



## **Book Review: McCourt, Frank (2005). *Teacher Man*. New York: Scribner**

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*Palmerston North Girls High School*

In *Teacher Man* Frank McCourt tells of his thirty years teaching English to New York City high school students. Although McCourt's life has been well documented in his earlier books, *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, his teaching career had, in his own words, been given a 'short shrift'. He has written *Teacher Man* to show how he values teaching as a profession, and how he gained from it. McCourt's story is a gentle, humble tale that reinforces the worth of a long time teaching career. It is a rambling account, full of anecdotes of his classroom experiences. It starts with near disbelief that he survived the early days of teaching. It finishes with his questioning, after all his years teaching students how to write, whether he could actually do it himself?

This simple progression is backed with excerpts and reflections on McCourt's own life. He uses these in his lessons; lessons that help him make sense of his life and keep his students quiet and in their seats. He is amazed that New York kids liked his life stories so much, but he is also worried that he has deviated from the curriculum. When a parent calls him a fraud, he tries to teach from plans, and then hits on an idea: 'Grammar is the way language behaves'. This leads him to spins on the sentence 'John went to the store' and eventually to a tale of John who ends up in Sing Sing gaol. The technique of bringing together psychology (through integrating students' experiences into lessons) and grammar gives McCourt a sense of achievement, of getting an idea across to students. He is however slightly cynical. Is it just 'hitting pedagogical paydirt', as described by an administrator in one school? Although McCourt acknowledges the use of performance as a teaching skill, ultimately he finds that honesty, 'being yourself', is the best way to operate in the classroom.

With McCourt's teaching, story telling and writing, the reader can feel that this journey is fun, but where is it going, and how does it end? Advice to young teachers is that 'the classroom is a place of drama ... after a few years you develop antennae. You can tell when you've reached them...'. McCourt wisely concludes that the journey ends with him learning from his students. One student shows him how he learned what was important from a martial arts teacher; or as McCourt translates it, 'If you have to act like a big-ass teacher you should go home and clean the toilet'.

McCourt is a great advocate for teachers, and it is refreshing to read such a strong recommendation about the value of teaching as a career. He never presumes to be anything other than a basic classroom teacher, and his disrespect for administrators makes entertaining reading. They are accused of talking in jargon: 'I was uncomfortable with the bureaucrats, the higher-ups, who had escaped classrooms only to turn and bother the occupants of those

classrooms, teachers and students. I never wanted to fill out their forms, follow their guidelines, administer their examinations, tolerate their snooping, adjust myself to their programs and courses of study'. He likens assistant principals to Cabots and Lodges (*sic*), old moneyed families from Boston. He quotes from a ditty coined by John Collins Bossidy, 'Good old Boston, The home of the bean and the cod, Where the Lowells talk to the Cabots, And the Cabots talk only to God'.

In spite of his admiration for teachers, McCourt often seems like a loner in the school. We hear little about his staffroom interactions, or his relationships with other teachers. He sees the job as 'you and the kids'. We get lots of insights into individual students, whose stories make up the most fascinating parts of this book. It would be hard to dispute the claim that teachers enjoy the job because of the rewards they get from working with students. But on a day-to-day basis for many teachers, other colleagues are their lifeline in a job that offers its share of stresses. It seems a shame that when McCourt does tell of other teachers, it is often to portray them as cynical and disillusioned.

This book is an entertaining read. It encapsulates a teacher's work realistically, and it affirms that what is of most value in educating cannot be assessed with hard quantifiable data. Education is, after all, about helping students think and reason, and these qualities are hard to measure.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Eleanor Bourke has been teaching in a variety of high schools in Aotearoa New Zealand for many years. Her school interests are Mathematics teaching and PPTA involvement.