

## Angela's Ashes

Literature, both highbrow and pop, has always been a source for movie screenplays. Popular works, especially those tagged as best sellers, are natural targets for film treatment because of their built-in audience of millions. True, in making a film version of a best seller, there is always the prospect of alienating the die-hard readers who will view any screen adaptation as a defilement to the book they love. Yet there is also the wonderful commercial potential of not only drawing people who already know the book and want to relive it in another realm but also of attracting all those other folks who have only "heard" of the work but never read it.

This month Washington sees the opening of a film adaptation of a mega-seller of the last few years, done in an earnest, thoughtful effort: *Angela's Ashes*, from Frank McCourt's hugely popular memoir. Since I believe that film is essentially a different medium from literary prose--beginning from different premises and responding to different exigencies--I will refrain from making constant comparisons between this film and its literary forebear. For my part, I will address it strictly as an experience in the movie house.

*Angela's Ashes* follows the struggling McCourt family in Limerick, Ireland, during the depression of the 1930's and 1940's, told through the eyes of the oldest son Frank, whom we see during several stages of his life. There is no stinting on the loathsome experience of grinding poverty, with its waterlogged walk-up, its constant bouts of ill health, its scramble to eat, its fruitless search for work, its driving people to drink and worse. Director Alan Parker's (*Fame*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Evita*) tactic is to have every bit of slop and dirt assiduously shown and to have every dream torn asunder, so much so that you might feel, as you leave the cinema, that you have sprung puddles in your shoes or holes in your trousers.

The monumentally depressing picture of the McCourts' life was leavened for the book's readers by the spryness of the author's voice and the bits of boyish humor. Snippets of the latter come through in the film, also, as when little Frank understands a churchly phrase to mean "Father, Son and Holy Toast." But one thing film does, sometimes with a vengeance, is construct a very concrete reality, and the harsh reality of this family's plight is so strong and unrelieved in *Angela's Ashes* that it overshadows the careful accuracy of the production and offers practiced performers--like Emily Watson and Robert Carlyle as Angela and Malachy McCourt--too little to do to challenge their environment. They can no more escape Limerick's dampness than their characters could. The film's finale, with young Frank primed to escape his upbringing, is meant to uplift, but it seems almost an afterthought in the grimness that has gone before. Go see it on a full stomach.

(*The film is rated "R" for wholly wretched life.*)

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