmas. He says everything will be different, he's a new man. He hopes we're good boys, obeying our mother, attending to our religious duties, and he's bringing us all something for Christmas.

Mam takes me to the railway station to meet him. The station is always exciting with all the comings and goings, people leaning from carriages, crying, smiling, waving good-bye, the train hooting and calling, chugging away in clouds of steam, people sniffing on the platform, the railway tracks silvering into the distance, on to Dublin and the world beyond.

Now it's near midnight and cold on the empty platform. A man in a railway cap asks us if we'd like to wait in a warm place. Mam says, Thank you very much, and laughs when he leads us to the end of the platform where we have to climb a ladder to the signal tower. It takes her a while because she's heavy and she keeps saying, Oh, God, oh, God.

We're above the world and it's dark in the signal tower except for the lights that blink red and green and yellow when the man bends over the board. He says, I'm just having a bit of supper and you're welcome.

Mam says, Ah, no thanks, we couldn't take your supper from you.

He says, The wife always makes too much for me and if I was up in this tower for a week I wouldn't be able to eat it. Sure it's not hard work looking at lights and pulling on the odd lever.

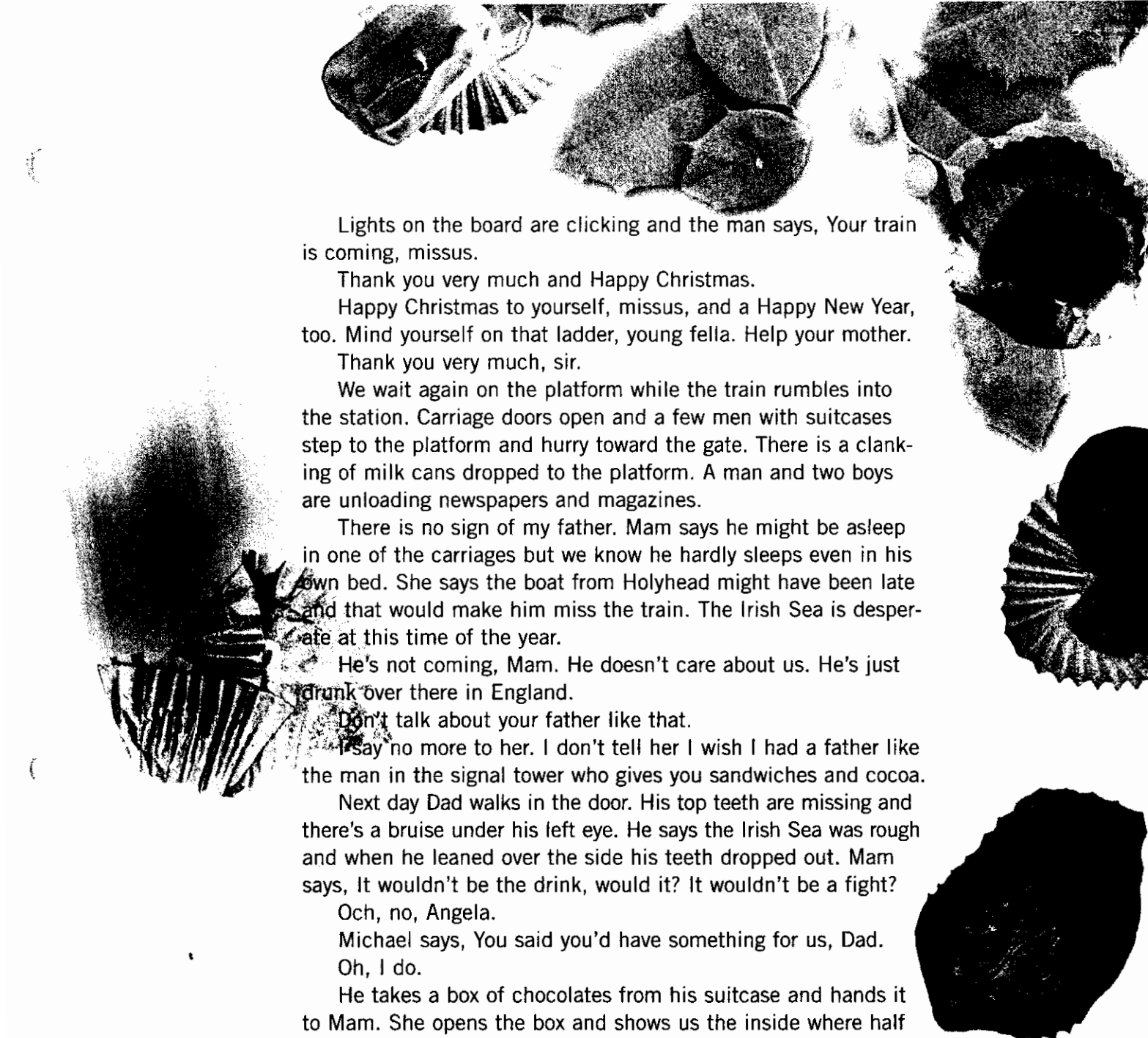
He takes the top off a flask and pours cocoa into a mug. Here, he says to me, put yourself outside that cocoa.

He hands Mam half a sandwich. Ah, no, she says, surely you could take that home to your children.

I have two sons, missus, and they're off there fighting in the forces of His Majesty, the King of England. One did his bit with Montgomery in Africa and the other is over in Burma or some other bloody place, excuse the language. We get our freedom from England and then we fight her wars. So here, missus, take the bit of sandwich.



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Lights on the board are clicking and the man says, Your train is coming, missus.

Thank you very much and Happy Christmas.

Happy Christmas to yourself, missus, and a Happy New Year, too. Mind yourself on that ladder, young fella. Help your mother.

Thank you very much, sir.

We wait again on the platform while the train rumbles into the station. Carriage doors open and a few men with suitcases step to the platform and hurry toward the gate. There is a clanking of milk cans dropped to the platform. A man and two boys are unloading newspapers and magazines.

There is no sign of my father. Mam says he might be asleep in one of the carriages but we know he hardly sleeps even in his own bed. She says the boat from Holyhead might have been late and that would make him miss the train. The Irish Sea is desperate at this time of the year.

He's not coming, Mam. He doesn't care about us. He's just drunk over there in England.

Don't talk about your father like that.

I say no more to her. I don't tell her I wish I had a father like the man in the signal tower who gives you sandwiches and cocoa.

Next day Dad walks in the door. His top teeth are missing and there's a bruise under his left eye. He says the Irish Sea was rough and when he leaned over the side his teeth dropped out. Mam says, It wouldn't be the drink, would it? It wouldn't be a fight?

Och, no, Angela.

Michael says, You said you'd have something for us, Dad.

Oh, I do.

He takes a box of chocolates from his suitcase and hands it to Mam. She opens the box and shows us the inside where half the chocolates are gone.

Could you spare it? she says.

She shuts the box and puts it on the mantelpiece. We'll have chocolates after our Christmas dinner tomorrow.

FINE TUNE YOUR WRITING

This excerpt from *Angela's Ashes* takes place at Christmas time. Write about a family holiday memory or a family tradition that you have. Include your feelings about the holiday. Is it one that you especially like or dislike? Explain why you feel the way you do.

**Save your work for
YOUR PORTFOLIO.**

**Read about
FRANK MCCOURT,
the author of
Angela's Ashes
in Issue # 12.**