

## *Angela's Ashes*, (1999)

Commentary with Author Frank McCourt and Director Alan Parker

### Chapter 1: Beautiful Wee Girl

I first came to this story very early on, I came upon a manuscript copy or a publisher's proof and I inquired about the rights, but they went very quickly. They were bought by David Brown and Scott Rudin, the two producers, so it didn't really come back to me till a good year later. And by then the original script had been written by Laura Jones a very good script. Then Alan Parker began work on his script.

These opening sequences, Alan Parker put in the editing process, because originally they were going to begin the movie in Brooklyn, where the book begins. But Alan Parker had the voice over, which is the second paragraph in the book. And Alan Parker thought it a bit odd to place it in Brooklyn, so that is why he chooses to do these scenes in the beginning.



When Alan Parker first read the book, he thought it was incredibly cinematic to start with, it is beautifully written and he loved the story. Parker also thought that McCourt did an incredible ability to describe quite serious and quite tragic circumstances but to never lose his sense of humor. It is a story that is full of humanity. An obviously everyone has responded to it, all around the world, because it is not just a successful book, it is a phenomena. It has been number one in so many countries, translated into twenty-five different languages, won the Pulitzer Prize, and as we look at the film the book still remains number one in several countries around the world. It has been an extraordinary publishing phenomenon.

It is always daunting for a film director to have to work with such a successful book. When I first asked if they wanted to make a movie of it, the book was not such a big success, but by the time we finished filming it, the book was a colossal success. The reason being that every one who has read the book has their own movie locked up inside their heads, and a director can only do their version of the film. You just cross your fingers and hope that some of the people who have read the book that some of these images will coincide with their own.

So the book came back to me, and Laura Jones had written a very good screenplay and then I wrote my screenplay. We didn't really collaborate on the script; I took hers and then branched off of it and went back to the book. The book is really a treasure trove, and how do we compress it, what do you leave out. It is always difficult.

These scenes, which are set in Brooklyn, are all sets that we built in Arden Studios in Ireland. And these scenes are quite very early on in our schedule because they are very

harrowing and quite difficult. We wanted to do some of the more difficult scenes early on, really for the young kids, so the young kids could understand the seriousness of our story.

1935

Emily Watson was Alan Parker's first choice, actually meet with her in New York, where she was actually making a film, Alan Parker had seen her in *Breaking the Waves*, she is just the most extraordinary actress, and a very lovely lady. She is Arsenal supporter, so we had a lot in common. When we first meet we spoke about the film for about five minutes and the Arsenal for about two hours. She has an incredible ability to concentrate and she is very economical about her performance and very generous.



Robert Carlyle, again it was the first actor Alan Parker spoke to and they got along very well. He is one of those actors that as a director you have a very little list in the back of your head, then one day you hope you get to work with him. Again a very generous actor, cause when you work with kids as you see this scene, a very difficult scene to do, as you see the two twins there, it is very hard to direct them, you have to go with what you got. Joe Breen and Shane Murray-Corcoran, who play Young Malachy and Young Francis here, they were found after searching for a long time, they saw over fifteen thousand kids, that Alan Parker read with in Ireland, they looked in Dublin, Limerick in Cork, before they zeroed in on these two. Alan Parker says that it is always hard, you always cross your fingers hoping the right kid will come in and be brilliant, you even get a bit punch drunk, watching the video tapes over and over again. You would narrow it down and narrow it down, then bring the kids back in and improvise with Alan Parker to see, whether or not they would be able to crack it, when they get on a film site.

Again these are built sets on Ardenmore studios. Working with kids is always very difficult, and the saying is you should never work with children or animals. These boys play young Frank here, Joe Breen, was brilliant to work with because he was so highly intelligent. Alan Parker says that what he does is that one-day he is a strict schoolteacher with these kids, then one day he was like a big brother to them. But in all he states that he had a very professional set, because adult actors have to work with the kids and the kids have to learn that.

This opening shot certainly establishes the weather and the climate. The rain of Limerick, we were never dry. And this particular, scene is so realistic especially the scene in the lane there, and then this of course is authentic, King John's castle in the distance. A typical Limerick back lane is visible here.

Catching also the devotion to the Catholic Church. When I visited this put together set, I was astounded at how authentic it was. I don't know, I think Alan Parker and the set

designers were inspired. It is a strange to write a book, deep back into your memories, and put it on the page, and then see it transferred to the screen with this much tenderness.

Scenes like this get down into the detail. I don't know how they got the children to cry like this. But when I went up to this particular set, this tenement in Brooklyn, when I went to see it in Dublin, where it was shot, at Ardmore Studios, I was astounded at how detail it was with the furnishings, with the bed, everything. I kind of stood at the door in a state of shock.

High Stakes. And this scene, I think, the one where my sister died, Margaret Mary, I think this was the beginning of the long slide. Usually movies begin with an up beat, this begins with a downbeat, where do you go after this. The baby dies, the little girl that my father was wild about, because all we had were four boys, and this was the light of his life. This particular scene, I suppose you could say, 'Goodbye Dad'. There might have been some hope of his redemption, but now he goes out for the drink. And it was the beginning of the end for my mother too.

If a woman is that depressed that she cannot take care of her children, then she is in suicidal shape. But I think what helped was the sweetness and the generosity of the neighbors. Little Job Rain got so sick of eating that soup. He asked Alan Parker, "Alan do I have to have that soup again?" Because they did take after take, and Alan said, "Just pretend Job." "Thanks Alan, you're the best director I ever had." I don't know how Alan directed those children.

## Chapter 2: Back to Ireland

The stink was awful. Because my father was gone, he went off for cigarettes and didn't come back for three days. It was desperation, a mother paralyzed with grief, a father paralyzed with drink. So my grandmother in Limerick, who was a scrubwoman, a cleaning woman, sent six fares from her savings.

But I remember that, I remember how Malachy and I went down in the crew's quarters just to get away, and it was a very kind English crew and they were always giving us bread and jam.



Alan Parker stated that you really try to create an environment where the kids can be at their best. The scenes on the boat were filmed after they finished filming in Ireland. They filmed for seventy-five days in Ireland, and then they had to create the illusion of New York Harbor. The shots of the Statue of Liberty were filmed by the second unit, and they put them together, these two scenes.

This is Cove Harbor. Cove Harbor is traditionally where the Irish would immigrate to the United States. That hill you see there is a very famous hill, except for our family as they are walking up it, instead of down it to the United States. This is also a very famous bridge, just outside of Cove. It is always difficult doing period films, this bus for instance, they had to bring from England, because it is one of the very few surviving buses that are actuate to the period.

At this moment you hear the theme, which John Williams wrote very beautifully, coming through on the track. John Williams is the great maestro; he got nominated for this film for Best Score, which was his thirty-eighth nomination for an Oscar score, which is quite phenomenal.

The two twins that you see here are Ben and Sam O'Gorman, their father actually owns a cinema. He told Alan Parker that this movie was the biggest hit he ever played at his cinema, but I would venture to say he might be a bit biased. When you work with young kids you have labor hours to worry about, as there is only so many hours that the kids can be on set. These two twins got quite emotional; it was quite difficult with the parents there. And you sometimes forget that you are dealing with real people's lives and it is not an illusion like it is for the rest of us.

The scene with the IRA man was filmed in a convent outside of Dublin. It is the only reference to the Irish politics, so many Irish films that you see center in on Irish politics. The central character of Malachy, senior, as seen here, this may elude to one of his stories in Alan Parker's opinion. Frank McCourt believes this part of his father's life that is for sure.

This is the second film that Alan Parker did in Ireland, the first was *The Commitments*. Alan Parker stated that probably deep down he wanted to make another Irish film, because he had so much fun making *The Commitments*. He always says that *The Commitments* was the best fun he ever had making a movie. He said that he used to wake up in the morning, and couldn't wait to get back to work. So coming back to Ireland, after nine years, is a big change, the affluence now, a great deal of change, almost like a different country. The country is also much more modern, so it makes it difficult to do period films.

The train station scene, which is meant to be Limerick, is Pier Street Station in Dublin. Along with the affluence, comes great change, so that is what makes period pieces difficult to do. Almost all of the original locations are far too tidied up to film in.

The voice over narration is done by Andrew Bennett, he was selected because he voice sounds a lot like Frank McCourt. In fact a lot of people thought it was Frank McCourt doing the narration. The voice over allows the film to show the poetry that is established in the book. The voice over is not just about exposition, but sometimes it is, instead it comments on what we are seeing and compliments. Often a great deal of humor is in the voice over, but it was in the screenplay from the beginning it was not an after thought.

This is the River Shamus, which runs through the center of Limerick. The river figures constantly through the film. This street shot was done in Cork. Then we go to the set, which is in Ardenmore Studios, which is just outside of Dublin.

It was difficult explaining to these kids the concept of fleas. They didn't know what that meant. The scene in the bed was filmed six weeks after the scene of them jumping on the mattress in the street, which follows this scene. And again the street is done in Cork. The concept of continuity is way beyond the understanding of children. Trying to tell them that they have to match what they did previously.



We arrived in the north of Ireland; a town called Molven and went to my grandfather's house. We didn't get much of a reception there so we went to Dublin to take the train to Limerick. You can imagine what a shock it was for all of us this traveling. McCourt states imagine four boys and my father and my mother, in a Dublin railway station, desperate, no money.

This is one of the most vivid memories I have with my father, going to this official, whatever was his official capacity, this IRA man. We were looking for some kind of pension maybe, some kind of recompense. And I know that my father was in the struggle.

The central element in our lives was the drink. My father's addiction, when he was sober he was the perfect father, but then there was the drink. He was entertaining a great storyteller, funny with a million stories.

I was going on four then, so my mother had six children in five and a half years and that included the twins, another one came later, Alfie, in 1940. The thing about this thing is that there wasn't much of a reception for people who came back from America. Grandma might have been glad to see us, but it meant we failed, that my father was a failure. So there wasn't much of a reception for him. He was also from the north of Ireland, and being from the north of Ireland was like being from Outer Mongolia. He was a failure, and he drained my grandmother's savings. Here there were six mouths to feed, and there was nothing in those days, there were no jobs. Why they ever went back I don't know. It was common then for kids to run barefoot, and of course half of the population had tuberculosis, we called it the galloping consumption.

A sensitive set designer as he captures this wallpaper, the dismal furnishings. Some people say it is the most catholic city in Ireland; there were statues everywhere, pictures everywhere and her we are all in bed.

What I call the night of the fleas. We were in bad shape in America, because we didn't have any fleas. There wasn't much you could do about the fleas, you could bring the

mattress out and jump around on it, and that. We had those fleas until we left for America. I think about the time of the Second World War they came out with some stuff called DDT's, which would deal with the fleas, but we had them up until the time that I came to America, we would lose night after night of sleep, due to the fleas.

### Chapter 3: Sent Away in a Box

The scenes here where they attempt to retrieve coal was filmed in the middle of Dublin, right near the Guinness Brewery, which is an area that hasn't changed much over the years, with the cobble stone streets.

The Director of Photography on this film was Michael Seresin he is also the one responsible for the beautiful lighting effects that you see on screen. Michael has worked with Alan Parker for over thirty years; they both started out doing television commercials together. This marks his eighth film with Michael. It is easier to work with some one repeatedly, as your atheistic become the same, and not much dialog is needed between the two of you as you are working.

Irish costume designer, Constance Boyle.

This scene was hilarious, as little Joe Breen, who plays Frankie hated eating this portage, as a result he was pretending to eat it, and Alan Parker got quite upset with him. If you look real close you can see the sign of a tear or two on his face. If you watch carefully, he doesn't really eat it; he would spit it out after putting it in his mouth. He is a farmer's son from Wexfor and had never acted before. He read the ad in the paper and came in for the open call, very unspoiled kid, and wonderful to work with, and highly intelligent.

This was a hard scene for the kids to do, the death of their family members. It was also hard for a movie to achieve, quite risky to have one serious scene after another, especially in the opening of a film. But since this was a memoir and not a fiction, the need to be truthful to the source is required and the audience will usually go along for the ride, knowing it is based on truth.

This is a question that a director has to answer when dealing with making a movie from a book. How loyal do you need to be? Everyone who has read the material has their own favorite character and situation, how do you please an educated audience? Obviously, Alan Parker had to include some scenes and some scenes he had to leave out of the movie that is always a painful decision to make. Alan Parker stated that he tried to take out scenes that were too repetitive to the points that he was trying to make.

Frank McCourt was allowed to read the screenplay prior to making the movie, and he understood that things would have to be compressed and cut out. Frank McCourt was unhappy that the Irish dancing scenes were left out of the screenplay and expressed that concern to Alan Parker, who then wrote them into the screenplay.

Alan Parker treated the book as the Bible for the movie, in fact on the call sheet, which is printed everyday of the filming; at the bottom he included the words, "When in doubt,

read the book.” That is a pretty clear message to the cast and crew, from where their direction was ultimately coming from. Everybody took their cues from the book.

These scenes here with the horse drawn hearse were filmed in Dublin. The water being thrown in front of the hearse was a tradition that Alan Parker learned about in Limerick, the water that had been used to bathe the corpse, was held back and then thrown in front of the funeral carriage. The neighbors often did it. The cemetery scene here was also filmed in Dublin. This is a popper's graveyard that they are using here. A popper's graveyard is where you are buried if you cannot afford a burial plot, usually it is in the back of a cemetery, in an area that is not kept up.

Back to a street in Cork. Robert Carlyle a very versatile actor, look at his body of work that we have known him for; unemployed in '97 *The Full Monty*, druggie in '96 *Trainspotting*, and a villain in '99 *The World is Not Enough*, *James Bond*, and many more parts. He is considered to be an easy actor to work with as he always knows his part and arrives ready to work, he is oddly committed to all that he does, a real joy to work with.



St. Vincent DePaul Society was the charitable organization that kept them alive. If you were desperate you would go to the society and they would give you a docket, a ticket, but they called it a docket to get fuel, coal, wool. Or food, you were allowed tea, bread and sugar. This is common in every city in Ireland, no paper, no wood, we burned everything. Mr. McCourt had very strange ideas about things he was very formal. You didn't carry anything in your hand, you didn't carry a parcel, for that was a low class thing to do, and you certainly didn't pick coal off of the streets. Angela being a mother needed the coal to light the fire makes the meals and a hot drink. My father had strange notions.

Very little industry in Limerick, there was a cement factory, coal yards, and a flourmill. That was all of the industries in Limerick.

Frank McCourt always thought that his Uncle Pa Keating would have been a good father; he was very loving to the children. But he and Frank's aunt didn't have any children. During the First World War, he was gassed, came back to Limerick and worked in the Gas Works, as a result he spent the rest of his life hacking and coughing.

Emily Watson wasn't given too many merry moments in the film, and she carries them all off so incredibly convincingly.

Frank McCourt said that one thing that was strange when he looked back on the family history, was that they always had cigarettes; they would send the kids off to buy them one at a time.

Two children dead now, leaving only three left. This stage of Ireland's development was very much like growing up in a Victorian era. Ireland was like this until the end of the Second World War. The carriages, the horse drawn funeral carriages, like this for the mourners. Frank McCourt stated that all of the funerals were vivid in his mind. There were so many people dying in Limerick from Tuberculosis, that death became a form of entertainment in Limerick, they were always having wakes. They would go to the wakes for eating and drinking and then they would all march behind the hearses to the graveyard. As a boy Frank McCourt would say that they belonged to the "Death of the Month Club."

#### Chapter 4: A Bad Yank

Very little rehearsal with the kids, if you do things like this fight scene over and over with the kids, it just doesn't look natural. You always try as much as possible to get the kids to just act natural, like kids.

When you consider the education that Frank McCourt had, with the corporal punishment and all, it is very ironic that he became a teacher at all.

The trouble that Frank and his brother had when they went to school at first was because of their American accents. The kids would imitate them, until Frank got mad and then he would fight back. There was hostility towards them because they were from America.

Education at this time in Ireland was the philosophy that children were little vessels that had to be molded. You were never allowed to think for yourself, ask a question, and wonder about things in life. Mathematics, History, Geography was all taught by rote, you had to memorize everything. If you didn't behave yourself, it was the strap and the stick.

Frank McCourt has been called the Irish Dickens do you see it? Do you see why he might receive that handle? The boy playing the young Malachy here was scared to death to get into the bed with a dead baby. As they explained the scene to him, it is difficult to explain experiences that are out of the grasp of the child actor's knowledge. In the end they all understood the scene, but in the beginning they were terrified to do it. When you are working with kids only half of it is acting, you really rely on their intelligence to get it, and that is all that you really need.

Now after the prayer, we give a touch of humor. Here is a classic example of Frank McCourt's writing, after a sad scene, comes something humorous or light hearted.

#### Chapter 5: Please Dear God...

The crushing of the pint glass is filmed in the middle of Limerick. That statue in the middle of the street in the background is what Frank McCourt actually walked by on a daily basis as he was going to Leamy's School.

The exterior of the pub is South's Pub that is referred to in the book, but the interior was done three weeks later in a different location. The funeral carriage driver, sharing a pint here is Brendan O'Carroll, a famous Irish comedian.

A lot of the locations that were used in the movie came from a Japanese website. A gentleman had gone around and made a map of all of the locations in the book and put them on a web site for tourist to use, when visiting Limerick. As a result it was rather easy for Hollywood to find all of the filming locations, as they were able to retrieve them from this web site.



Frank McCourt said that it was a long time, before he had realized what his mother had actually gone through, with the death of these children, all within a year and a half, one in Brooklyn and two in Ireland. If these children had received proper nutrition and clothes, they would have all survived now; after all, these

were basic respiratory problems that they suffered from.

Frank stated he remembered this moment vividly, a very strong memory of his father drinking black Guinness and setting his mug on top of Eugene's white coffin.

#### Chapter 6: Roden Lane

The St. Vincent DePaul Society was essentially a kind and charitable organization, but they had developed a very stern exterior. This organization has been around for a long time and even operates in the states. They were kind, but unsympathetic, there was a snobbish attitude in Limerick, if you were poor, you were lower class and as a result you had to crawl a little bit. There was great humiliation in this process. The dole is the unemployment. "Beggars can't be choosers," that was their philosophy.

Frank McCourt in the book describes this society and how humiliating this experience was for his family. A lot of people upon viewing the film didn't feel like the studios did justice to this organization for all of their great work. But when you witness your mother going through this experience, it might stay with you in a different manner, thus this is what they present.

The color scheme for this movie... The red coat, you notice that it is the only primary color that stands out. They attempted to keep the film rather monochromatic, muting most of the primary colors. They made five of these coats, each one getting worse than the previous coat, yet it is done incredible shuttle and as a result you may not even notice.

Notice the incredible presence of the crucifix on the wall; it is rather larger than life. This is deliberately done to show the ever-present nature of the church at this time.

Here we are in Roeden Lane; this was the biggest set they had to build for the movie. It was actually built in the middle of Dublin. They tried very hard to find the old lanes, because of the affluence of Ireland right now; they had all been pulled down. Jeffrey Kirkland built this set in six weeks. It is an absolute replica of the lanes at this time, all based on old photographs.

A shot of King John's Castle and the Shannon River, in the middle of Limerick. There were actually very few angles that you can film in Limerick, and not see the 20<sup>th</sup> century progress present in the shots.

The interior shots of Roeden Lane were filmed in Ardmore Studios. The interiors had to be built so that they could light them and get 50 crewmembers in around these very tiny rooms.

They had what they called "two up and two down," which means two rooms on the top floor and two rooms on the bottom floor. The McCourt family lived at the bottom of the lane, and when it would rain the rain would accumulate and flow in under their door. There you have the one toilet at the bottom of the lane; they used squares of newspapers for toilet paper. The photo that the family framed on the wall was Pope Leo XIII (13). Eleven families used the same lavatory.

The lavatory man kept forgetting his lines here, and little Joe knew them so he kept telling the actor what to say. It kind of freaked everybody out, especially the lavatory actor.

#### Chapter 7: Hanging On the Cross Sporting Shoes

With the boys running down the street, we have a shot of Limerick. Then the boys' running down the steps was filmed four weeks before that in Cork. Three streets away was this alley way with the arch, now they turn the corner and we are six weeks later in our set in Dublin, then into our set in Ardmore. All effortlessly put together, by the editor Gerry Hambling, who has worked with Alan Parker for about thirty years.

Here is just an efficient reminder that contraception was absolutely forbidden in these times in Ireland. Alan Parker stated that he likes working with kids, his first film which was done for television (1975), *The Evacuees*, had children in it, then he did *Bugsy Malone*, (1976) which was all kids, so he must not mind working with children. Alan Parker is a father and a grandfather, so that probably helps him with his comfort level.

Mr. McCourt came from a farming family in the north of Ireland, as a result he was a good worker when he worked and he was able to work well with his hands. He could work all day in a field with a shovel and a spade. Bobby Carlyle was a good painter and interior decorator, prior to his acting career taking off, so he too is handy with his hands.

The Leamy School was filmed in Dublin. The school scenes were done in the first couple of days of filming for the whole shoot. Alan Parker mentioned how odd it was to

be filming someone else's life and then to have them show up and watch you do those job. Frank McCourt as he was observing these scenes being filmed stated that, "I feel like I am intruding into my own life." Frank McCourt was also taken back at how accurate the interior of the school was to his own school.

This scene here in the schoolhouse, with the bicycle shoes, was the one scene that Frank McCourt was able to watch being filmed. Frank McCourt said that he stood against the wall in this room with his wife and Emily Watson and watched the filming of this scene. He said that he was transported back to his childhood; he stated "I was afraid that the school master was going to turn towards me, and ask me what I was doing standing against the wall."



#### Chapter 8: A Friday Penny

It is really hard for people to understand how important the accent was in Ireland, or anywhere in the British Isles. In England you are distinguished by your upper class accent, your Cambridge or Oxford accent, or at the other end of the scale, your cockney or anything in between. The

Beatles were the ones that broke the accent barrier.

The fact that this man is losing his dignity will of course also push him into the alcohol. There is probably nothing more painful for a man to lose his dignity, because he cannot find work. They try to show the pain that he was going through and not simply show the cliché of a drunk.

They used a lot of humorous music to balance what John Williams was doing with his score. They also avoid the cliché Irish music, which you hear in every Irish film. It is relevant in this film as the family started out in Brooklyn and the music of the United States became very relevant to him thinking about getting back there. John's score is very subtle and restrained. Alan Parker and John Williams made a pact early on that there would be no barren drums and pipes that you associate with Irish films, avoiding the River dance mentality.

In their home there was no bathroom, there was only one water tap downstairs, thus they would have to go downstairs to fill a bucket. If you wanted to cook, you had to boil water. If you needed a shower or bath, they would boil a bucket of water and then wash next to the fire standing to keep warm.

The Kevin Barry song, a song the family heard more times than they cared to hear. This is written in the text in its entirety. Frank stated that he thought his dad would have died happy, if he had died for a cause. He wanted to fight for Ireland. This wasn't so terribly uncommon, men yelling about Ireland, while their families expired.

Bobby's dialogue here is almost exactly as it appears in the novel, very closely scripted, yet it appears almost improvisation as Bobby delivers it. There is only water in that bucket, a lot of method actors would have wanted urine in the bucket, but he settled for water.

The humiliation of the man, as his self-esteem is eroded away all of the time. You also see Frank growing up before his time and the pain of Malacy, Sr. as he sinks further and further into despair.

#### Chapter 9: God on His Tongue

Two Rituals. Here we see the boys being prepared for communion, which is the second catholic ritual after baptism. This is another example of Frank McCourt's writing, how he inserts humor of his religious upbringing, into the serious lessons he learned as a child.

When these kids started sticking their tongues out, the crew couldn't stop laughing at them. Because when you ask a child to do this for an extended period of time, it no longer is about the acting, but it is about these kids being real. As a filmmaker, you want to make sure to get these real moments on film, but you can only concentrate on one child at a time.

Some of the crew was literally crying, and stifling their laughter, watching all thirty-five of these kids sticking their tongues out.

Interesting to note, that this is no national religion in Ireland, no official religion, however, here you have the public school, and the public schoolmasters preparing you for your first communion. On the day that you were about to receive your first communion you would go around and collect money from all of your neighbors and relations, it would be the first time that you would have a few shillings in your pockets.

When it came to an education on the "facts of Life," they would pick up everything on the streets. Everything was shameful, dirty and a sin.

#### Chapter 10: Confession

The cinema in Limerick and most of Ireland was censored. So a lot of American films never made it to the cinemas in Ireland, as they were considered too sinful for the Irish people to see. This was a Catholic repressed society.

At this time in Limerick, the church was very powerful. It is difficult to understand it now. The Jesuits had a saying, "give us a boy till seven and he will be ours forever."

For most protestants the confession is a very hard concept for them to grasp, thus as Alan Parker does here, he attempts to find the humor in it. Alan Parker was raised an English Protestant.

### Chapter 11: First Communion

As the second bucket of water comes in here on Joe, he was not told it was going to happen and it was cold water, thus he is not acting, but reacting. The cleaning of the ears and finally the spitting by his grandmother were all moments he was unaware that they were going to happen to him.

This scene got the biggest laughs in Ireland.

The wafer in his mouth was also real, not acting.

Frank stated that this is supposed to be the happiest day of your life. You would get a new suit, from the St. Vincent DePaul Society; you would get a communion and then your first communion breakfast, and then get to go to the Limerick Cinema to see James Cagney.



The exterior of the church is not the same church you were in earlier. An interesting note here, the woman who played the grandmother actually got married to her current husband in this church.

Grandma's street was an actual street in Dublin. They liked the fact that it had the lighter brick look to it. The first communion is sacred; you aren't supposed to throw it up. The two scenes here, the inside eating and then the outside throwing up were filmed about six weeks apart from each other. As he was stuffing those sausages into his mouth, he actually did get a little sick, so you have half acting and half realism as he scoots away from the table. What did he throw up? A little bit of carrot, lemonade and orange juice.

Frank mentions that all of the little boys in Limerick, wanted to grow up and be gangsters, just like James Cagney. They were taught that all of the great gangsters and cops were Irish.

Kind of sad here as these were the last scenes that little Joe did for them. He came from a farmer and everyday prior to coming to filming he had to milk his dad's cows. He brought something unique to every scene that he was in. He went back to farming after he made this movie. He was a beautiful and unspoiled kid, that everyone was extremely fond of working with.

A transition from little Frank to middle Frank. Middle Frank is played by Ciaran Owens, who resembles the little Frankie, with his eyes, walk and freckles.

### Chapter 12: Irish Dancing

Things were bad for the family, but one way of being respectable, was to send your kids to Irish dancing school, so Angela did just that with young Frank. This is the scene that Alan Parker inserted back into the screenplay at the request of Frank McCourt.

Ciaran is a very accomplished in sports and he hated doing the dancing scenes, the only part he liked was the physical part where he gets to knock down the other boy. Notice how well he handles the soccer ball at the end of the scene. Paddy Clohessy, played by James Mahon is a very experienced actor. These two bring a lot to the story line. They interviewed 15,000 boys for the roles in this film. Eamon Owens is the brother of Ciaran Owens and plays the part of Quasimodo.

The second film you see on screen here is Hop-Along Cassidy, 1935, so if you couldn't grow up to be a gangster like James Cagney, you could always become Hop-Along Cassidy. Frank stated that as a boy they like Hop-Along, because he didn't have to kiss the girl.

### Chapter 13: Playing Truant

Here in the cinema they give you an example of the newsreels. Remember that television wasn't invented until 1939, and then not in numerous households until 1950's.

Historians have pointed out that this is inaccurate as the Nazi footage was kept off of the screens, even in neutral Ireland, where the president was a big fan of Adolph Hitler, so this a bit of a cheat.

They give you some subtle political references here, the 800 years. Eight Hundred years is a long time to be under the British boot.



An example of how hungry they were that they would actually yearn for the apple peel of the schoolmaster, Mr. O'Neil.

These scenes in the countryside were done just outside of Dublin.

They would play hokey from school, it was called "going on the mitch," or "mitching." They lived so close to the country that they could be out in the grass of the fields in about five minutes. Frank McCourt stated that this was the highlight to get chased by farmers, and the kids would always win, since the farmers wore rubber boots.

Again you can see the athletic ability of Ciaran Owens here with the throwing of the apple, he never missed James, and in fact he got black and blue by all the apples that were pegged at him. This was very liberating scenes for these kids to film, living most of their lives in the heart of Limerick. The crew also enjoyed the opportunity to get out in the countryside.

Poor Quasimodo, name comes from the Victor Hugo novel and film, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. He had a hump on his back; as a result he wanted to be an announcer on the BBC, thinking that would be the only job he could get with the hump on his back. As a result he would try to practice and acquire a British accent.

These scenes are great and remind us that with the repression there will be deprivation to provide us with some sort of humor, same as in the book. The boy up the spout was a stunt boy, if there is such a thing. He is actually a jockey so he is a little older than he looks.

The shadow through the glass door shoot, is a David Lynch shot that Alan Parker pinched.

#### Chapter 14: Class Distinction

The idea of getting young Frank McCourt a job as an altar boy was his mother's way of trying anything to get the family out of the slum or at least a step up. Growing up in Limerick the children were exposed to three languages, the Latin of the church, the Irish Language, which was beaten into them in school, and English language, which they used, everyday.

Branded by living in the lane, attending Leamy National School, that was the mark of the lower classes. This example of the church closing its door on the boy shows how the Catholic Church was also involved in enforcing the class system in Ireland.

Politically incorrect nowadays to have two characters smoking in a scene together and particularly hard on Emily Watson as she had to take up smoking to do this film. To her credit, she did give up smoking after she completed this film.

Angela never approved of her son talking about these family issues and their life of poverty, as a result Frank McCourt waited until his mother passed away before he published his memoirs. She always felt that such pain should be reserved for confession and that no one else should really know about it. She wanted to pull a veil over all of the horrible things in their lives.

Frank McCourt stated that his parents were very private about their fights, he rarely saw them, or witnessed discussions like this, and they were very private about their fights. His mother didn't erupt in front of the children and never disagreed with her husband in front of the children. She insisted that the children respected their father, as bad as he was. "Don't talk about your father." The only time you were allowed to show strong emotions was when you were drinking, like anger, joy and merriment. As a result he rarely witnessed his parents embracing or sharing emotions with each other.

It is important that the young Frank McCourt witnesses this dialogue, as remember it is he who is telling the story. From a fictional look, it would have been interesting to have more scenes of the parents together, so that we could understand their relationship better, but from the text view, everything is told through Frank McCourt's eyes. In conventional fiction terms, this would have been an intimate scene between these two.

#### Chapter 15: Baby Alpine

Later in life, Frank McCourt said that he overheard his mother complain about all of the children that she had, wishing that she hadn't have had so many children. But there was

no birth control available to the lower class, and if you used it, or could obtain it, it was a sin. I guess you can mark that up as another triumph for Catholics and lack of contraception.

The interior of this post office was filmed in Dublin and when he moves out into the street it is back in Cork. Nice shot to look at atheistically, since it is backlit.

Frank McCourt said later that he did have mixed feelings about his father; he couldn't understand the sickness that would allow a father to walk into a pub and then forget about his children.

His mother would say that your "Dad has chosen the bottle over the babies." It is hard to comprehend that type of an addiction, where you endanger your own children. In less than nine and a half years, Angela had seven children. There was a gap of four years between Mike and Alfie, how she avoided having a baby in that time was saying no. Remember that it was also a sin to refuse your husband, to refuse to do your wifely duty, as they would call it. You had to submit, that the purpose of marriage was to have children.

Didn't use any dolls here, they were all real babies that Emily Watson was handling. Emily Watson has no children of her own, but everyone was amazed at how well she handled the babies on the set, which were thrust into her arms from all directions.

#### Chapter 16: The Typhoid

Frank McCourt stated that this society was puritanical and that you couldn't even throw a brick in Limerick with out hitting a priest.

Here now is the confirmation, which is when you become a true soldier of the church. Frank McCourt thinks to this day that it was the lavatory outside of their door, is how he caught Typhoid Fever, and spent three and a half months in the fever hospital in Limerick. He nearly died; they said it was the prayers of the boys in the church that saved him. In reality it was two blood transfusions from two soldiers in the Sarsfield Military Barracks, which saved his life. The belief at this time was that there was a crisis in every fever and if you can get over that you can be saved. This was a fever hospital, so as a result visitors were not allowed, and they only let his father in to visit him, as they expected him to die. Snuffing out of the candles is symbolic to the snuffing out of life.

Here we have symbolism with the blowing out of the candles, which represents the snuffing out of life. The hospital scenes were all done in a mental institution called Saint Itise, which is located outside of Dublin. Dr. Campbell is a cameo appearance by director Alan Parker. This building is one of the last buildings built for Ireland by the British, prior to them giving up on the Irish. Great looking building architecturally and it has been used in numerous movies.

The buckets of blood is a repeat for Alan Parker, one in which he wasn't fully aware of the repeat, but you see the same shot in *Angel's Heart*, 1987, only with buckets catching blood dripping.

Being in the hospital gave Frank a lot of firsts, 1) his first bed to sleep in with clean white sheets, 2) his first bath his first lavatory, and 3) three meals a day. Still he couldn't wait to get out and get home.

In the book there are whole chapters that make reference to Frank understanding the beauty of words, there could have been several possibilities for Alan Parker to film, but this is what the hospital scenes provide us with.

#### Chapter 17: Jesus and the Weather

Frank stated that he was treated like a hero when he got out of the hospital; it was like he had survived a war, as very few people did survive the typhoid fever. Those who didn't get Typhoid Fever would get TB, tuberculosis.

Mr. McCourt was considered the bad boy of the lane, as he would throw away his dole on the drink, he would constantly lose his job, while other men on the lane would bring home their dole to their families, and would actually get jobs and keep them.

Ironically, Frank McCourt might have gotten his ability to tell a story from his father, the man that never really was a father to this family, but he was a great storyteller.

Due to the fever, he was put back into the same class as his brother; this was a very shameful moment for the young Frank McCourt. When he went home from the fever ward, the doctor told his mother, that he should have meat three times a day. The closest he ever came to that was bouillon cubes. His mother would make a soup with the beef bouillon cubes.

Again all of these Leamy School scenes were shot on the first or second day of filming, but here now you see this scene inserted towards the middle of the movie, kind of odd to think about. Movies are almost always shot out of sequence. They only had this school for a certain period of time and had to shoot all of these sequences in that period of time.

The pub here, with the Statue of Liberty is a reflection of the image you saw in the beginning of the movie. Reminding of us of where this little boy came from and where he wishes to return. Thus the Liberty Pub was an artistic license by the director.

They were never allowed to write about what they wanted to write about; you couldn't use your imagination, you were always told what to write.

Here is Frank McCourt's first successful piece of prose.

One criticism the film was that Alan Parker filmed too much of the rain.

Mr. O'Halloran was the first teacher to ever encourage his students to be human beings. The Leamy School in Limerick is actually an office block, so these were all filmed in an old school in Dublin.

#### Chapter 18: Gone To England

The calling out of the dinner items was a great source of pride in the lane. Each family would do it, mentioning what the course of the day would be comprised of. They would always be playing outside, usually kicking around a football (soccer ball to us) made out of a sheep's bladder.

The church was everywhere even in the bed.

The music of Billy Holiday song, *I Can't Give You Love*, in the background, the first time Frank McCourt heard her was on the 1) Armed Forces Network or 2) Radio Luxemburg, young Frank McCourt said he thought she was only singing to him. "I can't give you anything but love, baby."

They spent a total of six months finding all of these locations in Ireland. Even when you see a street shot like this one filmed in Cork with everyone walking to the train station, they had to do a lot of dressing to the street to hide modern conveniences, and inappropriate signage for the day. Everything had to look like it was in the right period. This is Pierce Street Station in Dublin, considered to be the best period train station in all of Ireland.

The train pulling out of the station is another repeat shot for Alan Parker, as he did that same shot in *Pink Floyd, The Wall*, in 1982.

Many Irish families prospered working in the factories in England to help with the war effort. This was the point of the families highest hopes, was that they were going to move from that slums out of the Lane, because their father was going to send money home every week.

Frank stated that the telegram didn't come by 6 pm, when the church bells rang on a Saturday night his mother would sink down by the fireside and smoke a cigarette in despair. There really was nothing left for his mother to do, but to beg. When she brought home these items from begging for the priest's dinner, she would say that she got it from their grandmother.

Here is another example of the magic of Hollywood. The scene of the woman waiting to beg for the priest's dinner was shot in Dublin and the shot of the pram arriving and the boys seeing their mother, was shot in Limerick. Shot five weeks apart from each other.

The Redemption Church in Limerick didn't let them use their church for the filming, you can probably guess why.

### Chapter 19: Working Man

Shay Gorman, playing the role of Mr. Hanna died shortly after the filming of this movie was completed.

All of these shots of Frankie hauling the coal were shot at almost every location that they went to, and then assembled here.

The bags were filled with coal, as they wanted Ciaran to have the feel for the weight, plus it would have been one more thing for this poor kid to have to remember. He really cares the weight of the film.

This was Frank's first job, helping Mr. Hanna deliver coal. He had bad legs so he hired a boy to help him with the bags of coal, as some days he couldn't even get off of the cart. He did this job for thirty years; Frank stated that he doesn't know how he survived doing it that long. Frank McCourt got an infection from the coal dust in his eyes, an infection that would stay with him until he was about 39 or 40 years old. Later on in life when penicillin was invented, it would clear up for a short period of time, but then re-occur. Here is a thought, Homer, Milton, James Joyce, Shaun O'Casey, are all great writers and they all had trouble with their eyes. Frank McCourt thought that if he had trouble with his eyes, it might mean that he too would become a great writer. For the filming here, he is wearing red contact lenses.

In the pub here you can identify who delivers the coal and who delivers the flour. Nice visual scene, even though it is not very important.

The interior of the Lyric Cinema was built in the studio in Ardmore.

Make up courtesy of Sarah Manzoni, which is not on your credit sheet.

### Chapter 20: Christmas

Frank McCourt stayed in the hospital for one month with his eyes and they couldn't diagnosis what was wrong with them.

Men were constantly coming back and forth between Ireland and England. They always waited for something, but nothing ever came, even at Christmas time. Angela was very good at making excuses for her husband.

The train station filming here took all day, and by the end of the day Emily just could not hold the baby any longer, and Ciaran offered to hold the baby between takes, Alan Parker saw the image of Ciaran holding the baby and thought it was very powerful. So here something that happened by mistake winds up in the film. The image of course of him is becoming the surrogate father.

Coventry was the most bombed city in the British Isles, an industrial city.

Imagine the type of strength you would need to raise children like this? Frank stated that when he was growing up he was always on the edge of hunger and always cold.

The sheep's head was something that the kids were not aware of until it was set down in front of them, thus there is their reaction.

A lot of people asked Frank why his mother didn't have a job, but there were no jobs for the woman of her generation and there were no jobs still in Limerick.

When Frank McCourt's dad would be home and actually cook, he would make Portage, and he would put everything that was left over in it, which wasn't much of anything, but he never ate. If Angela had any money at all or few children to take care of, she could have moved the family to England, where she could get a job. But she couldn't do that, as she had too many children to look after and no money.

People also asked Frank why his family didn't put down a plank and then walk across the water with it in the winter rainy season, instead of walking in the water. But if they had a plank, it was used for firewood to cook with and to keep warm.

This moment of seeing his dad leaving for England a second time, was a turning point in Frank McCourt's life. This is where he became a man, or so he thinks. This moment was as vivid as the pint on the coffin, in Frank McCourt's mind. He never came back home, he would send letters, admonishing them and that was that, only once did he send money, 3 pounds.

This is not an autobiography, but it is a memoir, an impression of one's life, not exactly detailed. So the story is not blow-by-blow, it is the things that affected him and his version of that. So that there is truth at the heart of it, but it is blurred. Frank McCourt's memory is incredible in telling his own story and how well he actually remembers the events of his life.

Alan Parker's favorite scene is when Frank follows his father here.

Now we have another transition, from middle Frank to older Frank, both of these are really smooth. They could have had the opportunity to use digital effects, but they wanted to avoid that technique for the transitions to the ages. Here is Michael Legge playing the older Frankie.

#### Chapter 21: Eviction

There is the reason why they didn't have a plank downstairs, they even knocked down their wall and burned it. Frank recalled this Mrs. Purcell as a moment of luxury, to get to come in and listen to the radio.

Frank stated, "Just fell in love with Billy Holiday, without even seeing her picture, it was how her voice came across the radio like an angel."

Phelim Drew, who was the reporter in *The Commitments*, plays the landlord.

The lowest point in their life, being evicted, Angela had such pride that when they left that house, Angela made them go in the middle of the night. She didn't want the neighbors to see that she got evicted, so they made three or four trips in the night to Laman Griffin's house. Laman's job was digging holes for the electric light poles around the countryside.

They filmed in the lane set close to three weeks, so they got a lot of mileage out of the set that they built. As they are leaving here, Malacy was supposed to see Swaney, the Al Jolson song, but they couldn't afford it, thus Alan Parker wrote the song *Kaiser Bill*, that he is singing here.

The exteriors of Laman's were filmed weeks before they filmed the interior scenes.

#### Chapter 22: Dirty Things

Hoppy O'Halloran, played by Brendan Cauldwell, provided intellectual excitement and he treated the boys like human beings, not to mention his enthusiasm for America.

Another reason why churches don't want film crews in them, is that they would have to change the interior, especially they altar to match the period and then transform everything back to its original; state, not to mention a film crew of fifty which might not value the site as a religious gathering place.

Confession for the catholic, reassures them that if they die in their sleep they would immediately go to heaven, as they confessed their sins and received absolution.

In the book Frank McCourt describes these priests' ears to be as 'large as shells,' thus they looked all over Ireland for a person to play this part. Must confess the make-up artist also had a hand in creating these ears, along with the Almighty.

#### Chapter 23: Laman Griffin

If she defied this man, she would have been put out into the streets. Lots of people gave Angela advice and suggested that she give up the children and put them in an orphanage, but she refused. Several of Frank McCourt's cousins were sent to orphanages and they have horror stories worse than this life to tell.

One of the reasons why this movie and novel are called *Angela's Ashes* is because the original story was to end with Frank sprinkling his mother's ashes over the family grave in Limerick. He finished the story a little early, but he still liked the title so he decided to keep it. He felt he couldn't right it without any emotional clarity until she died. The relationship with Laman Griffith might not have been possible to write while she was alive.

Uncle Pat couldn't read, but made his living selling newspapers, he did know how to count money. He was considered simple, they say that he was dropped on his head as a boy, but Frank McCourt says that seems to be the running story for half of Ireland.

Michael Legge, when he arrived on set he had gained some weight from his audition, so Alan Parker asked him to drop his weight for this movie. He took twenty pounds off of his frame and kept it off during the entire filming. He was put on a strict diet to accomplish that; you can't have a chubby boy in a starvation situation.

The voice over as he licks the newspaper, comes directly from the book.

#### Chapter 24: Telegram Boy

The washing scene and then up to the bed, was a longer scene which even included Frank interfering with himself, it was shorten and they also thought it was a bit too much.

Frank McCourt stated that when people were generous they would do it in a rough way, there was to be no sentiment, no emotion, it was a way of protecting yourself. This is Alan Parker's second favorite moment in the film, Aunt Aggie buying Frank a new suit of clothes.

Frank McCourt was a telegram boy for two years, and he did this while the war was going on. As a result he delivered plenty of sentimental telegrams of the loss of loved ones.

The montage of the 1) telegrams being delivered was filmed in all of the locations they worked in, just like the 2) delivering of the coal.

#### Chapter 25: Theresa

Here is the use of a cunningly disguised stunt man.

Kerry Condon is playing the role of Theresa. She had never acted prior to this and was only sixteen years old. Very talented performance and I am sure she will go on to do other things.

Frank McCourt stated when this experience happened the only thing he knew about women was that it was all filth and sin.

The telegram building is the same location that was used for the hospital interiors, that metal institution. Great use of the English language with the confrontation with the supervisor, remembering that radio was scarce and television was not around at all, the use of the language in gaining the upper hand was a thrill.

At this time period if you got TB, tuberculosis people would treat you like a leaper, you were avoided.

Imagine what this would be like for a teenage to comprehend that his own mother had to surrender herself to her cousin, in order to have a roof over her head for her kids and to feed them. And then at the same time, Frank is having his experience with Theresa; imagine the confusion for a teenager to have to deal with.

And then having no one to talk to adolescence is hard enough, but then to deal with all of this on top of it. Frank talks about the fact that there really was no adolescence, you were a child one moment and then you became a man, and you went to work.

Emily Watson has to age fifteen years during the duration of this film, which is not an easy task for her, as she was too young for the role to begin with.

#### Chapter 26: Threatening Letters

Mrs. Finucane provided Frankie with a job and the means to get to America, again because of his writing talent.

The exteriors of Mrs. Finucane were done in Cork, and the interiors of her house were done in a home in Dublin.

#### Chapter 27: Confession to St. Francis

Inevitable, like father like son, at least for Frank it never became a serious habit. This was a difficult scene both to write in his book and for him to visually have to witness it on the screen. He still doesn't forgive himself for this moment. Frank said that he never told his mother that he was sorry about this moment in their life. He said that he felt his mother knew that he was sorry for this moment, and that they both shared moments that they were sorry for, but never expressed.

Film Trivia, this Franciscan Church in Dublin was on the same street that Maureen O'Hara was born.

"God forgives you and you must forgive yourself. God loves you and you must love yourself. For only when you love God and Yourself, can you love all of God's creatures."

#### Chapter 28: The End of Debt

Frank McCourt stated that he justified taking these funds, as Mrs. Finucane was going to leave it all to the church to say masses in her honor after her death.

Throwing the ledger into the Shannon was filmed ten times, which was all of the ledgers that they had to work with. Alan Parker said it was very frustrating to watch each one float away, knowing that the shot wasn't right and they would have to do it again.

#### Chapter 29: A New beginning

The eclipse is done with one gigantic light called a Wendy light, named after the great cameraman Wendy Watkins. They are cheating with the eclipse as they speed it up, at this point the audience doesn't want to wait twenty minutes to see an eclipse.

Going to America, without knowing anyone. He didn't need a sponsor, since he was an American citizen.

Strange, but true, there was an eclipse the night before he left for America. This was called an American Wake, when people went to America they gave them this type of party, celebration and grieving at the same time. You can cry through your laughter. This was 1949. A future completely unknown, not knowing what you were facing, no education, and no skills, but there was hope taking a chance that was all you could do. The American dream, hope that you could bring your family over in the future, which is exactly what Frank McCourt, did do. The dead are dead and the McCourt's are thriving.

The ending here with Frank looking back down the streets and seeing himself is totally cinematic, it has nothing to do with the book, and it is Alan Parker's favorite moment. It all serves as a cinematic curtain call for the actors. Alan Parker thought about ending this film on the classic walk away shot, but he thought that they really should go full circle, and the promise of America, the Statute of Liberty.

Ending of the movie, seeing the Statue of Liberty. This final shot is a digital shoot of the Statue of Liberty in the background.

Chapter 30: End Credits

Show this after completing the movie, Special Features:  
*The Making of Angela's Ashes*

In 1996 one of the most astonishing literary debuts in history came with the publication of *Angela's Ashes* written by former school teacher Frank McCourt it was the true life memoir of his childhood spent in poverty stricken Ireland. Acclaimed by critics and read by millions worldwide. *Angela's Ashes* won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, one of the highest accolades a book can receive. For some it was the lyrical writing style, which made *Angela's Ashes* classic prompting comparisons with Dickens and Joyce.

For many it was the evocative way in which the author captured the rain soaked streets of Limerick. For others it was the warmth and humor in which McCourt told his devastating yet somehow uplifting story. One thing was certain that someday *Angela's Ashes* would make a stunning film.

Allen Parker director of the smash hit musical *Evita*, had already brought one best selling Irish story to the big screen, *The Commitments*. Now he would return to the streets of Ireland, for his adaptation of another modern classic.

"I always liked Ireland and I had a really great time the first time I made a movie here, *The Commitments*, so this is just revisiting really. I've always loved the story, the working class story, the period always attracted me, but most importantly it was the beauty of Frank McCourt's words." Alan Parker

"I thought the book would be published and maybe the first edition would sell, and if it wasn't successful, I would go back to teaching. To make a movie of it, Oh, no." Frank McCourt

"In the end everything about the film is the book. The book is the heart of what we are doing, and it is the blueprint for what we are doing." Alan Parker

"Finding the right actor's to fill the right shoes of the adult roles was easy. Two-time academy award nominee Emily Watson would court Oscar for a third time with her heart felt betrayal of Angela McCourt. The mother struggling to hold her family together against the odds."

"I first saw Emily in Lars von Trier's 1996 film *Breaking the Waves*, I thought she was extraordinary in that film. It was just amazing. I have seen most of what she has done, and it is not like she has made a lot of movie's she hasn't, but she is pretty extraordinary." Alan Parker

"The first day of shooting I saw Emily Watson when I was in Alan Parker's trailer, where we were having lunch and Emily came in, I said 'Oh my God', my mother."

"And I play Angela who is the man of the family. Who is always having children? And we kind of live in lots of places like this and we get evicted from slums on a regular basis. All in all it is quite tough, but she must have done something right, because she brought up Frank McCourt." Emily Watson

Robert Carlyle would play Frankie's wayward father Malachi McCourt. "Scott Runden called me and told me that Robert Carlyle was being considered for the father. And I said, 'Oh my God! Cause I had seen him in the *Full Monty* and *Train spotting*. I said this is going to be explosive chemistry, as they say in the business. And it is."

"I play Malacy McCourt as the father of young Frank McCourt, amongst others. He is not what I would call a bad man. This is what the problem was for me at first. Because when I accepted the part, because so many people said to me, oh your playing this role and he's terrible, he's this, he's that. So what I tried to do was try to find the lightness in the guy. And to try to paint a picture of a man who was or can't accept his responsibilities. That was his biggest crime." Robert Carlyle.

"Robert Carlyle is an actor that I have admired for a long time. He's got honesty and truth about him and the character he plays Malacy McCourt is a sad character and does some terrible things, but actually it's not his fault. He is not the villain of the piece, he is not the sort of cliché wife beating villain sort or father that leaves the family. He has other lives to him that make him interesting." Alan Parker.

"My father is sort of a mystery to me. How deep or how wide was his intellect? I know he read I know he had dozens of poems and songs stuck away in his brain. And I know he had a right dry ironic sense of humor. He couldn't resist the drink and that nearly

destroyed him. Where as I said, when he was sober he was a very good father.” Frank McCourt

Never the less, Angela's Ashes is Frank's story and finding young actors with the talent and presence to play him from age five to nineteen was never going to be easy.

“It's bad enough trying to find a great kid actor, but having to find three wonderful kid actors And the only way to do that is to put the word out as wide as possible. We saw 1,500 kids, before I zeroed in on the kids that we have in the film.” Alan Parker

The film makers found the perfect Franky in eight year old Joe Breane.

“Joe Breane plays young frank. He has never acted before and he is extraordinary really. I know directors get kind of carried away with the young actors they discovered. But I mean, I love him dearly, I think he is so brilliant. And every day he does something that is amazing and it has nothing to do with me as a director. It is totally to do with him and the kind of person he is. Quite intelligence he has.” Alan Parker. “He has been the big surprise of the film and in many ways, because he is the youngest of all the actors and he does the things that is perhaps the most endearing. He's done a terrific job.”

Thirteen years old Keran Owens, the equally talented brother of the butcher boy star Amon Owens would play the middle Frankie.

“Keran had unusually acted before. He is at the terrific age, where he looks like a child, but actually has the intelligence of an adult. And for a director that is a terrific attribute.” Alan Parker.

Finally, nineteen year old actor Michael Leg was cast as the older Frankie.

“Michael Leg who plays the older Frank, he was the last to be cast. Because I think I worked from the middle outwards, I think I cast Keran as middle frank first, then Joe Brean as young Frank, then having got those two it made the choice of older Frank actually easier. Because it had to be someone who fitted in visually with them and someone who I thought could have the same gentleness and sensitivity that they had.” Alan Parker

With the perfect cast in place the search was on in which to find the perfect place to recreate the story of Frank McCourt's childhood. The task of bringing Angela's Ashes to life had begun.

Angela's Ashes began filming in Ireland in September of 1998. For Frank McCourt it was an emotional return to the streets of his childhood. Here we are evoking memories both painful and poignant.

“When I walked in here yesterday, I was jolted, Jolted into the past, because this is authentic. It brings back all kinds of feelings. Feelings that I felt were long disappeared. It is like seeing somebody that you were in love with a long time ago. And she reappears

and you say 'Oh Jesus' and the feelings well up again. I wrote the book to get the stuff out of my system; I didn't know they were going to start making a film about it. And I would have to look at my childhood all over again. And have to look at these house and doors, I can look down the lane and see women standing at the door. I can see children playing in the gutter that ran down the middle. I can hear the women calling to their children to come in for their tea." Frank McCourt

"For me as a film maker it is always nerve racking when the author comes to visit a set. Particular with Frank, as I have always said his book is our Bible. He's the reason we are doing everything here, it is not just a book we are talking about. It is a man's life," Alan Parker.

In keeping with the spirit of the book, the film would be a grimly realistic portrait of Ireland in the 1930's with the McCourt family at the heart of the story.

"I looked all over Ireland for all of the locations. We filmed it in Limerick, Cork and in Dublin, but the problem with Ireland at the moment it is going through an economic boom so everything is being modernized at an incredible rate. So it is quite difficult to find locations of the period that we wanted them for, you know pre-war. Also regard to the poverty of Roeden Lane the actual Lane, really don't exist any more, so although I looked very hard to find one, I couldn't find one that was exactly right. And Roeden lane is Frank's world really; the bulk of the story takes place in and around this lane. So we had to bite the bullet and build it. And having made that decision is great of course, because you can go back to the original photographs. And we looked at many black and white photographs, which is what it is based on. Then once you built it, it is a complete joy for film making, because you got the complete train set." Alan Parker

"The Lane is where you put the, what you call it, under class the complete unemployed, the under privilege, and these were built in the time of Queen Victoria. And they were called Artisan Dwellings. Okay, there was a whole Lane, I think it was about sixteen families, and at the end of the Lane there was one lavatory." Frank McCourt

"We tried to be as real as possible. In the Ireland of the period, which was much more monochromatic, then the bright colors you know see painted everywhere in Ireland. It is a period film, in many ways; it is a bleak but funny story. It's dourer, it's damp, it's monotone and hopefully it's honest. It's truthful." Alan Parker

One small concession to Hollywood filmmaking came in the form of rain machines to provide the constant bombardment of bad weather described in the book.

"We were particular unfortunate, my family, because we lived at the end of the lane and it slopped. With our kitchen became a lake with the result of the rainy weather. We had to move upstairs to get away from it, so downstairs was Ireland and my mother said we move upstairs in the winter and that was Italy." Frank McCourt

“It is not a glamorized film in any stretch of the imagination, but by the same token, it doesn't matter how ugly a street may be, there is an odd beauty to it, it has its own aesthetic this sort of miserable world. In many ways, I don't think many of us would want to live in it, but it is quite interesting to photograph.” Alan Parker

One of the key aspects of Alan Parker's vision for Angela's Ashes would be to capture the lyrical, powerful, and emotional qualities of Frank McCourt's writing.

“The magic and beauty of the book is Frank McCourt's voice. There is no doubt about that, it is in the eyes of a child, and yet it has the wisdom of a sixty-five year old man. And in that regard, that is its special ness.” Alan Parker

“Small children don't lie. They don't know how to lie. They see what is and they tell the truth that is all they know.” Frank McCourt “As a writer I tried to tell the truth. People would say is this really true, and I would say, ‘You're damn right it is true.’”

“He is so wonderful descriptive Frank. Every single sentence that he has, you know, it is easy to see the scene. It wasn't difficult to write the screenplay.” Alan Parker

“The book and then the screenplay, absolute magnificent piece of work.” Robert Carlyle. “As said there is a lot of misery in this piece, there is a lot of tragedy. But there is triumph there as well. I mean the fact that anyone, anyone at all, can emerge from this with any kind of dignity, I think is a triumph in itself.”

“Houses were collapsing in Limerick and Dublin, these slums were simply crumbling. And the people in them would just carry on. We were stubborn; we went from day to day and hungry most of the time and cold. But we had dreams, and I think the more you're deprived the more intense your dreams become.” Frank McCourt

“There is no denying it is a tragic story. But I hope it is not depressing, it is very sad at times, there is no doubt about that, you can't deny that. But the beautiful thing about the book and I hope the film is incredible humor that is in it, because in the end it is a film about survival. And I think in many ways it is very up lifting.” Alan Parker, “You go through this incredible journey. A great deal of which is sad and a great deal of which is funny. I think the beautiful thing about the Irish and Frank McCourt's writing is that he is able to describe quite sad and serious things and make them sound quite funny.”

“Films are an organic process and you look for things that you didn't really count on. And often they are the best moments in the film. When I write in my script, ‘you improvise there,’ you also have the script to be truthful to then. So you try to keep on the script, but on the other hand if something happens, that is naturalist and real and a happy accident, you are mad not to go along with it.”

Despite the old saying about never working with children or animals, working with the young stars of Angela's Ashes proved to be both challenging and rewarding.

“You can't act with children. You shouldn't act with children. Because they show you up. They're so natural, very natural. And they are one take wonders. You can't really repeat with kids, take two, take three, and take four. It changes and it is kind of an organic thing. But they really are a lesson to any actor and to us. And I have learned a lot just by working with them.” Robert Carlyle.

“Everyone says to me, you must love working with kids. Well, kind of do. But it is actually hard. Sometimes I ask myself, why I give myself such difficult. Because it is harder than working with adults, because when they do something that is special and magical which you could possibly have written or thought of or directed, but they do it comes out of them which is special and magical, and that is terribly rewarding” Alan Parker.

“Alan works with the kids as much as if they are adults, he is very firm with them. He doesn't compromise anything, because he doesn't think that they can do it. He just expects that they can do it.” Emily Watson

“He is like the respected school teacher. They love him, but it is a healthy respect as well. I mean because he is not slow in telling them. You know if they are not behaving or concentrating. So he is like the favorite schoolteacher who gives them a weekend of warning.” Robert Carlyle

“I have to be their friend. I have to make the world of the film set fun for them, in order for them to be at their best. You can be strict, but you can't bully them into a great performance. Young actors work at their best actually when they enjoy what they are doing. Also, it makes it all that much easier, when they love what they are doing, and I really love them. You know, I got four kids of my own, so every time you do a film, you get an extended family. So I think a great of it is to be their friend first and a strict school teacher second.” Alan Parker “In the end it is about a family, about love, it is about survival.”

“When you are working with some one like Alan Parker, you know you are in good hands, so I feel it going to be a very important film. “ Robert Carlyle

“I wrote the book and I looked at it from time to time, and I like my own book, I would buy it.” Frank McCourt

“There is a heart to it, which I don't think you would find in a normal fiction.” Alan Parker.

“This film deserves to be seen, it deserves to be seen, because it is a time which really shouldn't be forgotten. “ Robert Carlyle.

“Deep down it is a black and white movie, dying to get out.” Alan Parker.

Now almost four years since Angela's Ashes, hit the international bestseller list, and two years since work began on Alan Parker's ambitious adaptation. A new chapter in the remarkable life story of Frank McCourt is about to begin.

"The little smile on peoples faces as they leave." Alan Parker

Interview with Director Alan Parker

I was sent a very early copy of the book and I thought it was a wonderful story, and very beautifully told. I tried to buy the rights to it but couldn't because Scott Rudin and David Brown were far too quick for me, so they snapped it up. Sometimes you don't get things on the first bounce. I watched its progress as it went to number one in the best sellers, and then won a Pulitzer Prize, and I thought – I used to track it thinking, "I wonder what's happening to it." And then, second bounce, it came back to me. So I was very fortunate.

The most difficult thing was writing the screenplay. First of all, Laura Jones had written a screenplay and then I wrote my screenplay, and then, most importantly, both Laura and I needed Frank's approval of it. And he was an English teacher for many years, so he was very encouraging, I think once we had that, then I had the courage actually to make the film knowing that I would be loyal and faithful to his book.

And every day that we ever had a problem on the film for a film director, you get asked 150 questions every day, and the difference between a good film and a bad film is how many of those questions you get right. If there ever was any area of doubt, I used to say to everybody, "Look at the script, look at the book. Most importantly, look at the book." Because all the clues are there with regards to what we should be doing.

Sometimes a film, because it is organic, you think of things on your feet. Some of the best things you do happen spontaneously. Other times you think about it three months before you do it and then, you know it works out sometimes.

The performance of Emily Watson in *Breaking the Waves* is so unique and special that you think to yourself, "One day, I will work with that person." So I kind of mentally put her on a note pad in the back of my head. And then the moment I read this, she was the first person I thought of doing it.

I think it's a much understated performance by Emily. You have to bear in mind this is 50 years ago, where women weren't quite as assertive as they might be now. And she didn't quite know how to deal with the situation. First, she was dealing with a big family; she was dealing with incredible tragedy within the family. Losing so many of her children so early – three of her children, she lost in a very short period of time; going from the United States, where she'd moved; coming back to Limerick; and then the alcoholism of her husband and the uselessness of him, with regards to looking after that family; she deals with all of that.

It's a difficult role, and when I met with Bobby Carlyle, we both thought we didn't want to make him into the stereotypical, cliché, you know, wife-beating drunkard.

Before I started, I knew that casting three boys was going to be the most difficult thing to do. And so, we saw about 15,000 kids, I think, all over Ireland.

Interview with author Frank McCourt

How he has captured it, the grittiness, and the despair of life in that lane in Limerick – It means that he must have come from something like that. I'm very interested how people in the film industry find the authenticity, which he found.

I went to set twice on the day that they started shooting and they started in a schoolroom. I was standing against the wall, Alan Parker was not too happy about visitors, but since I wrote the book he didn't mind. Emily was there, standing against the wall with my wife, Ellen and me. These kids come into the classroom these urchins and I was back. I was a nine-year old. And the master was there with the stick. I stood against the wall, rigid. "Oh, he's going to spot me, and then he's going to beat the shit out of me." So I stayed very quite.

School Master's line: "Is there any boy in this class who thinks he's perfect? If so, raise your hands. Is any boy here now who has money galore to be spending on shoes? Raise your hands."

Well, Emily is a slimmer version of Angela, my mother, but Emily must have got inside my mother's larger frame. No matter how bad things were, she could always come up with a saucy line. And Emily has that feeling of despair and desperation, but good humor.

My father came from a revolutionary family in the north of Ireland. He was in the old I.R.A. He had to be hustled out of Ireland on a cargo ship. He didn't belong in a family. He shouldn't have been married. He shouldn't have had seven children. He should have been a gunman. He would have been happy if the fight had continued, and he'd been sentenced to death and hanged. He would have been happy hanging from the end of a rope, singing.

Interview with Actress Emily Watson

I was sent the script and I read it and I nervously thought, "Oh, my God, it's another great big emotional upheaval role." And then I heard Alan Parker's name and read the book and thought, "There is no other film to make. This is it." I mean it's just such an extraordinary story."

I studied the accent. I went to Limerick. I took up smoking, but really our Bible was the book.

Alan Parker, he created this world that was so real and so vivid. And he just kind of dropped Bobby and me into it and let us grows and does our own thing. He would just very occasionally come in and change the direction slightly, or suggest something. But it was very, very gentle, which is kind of a surprise for a man who is so passionately strong about what he believes about everything. In every other way he had very, very high standards. And he was very, um – He's a real perfectionist.

I've done emotional roles before, but this was very restrained. There's no great, third-act aria, where she lets it all out and is out there screaming and shouting.

Bobby and I work in a very similar way, very kind of instinctive. We both decided on day one, we had a talk about it, that because it was all children, you can't arrive on the set and think, "Oh well, I'll find my way into this."

Although the father behaves appallingly, and deserts the family and is a terrible man. Bobby has found absolutely the essence of what it was that gave Frank his sense of poetry and lyricism – it's beautiful.

Interview with Actor Robert Carlyle

*Angela's Ashes* came to me through my agency, obviously. Alan Parker had contacted them with a view to seeing me for this part. I went to meet Alan. I read the screenplay before; thought it was a wonderful piece of work. And then after that first hours meeting I went home read the book after that and just prayed that Alan would come back and knock on my door, which thankfully he did.

I think Emily Watson's undoubtedly the best I've worked with, male or female. She has that poise, and she has a concentration, which is amazing, you know, amazing. Because suddenly she's surrounded with children in this film, with them in her arms, she's so focused. And she has this incredible quality, whereby she makes even the most pathetic of actions and of situations and scenarios somehow quite beautiful.

The most important thing was I didn't want to make this guy the villain. This was very, very important to me. Yeah, he's guilty, but some of his guilt stems from his alcoholism.

So I was trying to walk a middle ground, because when I met with Frank McCourt and spoke about him, one of the first things he said was that he loved his father dearly. I thought, how interesting. None of the family had a bad word to say about him. So that was the key for me right there. I had to walk this middle ground here, and show some sympathetic side, because if these kids loved him, there must have been a reason for it.

Interview with actor Michael Legge:

Emily Watson is just the most extraordinary person. She is just extremely down-to-earth, intelligent, funny and just a brilliant, brilliant person to work with.

### Interview with actor Joe Breen

I just saw the advertisement on the paper, and I went in, read my lines and went home.

### Production Notes

#### The Making of Angela's Ashes, By Alan Parker

The first time I visited Limerick in April 1998 I was armed with a bundle of maps which we had downloaded from one of the "Angela's Ashes" fan websites. This particular website was all the more remarkable, I thought, because it was Japanese. Why a culture so different to the Irish should have been so taken by Frank McCourt's story intrigued me to no end. I walked the streets so carefully mapped out and lovingly flagged by the Japanese fans who were obviously obsessed with every little detail of Frank's book: "1st residence: Windmill St. (until Oliver's Death)"; "St. Joseph Church (First Communion, Confirmation)", "Lyric Cinema (closed 1964, now parking)."

As we walked the route, we found that even the landlord at South's pub had started to pin up photos of himself hugging strangers with wide, non-Irish smiles. No doubt the ghosts of Malachy Sr., Uncle Pa and Mr. Hannon, leaning on the bar supping their Guinness, were wondering why their local pub had suddenly become so popular.

I write now, after finishing the film, and the "In search of the McCourt's" obsession has gained even more momentum as regular "Walking Tours" are advertised. "Daily at 2:30 p.m.," the flyers pronounce "Individual walks," "4 Irish punts (\$6) per person!" Bands of "McCourties," clutching their much-thumbed copies of Frank's memoir, regularly walk up Barrack Hill in search of Roden Lane, baffled that it's no longer there. My personal impression is that everyone you meet in Limerick, of a certain age, falls into one of two distinct camps. Half of them claim that this uppity, now-affluent, Irish-Yank exaggerated his childhood plight. The other half of Limerick lived next door to the McCourt's.

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Adapting any famous literary work is problematic in that, in the compression to a manageable cinematic shape, inevitably certain characters and situations will be excluded. I met with Frank for lunch and talked about the pitfalls of any screenplay, and he was, as he always is, most generous, constructive and totally ungracious about his words. Frank is a delight to talk to. A natural raconteur, articulate and witty, it has been said that if conversation was a category of the Olympic Games, then Frank would talk for Ireland. I think originally he had considered writing his own screenplay, but he eventually concluded that it would be better for new eyes and fresh legs to take on the task. Also, it's painful for any writer to take the necessary cleaver too much loved passages. Mr. Timoney or Mr. Hannon? Theresa or Patricia? Mr. O'Neill or Mr. Benson? South's or Gleeson's? However (always the caring English teacher), Frank was encouraging throughout the scriptwriting process and most complimentary on Laura's and my finished efforts.

In Limerick I walked the streets many times from South's pub to Leamy's National School to the General Post Office, retracing Frank's own steps as we tried to piece together Frank's life and figure out just how to replicate his world on film, the Limerick of the 1930s and 40s. Although Leamy's building was intact, it had been closed down as a school in 1952 and its interior converted into modern offices. Roden Lane itself, in many respects the heart of the story (the book's "Ireland" and "Italy"), had long gone, as had most of the worst slums mentioned in the book. However, the elegant Georgian crescent on O'Connell Street, just down from South's pub, is remarkably period-correct, dominated as it is by the imposing statue of the great Catholic liberator Daniel O'Connell now standing atop a column originally built for some forgotten English king. We filmed much that revolved around Frank's world here.

The nearby St. Joseph's and Redemptorist churches were out of bounds to us, however, as the clergy would not grant us permission to film inside or, indeed, even outside. We assumed that the church leaders were less than pleased with how their predecessors were portrayed some 50 years ago in the book and had decided not to cooperate with us. The Franciscan Church on Henry Street was more welcoming. Since the character Father Gregory was portrayed as one of the few compassionate and caring adults in Frank's memoir, the last bastion of the young man's fragile faith, we were optimistic that they, among all the churches in Limerick, would allow us in to film. As it transpired, their welcome lasted about a week, until they were also "persuaded" by the Limerick ecclesiastical powers that be to disinvite us from filming in their church. Although it was disappointing to experience such reactions in Limerick so many years after the actual

events, we had been welcomed to use the interiors of the churches in a different diocese (and governing body) in Dublin. Obviously they felt sufficiently distanced from the story not to feel any collective guilt for the church's behavior towards the poor of Limerick in the 1930s.

Although some have said that Frank McCourt has done for Limerick what James Joyce had done for Dublin and The Irish Times has dubbed him "our first Irish Dickens," it has to be said that not everyone in Limerick has embraced Frank's book. Indeed, on President Clinton's visit to Limerick in 1998, he detected some coolness in the crowd when the Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) mentioned Frank McCourt's name and, consummate politician that he is, riposted with "Frank, you made a lot of money from the old Limerick, but I think I like the new Limerick better." Obviously, the American president was not aware that the Irish nickname for present day Limerick is "Stab City." Frank has always made it clear that the book was not a personal attack on Limerick. As he put it: "A lot of people did not understand that the book was not about Limerick, it was about poverty."

The production designer, Geoffrey Kirkland, and I traveled all over Ireland to seek out our locations. One of the negative aspects of the thriving economy in Ireland (the so-called "Celtic Tiger") is that it has become more and more difficult to make a period film there. What little period architecture the country once had has either been torn down or rebuilt in a modern manner, and only the most obvious Georgian architecture survives. All too often, nasty, modern bungalows thumb their noses from pretty green hillsides. Once monochromatic streets are now transformed by a curious national penchant for bright purple, yellow and pink exterior paint. In short, a nightmare for a design department set the task of creating the world of 60 years ago. Limerick, the real centre of our story, offered us the beautiful Georgian Crescent, with O'Connell's statue, adjacent to South's pub and the River Shannon the damp heart and, in many ways, the silent villain of our story. Even the Shannon itself offers fewer and fewer riverbank views as the city hurtles into modernity, changing the historic riverscape. But the ancient river still has a raw and aggressive power that roars through the centre of the city as well as our film. I had some experience working in Ireland on "The Commitments" and as with that film, it was obvious that a patchwork quilt, a mosaic of different places, would have to be put together to accurately replicate the Limerick of 50-odd years ago.

For these reasons we decided also to film in Cork, a city which has retained its narrow, cobbled streets and is also, handily, close to Cobh Harbor which for a century and a half had seen a hundred thousand Irish families emigrate to the U.S and to where Angela, Malachy, Frank, Malachy Jr., Oliver and Eugene McCourt conversely return. The bulk of our filming, however, was to be done in Dublin, where the busy city offered up the most options needed for our film locations. It is also close to Ardmore, the main Irish studios, where we were to build many of our interiors. Most of the rooms that the large McCourt family shared were tiny, and the impracticality of a 150-person film crew squeezed into such spaces ruled out the use of real interiors. It was also clear that the exterior set of Roden Lane, in which much of our story was centered, had to be built as a set since these once quite common, narrow alleys had disappeared with Ireland's new found affluence.

To this end we built the muddy, cobbled Roden Lane set with its 30 dilapidated cottages on an empty Dublin building site situated 100 yards from the River Liffey, next to the Collins Barracks Museum. It took 80 carpenters, plasterers, painters, greens men and dressing props 14 weeks to build, and we filmed on it for scarcely two weeks. I can only think that the future bands of "McCourties," their "movie version" website maps in hand, are going to be disappointed visiting the film's Roden Lane on Benburb Street because, alas, it took just two days to demolish it and return it to a building site.

Once I had finished my draft of the script, my next priority was casting. I met with Emily Watson in New York, where she was filming Tim Robbins' "Cradle Will Rock." She was the only actress I had in mind when thinking of Angela- I had greatly admired her wonderful "nerve end-exposing" performance in Lars Von Trier's "Breaking the Waves" and her powerfully subtle work in Jim Sheridan's Northern Irish film "The Boxer." At the time I hadn't yet seen her as Jacqueline Du Pre in "Hilary and Jackie," a performance which would bring her a second Oscar nomination. After a short meeting (and the bonding revelation that we both support the same soccer team), I was convinced she was our Angela. Emily's complete lack of pretentiousness is quite compelling. The part of Angela meant that she would have to look less than glamorous wearing distinctly unbecoming costume and make-up, age 15 years over the course of the story and chain-smoke nasty Woodbine cigarettes. This didn't faze her one bit.

I met with Robert Carlyle in London. He had recently returned from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where he had been chewing on human body parts for Antonia Bird's film "Ravenous." Bobby was very keen to portray Malachy McCourt Sr., Frank's feckless, alcoholic father, a man who is sadder than he is evil. A man with great dignity- every morning he gets up, shaves, dresses, puts on a collar and tie, looks for work, doesn't get it, goes to the pub. He is utterly useless, but the kids never have a bad word to say about him, despite the penury and pain he enforces upon them with his negligence and irresponsibility. To still make this man sympathetic to an audience was Bobby's biggest challenge. As he once said: "It would seem to me too obvious to paint the guy as a villain. The way I see it, he's as much a victim as anyone else; his crime was to get addicted to the drink. But to paint Malachy McCourt as the villain of the piece would be to let off very lightly the society that allowed these conditions to exist." The intensity and concentrated power in all that Bobby does can sometimes shake you as a director and it's hard not to be impressed with his work. Most people probably know him as Gaz, the unemployed steelworker in "The Full Monty," or the manic Begbie in "Trainspotting," but other images of his performances had always stayed in my head: his portrayal of the skinhead psychotic in TV's "Cracker;" in Michael Winterbottom's "Go Now," his work as a multiple sclerosis sufferer is one of those performances that you can't watch without dropping your jaw; the gay sex scene in Antonia Bird's "Priest;" his work in Loach's "Riff Raff" and "Carla's Song" the list goes on and on.

The casting of Frank presented extra difficulties because we were going to need three different boys to play the Young Frank (aged 5 to 8), Middle Frank (aged 10 to 13) and adolescent, Older Frank (not to mention three different Malachys, Michaels and Alphies). Apart from having to convince the audience that the three are the same boy, accurately

resembling one another in physiognomy and manner, the transitions of the ageing process had to be seamless. I was always fearful that the audience would invest so much emotional commitment to the first and youngest Frank that there would be a sense of loss once Middle Frank takes over and the viewer realizes that the youngest boy has vanished from the screen. I paid a lot of attention to the transitions from young to middle to older Frank, and hopefully, in a blink, the audience accepts these transformations.

Our casting directors (John and Ros Hubbard and Juliet Taylor) had all worked with me before, and I was lucky to benefit from their wisdom and enterprise. In looking for the children, Ross Hubbard held open calls in Limerick, Ennis, Tralee, Dingle, Tipperary, Cork, Kerry, Waterford and Dublin. Over a two-month period they saw close to 15,000 kids, patiently sitting and reading lines with them, narrowing down and videotaping them for me to choose from. We ran ads for the auditions in newspapers, stuck signs on lampposts and ran competitions on the radio in order to cast our net as wide as possible. Joe Breen, who plays young Frank, answered just such an advertisement in *The Irish Times*. A farmer's son from County Wexford, he woke early on the day of his audition, helped his father to milk the cows and then traveled two hours up to Dublin for our giant open call. I singled him out from the thousands who turned up and subsequently called him back on three more occasions to videotape and work further with him, going through the scenes and encouraging him to improvise, to be as natural as possible, not to act but to be himself. From the first day he effortlessly took to his new career (whilst still milking the cows before going to work). He is a beautiful, unspoiled boy and bright as a button. Not only was he always word-perfect with his own lines but often corrected the adults on theirs.

Ciaran Owens, who plays Middle Frank, came to his part through a more conventional route. The youngest of five sons, his brother Eamonn Owens had brilliantly portrayed the title role in Neil Jordan's film "The Butcher Boy." (In "Angela's Ashes," Eamonn plays the role of Frank's friend, Peter 'Quasimodo' Dooley). It was ironic, therefore, that after casting our net so wide amongst so many newcomers we should choose Ciaran, who had already acted with his brother in a number of Irish productions.

Michael Legge, who plays the older, adolescent Frank, comes from Newry in Northern Ireland and had done some television and theatre work before coming to "Angela's Ashes." He has great subtlety and application, and as with all good actors who make things look easy, there is a fierce intelligence at work. In many ways he has the hardest job of the three Franks as he has to follow young Joe and Ciaran, who have the lion's share of the film, dominating the first two acts. Cumulatively the two young ones are a hard act to follow. When we shot the penultimate scene where older Frank stands in the street outside Grandma's house and looks back at the images of his younger selves, Ciaran and Joe silently staring back at Michael, I realized how lucky I was to have found not one, but three great Franks.

The age progression of the narrative also meant that surrounding siblings and friends of different ages had to be cast. As I write and pore through the long cast list with young,

middle and older Malachys, Michaels, Alphies, Paddys, Willies, Fintans, etc., I realize that we were fortunate to have had 15,000 young actors to choose from.

Our film had the advantage of being financed by two studios, Paramount and Universal, and so we had the luxury of moving this mammoth traveling circus around Ireland. Luxury is probably not the best word because three months of soggy socks and dripping macs meant perpetual flu, but curiously we got used to it. I don't think I ever had a conversation with someone from the crew during the three months shooting without them blowing their nose. Although the story is harrowing and bleak at times, Frank's book is full of humor, too, and I tried at all times to lighten up situations which, on the surface, might appear grim. We started the shoot with the various scenes in Leamy's National School, actually filmed in the empty St. Kevin's School in Dublin. Frank McCourt (the real one) visited the set and watched from a corner. Joe Breen, playing young Frank, eyed with some suspicion the white-haired man standing unassumingly at the side of the classroom. I said to Joe, "Do you know who this gentleman is?" and Joe answered, "Yes, me when I'm older." As Frank has said regarding his visit to the set: "My old headmaster, Mr. O'Halloran, has four sons here in Dublin. They had some of the maps and charts from his old schoolroom wall and supplied them to the movie. So that was weird seeing them. Then these kids come trooping in. It was happening all over again. They were barefoot with shaved heads and raggedy clothes. I felt strange, so I had to go and have a pint with Emily Watson and my wife. I was jolted into the past. It was so authentic what they did with that classroom. I expected the schoolmaster to turn on me at any minute with the stick."

I had decided to shoot some of our more harrowing scenes early on, to prepare us all for what follows and to familiarize the younger members of the cast with the more serious, bleaker parts of our story. Geoffrey Kirkland, our production designer, and Jennifer Williams, our set decorator, had converted another derelict Dublin school into the St. Vincent De Paul Charitable Society, where Angela suffers the humiliation and indignity of begging from the assembled "V De P" officials. (The society is still active in Limerick next to where Frank knew it, on Hartstonge Street, the same street as the actual Leamy's National School.) I think we achieved some of our more graphic scenes there, with Emily and the boys standing erect, fragile and vulnerable, like a Victorian painting, overshadowed by the massive presence of the crucifix hanging above them on the wall.

The next week's filming saw us pitching headlong into some of the sadder, more serious scenes at the graveyard as Angela and Malachy bury first Oliver and then his twin, Eugene. Emily has an extraordinary ability to suddenly cut off from the real world and concentrate totally on the scene. She stops your heart as she stifles the pain, showing Angela's unimaginable suffering at the loss of yet another of her children.

We then settled into two weeks of our interior work at Ardmore Studios. The tiny sets all had floating walls to open up this confined, cramped world to the camera, lights and the dozens of attendant crew. The old chestnut about avoiding working with animals and children became very real as Emily and Bobby juggled the various babies. Their considerable patience was admirable, as was the crew's, as we waited for the wailing

infants to stop their screaming. Emily said she sometimes felt more like a child wrangler than an actress as she wrestled with her tiny co-stars. At the end of a day's filming, Emily often couldn't hold her arms up as they ached so much from holding her offspring. Like all good actors, both Emily and Robert used the discomfort to help their performances. Both of them are unselfish in their acting and the very act of nervously nursing an uncooperative, wailing infant ensured a certain reality in the scenes. Both Emily and Bobby have humility in their acting that makes it so pleasurable for a director. They have an extraordinary ability to concentrate and to give generously to those around them so that the work is never about them but rather about the collective scene. Watching the two of them coping with the flailing arms and wriggling bodies, patiently waiting for the screaming to stop in between takes and still managing to get their own lines out deserved all of our admiration. I have to say that these were the most difficult scenes I've ever directed with young children, and I've done a considerable amount of filming in this area. Although a shrieking child might be what you're after for the scene (and as a director, greedily you grab this anguish on film), you have to keep reminding yourself that it's not just the illusion of film and that close by, behind the set, stands the real mother of this small child, suffering considerably herself as her offspring cry real tears for the camera.

From Ardmore we moved on to Cork, where the cobbled alleyways and steps added to the mosaic of Frank's world. With the help of the local Gardai we were able to close down some of the longer runs of the city and re-dress each and every shop window and doorway. Above us, the rain machines down poured, quite ironic considering the continual damp weather. But the machines allowed us the continuity needed on film, and the artificial rain photographs more clearly than the erratic, and finer, real Irish drizzle. Although we were building Roden Lane in Dublin, I had also found streets in Cork which had good period detail which would be our Windmill Street and the narrow archways that in our "joined together" story would appear to be adjacent to Roden Lane. As each street would have resonance in all three acts of our story, each scene had to be repeated with the three different Franks and Malachys. Consequently I found myself filming out of sequence as Dad makes his final exit from the family on Christmas Day. Also at this point, I had decided to make the final transition from "Middle" to "Older" Frank. This scene took on an extra poignancy, accompanied as it is with the voice-over: "In another week, a telegram arrived for three pounds and we were in heaven. The next Saturday, there was no telegram, nor the week after, nor any Saturday forever."

From Cork we moved to Limerick, after one day's filming at Cobh Harbor, 15 miles from Cork. The deep harbor at Cobh was the historic departure point for thousands of Irish families leaving by ship for the U.S. It made for a touching scene as we watched our own small family make their way up the same hill that so many families had descended on their way to America.

Arriving in Limerick was an odd feeling. It's an exaggeration to say that there was enmity towards us making the film in the city where it is based, but I think it's fair to say that there was some trepidation on our part, a feeling that we were not entirely welcome, but that could have been my own personal paranoia. Many of the people of a certain age had thought that Frank had denigrated the city in his book. As Frank says about his own

mother: "My mother hated me uncovering the past: the only place for confession is to a priest, she thought; she wanted curtains drawn over all the poverty and sordidness." Frank is uncompromising about his views of the old Limerick: "In the old Limerick, you couldn't throw a brick without hitting a priest. It was grim, puritanical and there was no such thing as free expression." Certainly the hierarchy of the church had made its stand by refusing us permission to film inside Limerick churches, but they still treated us cordially, and a passing priest from the dour Redemptorist Church even wished me luck. If there ever was any enmity, it soon evaporated as we took over the centre of Limerick for three days. Traffic ground to a halt for hours at a time with few honks of protest. Children took the day off from school to watch the proceedings (sometimes with the blessing of their teachers, sometimes not). Our Irish costume designer, Consolata Boyle, serene as always, kept her cool as we coped with our largest crowd scenes. The wonderful bonus of having non-professional extras is that they bring an honest naturalism to the proceedings. The downside is that, once comfortable in their authentic period clothes, they have to be reminded that they can't take them home at the end of the day. We filmed for three days on the rain-soaked (courtesy of our machines) Crescent, and each evening we would retreat to South's pub to down a Guinness and rub shoulders with the ghost of Malachy. Our other priority in Limerick was, of course, to capture shots of the River Shannon. At first light each morning we would position our camera at one of the few spots that afforded a view uncluttered by modern architecture. We used small boats carrying machines to drift smoke into the backgrounds to soften any contemporary embarrassment. Similarly, each evening as the light fell, we repeated the process until all the shots needed for the film were in the can.

Back at Ardmore Studios we began work on the interior scenes for the "Italy" sequences (upstairs at Roden Lane). The Christmas scene where Malachy Sr. takes his leave of the family so soon after arriving from England presented a particular dramatic challenge. Both Emily and Robert wanted to play this scene down because it so easily could have slipped into melodrama. They are underplaying of the scene and the controlled, matter-of-factness of the whole family as they realize that Dad is leaving again makes the scene all the more effective.

Our next week of location shooting took us to the vast mental hospital of St. Ita's in Portrane. This vast building complex was built at the turn of the century and once held 5,000 patients. Although still in use, albeit on a much smaller scale, large areas of this mysterious and eccentric building had become empty and dilapidated, offering up a musty, ready-made film set. Here we filmed the City Home Hospital interiors as Frank recovers from typhoid and conjunctivitis. The wide corridors also gave us the Henry Street Post Office set where older Frank verbally duels with the officious Miss Barry.

Leamy's school playground, Dr. Troy's eye dispensary and the Irish dancing class interiors were filmed in Inchicore and Kilmainham. The interiors of Mrs. Finucane's house were filmed in a small house in Ranelagh, Dublin, painfully reminding us all how much easier filming is in a studio, where walls and ceilings are all removable.

Back at the studios once more, we completed our interiors for the Windmill Street section of our story. These walls were removable, which was fortunate when filming Mum, Dad, Frank, Malachy, Oliver and Eugene all in the same bed battling the fleas.

For the interiors of the Franciscan Church, we were kindly given permission to use the Holy Name Church in Ranelagh. It's always difficult filming in a place of worship, as a hundred film crew can noisily go about their business, particularly for a film which takes place in a period before Vatican II, which entails removing the front altar. The wonderful Irish actor, Gerard McSorley, played Father Gregory with a real and compassionate portrayal as Frank recaps on the pain of his young life.

The beautiful cobbled streets outside Dublin's Guinness Brewery have probably seen many a film crew, and we used them to film Mum, Young Frank and Young Malachy picking coal off the road. We also filmed Middle Frank proudly "driving" Mr. Hannon's coal cart there. The actor who plays Mr. Hannon, Shay Gorman, sadly died soon after the film was completed.

Denied the real Redemptorist Church in Limerick, we were able to film this interior in the Church of the Oblate Fathers in Inchicore, where the irate priest harangues the boys in the congregation for "interfering with themselves." Frank: "We pray to the Virgin Mary to say we're sorry because we can't stop interfering with ourselves."

Theresa's house, both exterior and interior, was filmed in the Dublin suburb of Greystones. Kerry Condon, a young lady who auditioned at the Limerick open call, played Theresa. She had never acted before. Theresa: "You might be scrawny, but that's a fine boil you have there."

The interiors of Grandma's house were built by Geoffrey Kirkland and his art department at Ardmore, as were the New York tenements in the opening scene of the film. Robert Carlyle was particularly taken by the young baby he held in his arms, the "Margaret Mary" of our story. "They brought this baby in, three weeks old, and I just melted with this gorgeous kid, fell in love with her. In the afternoon we shot a scene where the baby has just died. It was a doll made to look dead, but it frightened me. I couldn't help but see the wee kid's face, hold that reality in my hands." The interior scenes of the New York tenement, with Frank and Malachy changing the twins' "shitty" nappies, were very harrowing to film. After many weeks of filming, the young boys playing the twins, Oliver and Eugene (Sam and Ben O'Gorman, age 2) had got wise to the mechanics of filming and had obviously made the joint decision that they hated it. Consequently they screamed very loudly, their faces bright red, the moment they were brought anywhere near the film set. As we had already established them quite clearly earlier in the film, shooting as we did out of sequence, I had to persevere, even though these young "thespians" had decided that the acting life was not for them. A few days, many bags of chocolate biscuits and a great deal of patience later, we had the (very authentic and real) scenes in the can.

For Limerick Railway Station we used Pearse Street Station in Dublin, borrowing the period steam trains from the Irish Railway Preservation Society. We filmed through the

night as Mum, Frank, Malachy and baby Alphie await Dad's return from England. Baby Alphie was very heavy and, so that Emily could rest her aching arms, I asked Ciaran, playing Middle Frank, to hold the baby. It presented us with a very strong image, the older brother protectively clutching his sibling, and I kept it that way through the scenes, much to Emily's relief.

Our final two weeks were spent filming on our purpose-built set in the centre of Dublin. As I mentioned before, the narrow slum alleys, "the lanes" of Frank's memoir, have fast disappeared in affluent Ireland, necessitating the building of our Roden Lane. I think the filmmakers of my generation have relished the fact that we took filming back into the streets and away from the studios, but for control and sheer pleasure of filmmaking, for a director, there's nothing like a controlled studio set. It's a joy being able to concentrate on the scene at hand instead of battling, as we usually do, the unrelenting demands of daily life in a real city. The Roden Lane set also housed a number of interior sets, and work here was probably the most enjoyable for the crew. Filming wrapped on December 22nd, having taken 75 shooting days to complete.

My principal collaborators on Angela's Ashes had worked with me on my films over the last 25 years and the film is as much theirs as mine. They are director of photography Michael Seresin, production designer Geoffrey Kirkland, camera operator Mike Roberts, line producer David Wimbury; and Editor Gerry Hambling.

Back in London, Gerry Hambling and I worked towards the final cut. The voiceover had always been an integral part of our screenplay, not just as a handy exposition device to prod the plot along, but because it contained a great deal of Frank's wit, wisdom and, importantly, the poetry of the book. Gerry needed a guide for this in order for him to pace and meld the pictures with the rhythm of the voice. He had tried to use his own voice as a temporary measure, but I felt we needed, for the time being at any rate, an actor to read the lines. To this end, the casting director Ross Hubbard got in Andrew Bennett to record a temporary version of the voiceover. I liked his voice very much and began to experiment. Andrew came back on 10 different occasions as I juggled with the words. As often happens with temporary ideas, Andrew's voice began to grow on us, and so I decided to use him for the finished film (all the more remarkable for me because I had never met him, I only knew his voice).

During the editing process I usually experiment with a "tool kit" of music. On this film it was a particular pleasure as John Williams had agreed to do the finished score. I consequently laid up a hotchpotch of John's music culled from his previous scores to help us judge the flow of scenes but principally to aid the "spotting" of just where we were going to need music. I showed John an early cut of the film in June, and after finishing his latest "Star Wars" opus, he began work on our score. The music was recorded at Sony (the old MGM music scoring stage) in Los Angeles. I try not to fill these production notes with meaningless hyperbole, but I have to say that working with maestro Williams was a privilege. However aware one is of his colossal talent, it's still an extraordinary experience to watch him work. His sensitivity, wisdom, graciousness and total, effortless control of the task of scoring for film is awe-inspiring.

As I said earlier, adapting any famous literary work is a daunting experience because every reader of Frank's memoir has their own movie locked away inside their head. For those of you who haven't read the book, I hope you enjoy the film afresh. For those of you who have, I hope the images in the film coincide with some of your own.

Literature to Film  
Mr. Seller

### Reviews on *Angela's Ashes* Transference to Film

Read the following two reviews written about the transference of the novel to film. Detach the last page and write your comments on these two opinions, citing your own opinion on the accuracy of the writers, and your feelings on the adaptation. Feel free to cite examples from the book and film to back up your opinion.

Luck of the Irish, By Paul Tatara, January 21, 2000

I think it's patently absurd when critics compare a film made from a popular novel to the novel itself. A movie is a movie and a book is a book. (See future columns for even more earth-shaking insights into the nature of nouns.) Some stories, however, are simply better suited to the written page. Exhibit number 258: Alan Parker's *Angela's Ashes*, the film adaptation of Frank McCourt's by-now legendary, zillion-selling autobiographical memoir.

Without the guidance of McCourt's sardonic, observational voice, the story turns into a Celtic variation on that song that Grandpa and Stringbean used to sing on *Hee Haw*: "Gloom, despair, and agony on me... deep dark depression, excessive misery... if it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all..." I'm telling you, you've never seen suffering like this. Without any real subtext, or even a sense that some sort of spiritual residue is gathering within the souls of the characters, you simply end up with a litany of bummers and dead-ends.

It's the late 1930s. Young Frank, his long-suffering mother, Angela (Emily Watson), drunken father (Robert Carlyle), and three siblings, inexplicably return to Ireland from the United States when his newborn sister dies in her sleep. Back in Ireland, it rains in sheets all day long, every single day. The entire population is slowly starving to death.

After being more-or-less rejected by Grandma as well as the rest of the family because of Dad's unrepentant Northern Irishness, the McCourt's wind up in a single, decrepit room, where they sleep on mattresses that are infested with biting fleas. Soon, they move into a broken-down house that floods with water during storms. The house is located next to the town excrement dump, so it stinks to high heaven. Dad is in the habit of drinking away what little money the family can scratch together, forcing Angela to shamefully apply for charity. Eventually, two more of her apple-cheeked children die from the ordeal.

So much for the first hour.

You've still got 90 minutes to go, and it never lets up. Even when teenage Frank (played by Michael Legge; Joe Breen and Ciaran Owens play him at younger ages) finds a job delivering coal, he develops a horrifying case of conjunctivitis and is forced to quit before he goes blind. I hate to say it, but I was chuckling by this point. The only reason nobody gets taken out by a falling satellite is because there weren't any orbiting at the time.

I understand that this was McCourt's actual life. And it takes a remarkable person to survive such trying times and come out not only intact, but triumphant. He really is a hero of sorts. But I can't imagine what's to be gleaned from Parker's version of the story. You feel like you're doing penance by watching it. Not one, not two, but three different family members vomit on-camera before the end of the second act. Talk about "the troubles."

You certainly can't fault the cinematography or production design, both of which make you feel like you're rolling around in the mud with the McCourt clan. And the performances are uniformly solid. Carlyle manages to generate some fatherly tenderness, even when he's morbidly resting a pint of ale on top of his baby daughter's casket. Watson is, at turns, affectionate and resilient. Her lovely eyes are gently emotive; she's well cast as a matriarch. But there's not much she can do when the material is so relentlessly single-minded.

The few occasions when somebody lets out a laugh feel like aberrations, as if Parker somehow forgot to remove the inappropriate footage. It says a lot that the fleeting moments of real warmth and humor come courtesy of a voice-over that's straight out of McCourt's book.

Parker has always excelled at embarrassing literalness. Rather than investing this adaptation with the earthy emotion of his most personal film, 1991's *The Commitments*, he produces a movie as painfully obvious as *Pink Floyd—The Wall*. That one featured somnambulant school children blankly marching into a meat grinder. Slow the grinder down to a crawl, make it piss rain, and presto... you've got *Angela's Ashes*. McCourt deserves better, and so does Angela.

The Poetry of Poverty, By Renee Scolaro Rathke, Pop Matters Film Critic

It must be a daunting task to translate to film a book as enormously popular as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Inevitably, some devotees of McCourt's memoir of growing up in Ireland, will walk away from the film disappointed, finding that some aspect of the original text has been left out or altered. Choices about what to leave in, what to add, and what to change must be difficult for the director and screenwriter to make, knowing as they do that each decision risks letting down or alienating some segment of the audience.

*Angela's Ashes* director Alan Parker addresses this facet of the filmmaking process in his "production journal," which is posted on the film's official website ([www.angelasashes.com](http://www.angelasashes.com)). I stumbled on Parker's journal accidentally as I browsed the website, and found it fascinating, not so much because of his rather obvious observation

that directors have to make choices, but because his narrative reveals contexts for some of the *particular* choices he made for this film, which, in the end, often fails to capture the energy and lyricism of McCourt's writing.

Many of the events of the book appear in the film: *Angela's Ashes* tells the story of the McCourt family from the perspective of the oldest son, Frank, beginning when he is about 5 years old, until he is 16. They suffer unthinkable poverty and loss, mercifully punctuated with humor and profound instances of familial love. The film opens in Brooklyn, 1935 as Malachy McCourt, Sr. (Carlyle) proudly holds his newborn and only daughter, Margaret Mary. A few seconds later, the baby has died (we're not told why), the first of many catastrophes to befall the McCourt family, including the deaths of two more children. They move back to Limerick, probably the first Irish family in history, as an older Frank narrates, to be sailing *away* from the Statue of Liberty. The remainder of the film, like the book, recounts the family's struggle, back in Ireland, as they survive constant hunger and harsh rain, prejudice and persecution.

Parker's journal helped me to understand why I felt troubled while watching *Angela's Ashes*. I knew right away that I wasn't bothered by witnessing horrific destitution and despair (which McCourt describes in detail), but instead by seeing the McCourt's' poverty too perfectly composed, too pretty, too carefully rendered with soft, washed-out colors. Some scenes resemble a sepia-toned postcard, suggesting a distant past and recalling the cover of McCourt's book — the original gold and brown cover photo of a young, smiling Frank, not the one featuring Joe Breen, who plays the 8-year-old Frank in the film. Parker's film is beautiful, even pleasurable to look at. And this seems inappropriate to me.

In his journal, Parker walks us through the process of creating this beautiful film. He writes about his decisions concerning locations, characters, actors, and filming methods, but sprinkled throughout this narrative are his comments lamenting the intrusion of relatively new architecture on the landscape (he sees "modern bungalows" as "thumbing their noses from pretty green hillsides") and fanciful references to the ghosts of McCourt's father and uncles lingering in the pubs (which he makes visible in the film). Such romantic ideas about Ireland are evident in Parker's version of the poverty in Limerick in the 1930's and 40's. Idealized visions of any country or group of people can only be condescending. The viewer consumes, and enjoys, these presentations from a safe distance of time and place, assured that the characters and situations they're seeing have little to do with themselves.

Reading Parker's journal, I remembered feeling the same nervousness about romanticism when I started the book a couple of years ago. I felt a little put off by McCourt's resurrection of Irish stereotypes and the glorification of "Irish woes." In the first few pages, he writes, "People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless, loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years" (11). Here we go again, I thought. I hate to see these stereotypes

dredged up, as they almost always are in books and films about Ireland. I read on, however, and discovered that McCourt admirably fleshed out most of these familiar types: the alcoholic father, Malachy, isn't merely shiftless and lazy: his spirit has been crushed by class prejudice and his own pride. And Angela turns out not to be a pious, defeated mother but one who rouses herself and fights for her family's survival at the expense of her own dignity.

Alan Parker and the cast do succeed in translating some of these subtleties to the screen. For example, Robert Carlyle sensitively conveys Malachy's broken spirit beneath his careless smile, so that you pity more than despise him. And it is easy to see how the young Joe Breen, a first-time actor and farmer's son, was chosen to play the youngest of three versions of Frank (Ciaran Owens plays him at age 12 and Michael Legge at 16). His face conveys a mixture of innocence and rough experience.

During the first third of the film, the camera (and by extension the viewer), often gazes on Breen's large eyes and freckles, which by now we've all seen staring out at us from the movie poster and the recent paperback editions of the text. At a basic level, the focus on Frank's face makes sense: we are watching him take it all in, the suffering of his parents and siblings, as well as his own, and seeing the effects register in his face. At the same time, one senses that the film invests more in Breen beyond his playing the main character, as if he represents some sentimental embodiment of childhood in general and for Parker, an Irish childhood in particular. In his journal, Parker writes of Breen, "He is a beautiful, unspoiled boy and bright as a button," and asserts that he encouraged Breen not to act, but to just "be himself." This reference to Breen as beautiful and unspoiled doesn't sit well. This is a kid who, Parker notes, milked his father's cows every day before coming to work and yet, the director's fantasy of him both ignores the reality of his life (he worked two jobs throughout the filming) and idealizes it (insinuating that these difficult circumstances enhance Breen's "beautiful," natural performance).

Frank McCourt has said his book "was not about Limerick; it was about poverty." The film version focuses on the circular causes and effects of that poverty, usually located in class prejudices. Malachy can't find work in the States because he's Irish, or in Limerick because he's from Northern Ireland and is Protestant. Charitable institutions humiliate and belittle Angela (Emily Watson) when she seeks assistance, assuming that because he is poor, she is also shiftless and that her husband must be a drunk and a philanderer. And the Catholic Church rejects Frank for training in the priesthood, despite his obvious aptitude, because of his low class.

Despite the film's efforts to pinpoint the forces that keep people impoverished, the means by which it represents poverty — poetic images, the music that swells appropriately at the saddest moments — might be considered just such a force, making the characters' suffering into something morally admirable and visually splendid, objectified for viewers able to afford \$8.00 tickets. J.M. Synge once wrote of his travels through the west of Ireland, "In a way it is all heartrending, in one place the people are starving but wonderfully attractive and charming." For me, *Angela's Ashes*, the film, reasserts this attitude: It is indeed all heartrending, but so exquisite to see.

Reviews Assignment on *Angela's Ashes*

Luck of the Irish, By Paul Tatara

The Poetry of Poverty, By Renee Scolaro Rathke

After reading the two previous reviews written about the transference of the novel to film, detach this page and write your comments on these two opinions, citing your own opinion while reflecting on the accuracy of the writers, and your feelings on the adaptation. Feel free to site examples from the book and film to back up your opinion.