

## Hierarchy, Respect, and Flying Sandwiches: A Review of *Teacher Man*

By Frank McCourt  
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Reviewed by Brady Coleman

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Frank McCourt certainly keeps hope alive for the unaccomplished retiree. His first novel, *Angela's Ashes*, won the Pulitzer Prize—when he was 67—for the story of his boyhood in Ireland. He followed this up with a second autobiography, *'Tis*, of his early years in America. *Teacher Man* is his latest memoir, of his 30 years spent teaching at high schools in New York City. What took him so long to write his first masterpiece? “I was teaching, that’s what took me so long,” McCourt explains in the prologue. “When you teach five high school classes a day, five days a week, you’re not inclined to go home to clear your head and fashion deathless prose. After a day of five classes your head is filled with the clamor of the classroom.” (p. 3)

His teaching degree does not prepare him for his very first day of class in 1958 at McKee Vocational and Technical High School in Staten Island, when a boy named Petey throws a baloney sandwich wrapped in wax paper at another boy, which then falls to the floor near McCourt. The students are all staring at him. How should he respond?

Professors of education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don’t mind, the child’s felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom. (p. 16)

But McCourt’s instincts carry the day. Rather than overreact, and create hostility, or ignore the

incident, and risk losing his authority, he picks up the sandwich, unwraps it, and enjoys eating it slowly while the class watches in admiration. “Petey said, Yo, teacher, that’s my sandwich you et. Class told him, Shaddap. Can’t you see the teacher is eating? I licked my fingers. I said, Yum, made a ball of paper bag and wax paper and flipped it into the trash basket. The class cheered.” (p. 17)

McCourt is keenly sensitive to classroom dynamics. He is warned that “first impressions are crucial. ... They’re watching you. You’re watching them. ... They’ll take your measure and they’ll decide what to do with you. You think you’re in control? Think again. They’re like heat-seeking missiles. When they go after you they’re following a primal instinct. It is the function of the young to get rid of their elders, to make room on the planet.” (pp. 39–40) McCourt faces challenges to his clout, as all teachers do, and recounts many of them throughout the book. How do the best teachers deal with them? They anticipate and welcome such inevitable challenges from students. What a great thing that contemporary American students try to challenge their teachers; they certainly haven’t in many places and in many times. After all, as the Irish McCourt reminds us, America is the “land of the free and home of the brave.” (p. 83) But McCourt’s anecdotes remind us that skilled teachers learn to draw sharp and visible lines of expected classroom civility, and enforce them consistently and firmly.

That consistency can be a difficult challenge for any human. What teacher has not shown up at class in a foul mood, and later regretted letting his anger out unfairly on the class: “You’re just another teacher, man, so what are you gonna do? Stare down the whole class? Fail the whole class? Get with it, baby. They have you by the balls and you created the

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situation, man. You didn't have to talk to them like that. They don't care about your mood, your headache, your troubles. They have their own problems, and you are one of them." (p. 68)

Interspersed throughout his memoir as a teacher, McCourt recounts early failures in the classroom, struggles with an unsuccessful marriage, being fired from one high school, his seemingly endless stack of student papers to correct, being unable to complete a Ph.D., and a persistently low self-esteem. But somehow he gets a job teaching at the prestigious Stuyvesant, "the top high school in the city, the Harvard of high schools, alma mater of various Nobel Prize winners, of James Cagney himself." (p. 183) He remains there until the end of his teaching career, and is wildly popular. Students sit in windowsills to attend his classes; there are admiring jokes from colleagues about him filling Yankee Stadium; he wins "Teacher of the Year" awards. Still, he worries he is liked only because he is an easy grader, and not tough enough on his students. He goes through periods trying to toughen his image (humorously, but inevitably, his students see right through the facade).

Some teachers are respected but disliked; others liked but disrespected. But we know it's not a straight line, with "respect" on one end of the continuum, and "like" on the other, because fortunate teachers manage to get lots of both reactions. A teacher's personality and experiences strongly influence which reaction he most desires from his students, and for McCourt, it is unquestionably a need to be liked. Still, one suspects McCourt's students must have respected him as well, and that he ruminates about these struggles with respect to, well, to be liked more by the readers of *Teacher Man*.

But ruminate he does. "There's no respect for easy teachers. One teacher at Stuyvesant was called Something for Nothing. I want to make them earn their grades. Have respect." (p. 201) Although one of his popular Stuyvesant classes is already filled up, a girl wants in so badly that her divorced mother offers to spend the weekend with McCourt at a resort as payment to let her daughter in the class.

When an astonished drinking buddy asks McCourt why he refused, he replies, "There wouldn't be any respect." (p. 201) His obsession with respect predates his teaching years. For example, he writes that "if you even hint that you read Shakespeare, people give you that look of respect." (p. 36) Working on the docks before getting his teaching certificate, McCourt learns that certain insults must be met with fists, or "you lose all respect." (p. 60) He had "more respect for [a dockworker] than [he] had for any professor." (p. 63) But he's advised to leave the docks: "You just go be a teacher, honey. You'll get more respect." (p. 65)

Gratefully, McCourt doesn't offer budding teachers a list of pedagogical principles to follow. But he does conclude the book by recalling this advice to a young substitute teacher:

I'll admit I didn't always love teaching. I was out of my depth. You're on your own in the classroom. . . . One unit of energy against one hundred and seventy-five units of energy, one hundred and seventy-five ticking bombs, and you have to find ways of saving your own life. . . . I know I'm exaggerating but it's like a boxer going into the ring or a bullfighter into the arena. You can be knocked out or gored and that's the end of your teaching career. But if you hang on you learn the tricks. It's hard but you have to make yourself comfortable in the classroom. You have to be selfish. The airlines tell you if oxygen fails you are to put on your mask first, even if your instinct is to save the child. (p. 255)

McCourt doesn't so much write to his audience as he speaks to it. Indeed, his first book, *Angela's Ashes*, likely won so many awards because of McCourt's brilliance with portraying spoken dialect in print. This same talent comes through in *Teacher Man*, particularly as he depicts the different ethnic accents of his students. Some have suggested avoiding the print version, and getting a copy instead of the audio version of the book—spoken by the author himself, with the appealing remnants of an Irish brogue.

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Although a captive storyteller and brilliant stylist, at times one wishes for fewer anecdotes and more rigorous reflection. In particular, McCourt doesn't reveal much deep thought about an issue that appears repeatedly throughout the book—that of status. McCourt is plagued by doubts about his place in the social hierarchy: “Teacher, my arse. I should have stayed in the army with the dogs. I'd be better off on the docks and the warehouses, lifting, hauling, cursing, eating hero sandwiches, drinking beer, chasing waterfront floozies. At least I'd be with my own kind, my own class of people, not getting above myself, acushla.” (p. 55) As a secondary school teacher, he admits that he “envied” college professors, with their comparatively light teaching loads. (p. 103) And he “envied” the writer Edward Dahlberg for “living the life of a writer.” (p. 106) Before getting his job at Stuyvesant, in a short stint as an English as a Second Language teacher to immigrant children, he says, “I could have been one of them, part of the huddled masses. . . . I know English, but I'm not so far removed from their confusions. Rock bottom in the social hierarchy.” (p. 130) Indeed, his motivation for writing *Teacher Man* is “the nagging feeling [that he had] given teaching short shrift” in his previous book *'Tis*: “In America, doctors, lawyers, generals, actors, television people and politicians are admired and rewarded. Not teachers. Teaching is the downstairs maid of professions.” (p. 4)

McCourt's fixation with status is familiar to most of us, but particularly so in legal education. Indeed, so much of our talk—in the hallways, in the faculty lounge, in formal meetings—appears increasingly to be of hierarchy: the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking system is flawed and destructive; a law school department (or school of thought, as reflected in hiring and promotion) lacks deserved status; the traditional classroom deference owed to us as professors—which deteriorates annually, according to some reports—must be restored. And of course there is the dimly routine politicking for superior perceived status between academic coequals, conducted without any of the idealism that supposedly underlies our scholarly writing or public service or religious beliefs.

Reading *Teacher Man* reminded me of a couple of lessons learned when our law school was moving toward tenure-track status for legal writing professors. First, hierarchy battles are zero-sum games; the more status I have, the less you have, because there is (tautologically) a limited supply of high-status institutions and positions, despite an unlimited ability to shift relative social power. If it is human to want more status, it is just as human to not want less—and legal academics are intellectually adept at rationalizing either outcome as the more legitimate. But respect and civility are not zero sum; they are behavioral rather than structural. We can display a genuine equality of respect independent of status; and a common civility regardless of position. The link between respect and hierarchy is a strong one, reinforced by both nature and nurture, but it is not a necessary one. In both classroom and faculty settings, hierarchy becomes ugly, and therefore divisive and challenged (or quietly resented), when civility disappears: perhaps there is a needlessly blunt assertion of dominance; or a sarcastic remark about powerlessness; or some humiliating reminder of existing constraints. This is a lesson McCourt learns early on, although with his students, not his colleagues: “If you bark or snap, you lose them. That's what they get from parents and the schools in general, the bark and the snap. If they strike back with the silent treatment, you're finished in the classroom.” (p. 68)

Second, we would all do well to gently laugh a little more at ourselves and our institutions of power (as McCourt does so often) lest we become miserably self-absorbed. In *Teacher Man*, McCourt does manage to mock his romanticized image of the envied class: “No one is forcing you to stay in this miserable underpaid profession and there's nothing to keep you from going through that door to the shimmering world of powerful men, beautiful women, cocktail parties uptown, satin sheets.” (p. 152) Of course, the same tenured faculty member at your nonelite law school who obstinately argues against your tenured status, for example, is herself not equally considered for membership on important Association of American Law Schools (AALS) committees, has had her substantively

superior article rejected by top journals because of her school's rank, and has surely been ignored (one quick glance at the bottom half of the name tag?) at AALS cocktail parties, all for reasons of institutional status that are analogous to your own. That the emperor has no clothes is not an argument for complacency within the legal writing community; rather, it is a reminder of the omnipresence of hierarchy, and therefore a call for a more civil if more tenacious fight, moderated by more of McCourt's graceful self-effacing humor toward the teaching profession, all around.

History has taught us this much: attempts at abolishing all social hierarchy end in bloody tragedy at worse, or inefficiency and collapse at best. Simultaneously, struggles for greater equality—the defiance of existing hierarchies—must be fought if justice be gained. And to ourselves and our allies (unsurprisingly), we leave the task of distinguishing just from unjust hierarchies.

No philosopher will resolve the enduring challenges of social organization. Still, we know of many who have written rigorously about them. And by their thoughtful explorations of status and justice, hasn't the occasional suffering that follows from our own personal encounters with such challenges been leavened? Or at least, by expanding our awareness, haven't we then been able to smile at, rather than hide behind, our own daily hypocrisies toward hierarchy: damn the oppressive deanery above me (their notion of hierarchy always too strong), and damn the cheeky administrative staff below me (their notion of hierarchy always too weak).

Of course, McCourt is not a professional philosopher; indeed, he makes no pretensions in the book to even being an amateur one. His lack of explicit depth and profundity are in fact the inverse of his greatest strengths, which are his charming modesty and approachable prose. To any of us who speak in a room full of students for a living—whether such students are rambunctious kindergarten kids or college graduates seeking law degrees, whether they are overseas Chinese businessmen practicing English conversation or

American inner-city high school teenagers—*Teacher Man* will likely educate and entertain, as well as soothe and appease. I wondered briefly before getting the book whether it would have any relevance at all to my own teaching, based on a glance at the jacket cover. After all, McCourt's experiences are mostly decades old, he taught largely to secondary school students in a very different American subculture from Texas, and he did not teach legal subject matter. My doubts were soon eliminated as the relevance of the book became quickly apparent. I recognized the universality of the teaching experience far outweighs any superficial distinctions I had imagined.

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