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Calvin G. Roso
Oral Roberts University

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Reviewing *Teacher Man: A Memoir*



Teacher Man: A Memoir

by Frank McCourt

Scribner: New York, Copyright 2005. 272 pages.

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by Calvin G. Roso, Ed.D.

“[My] miserable childhood deprived me. . . . How I became a teacher at all and remained one is a miracle and I have to give myself full marks for surviving all those years in the classrooms of New York” (p. 1). Thus begins the humorous and entertaining teaching memoirs of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Frank McCourt. Even for those who have not read McCourt’s earlier autobiographies, *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) and *‘Tis* (1999), *Teacher Man* (2005) may prove interesting. For teachers and professors who are reading McCourt, this book may provide insight on how to improve pedagogy and andragogy. Following 30 years of McCourt’s teaching experience is an eye-opening taste of classroom reality. McCourt does an exceptional job depicting the differences between his university pedagogy classes and “real-life” experience in the high school classroom while showing some of McCourt’s strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. In addition, McCourt’s *Teacher Man* offers readers insights on techniques for engaging students, teacher-centered instruction, and the growth-cycle of educators.

McCourt’s crass language and lifestyle fit well in the classroom setting of New York public high schools and colleges in the 1960s and ‘70s; however, this type of teaching style would not be accepted in most colleges today. Although McCourt initially struggled as a teacher, he soon learned that in order to gain students’ respect and attention he needed to do something other than merely regurgitate textbook information. McCourt grabbed students’ interest through sharing several of his life stories from his “miserable childhood in Ireland” (p. 1) where he personally observed the negative side of education and where schoolmasters pushed, pulled, and “whalloped” him.

While McCourt’s childhood enabled him to empathize with students’ fears and boredom, it was McCourt’s first days of teaching in both the high school and college setting that brought him face-to-face with the plight of the teacher.

This morning I have to make decisions. In a minute the bell will ring. They’ll [the students] swarm in and what will they say if they see me at the desk? Hey look. He’s hiding out. They are experts on teachers. Sitting at the desk means you’re scared or lazy. You’re using the desk as a barrier. Best thing is to get out there and stand. Face the music. Be a man. Make one mistake your first day and it takes months to recover. (pp. 16-17)

Like many first-year teachers, McCourt felt ill-equipped to handle classroom management. For example, McCourt stated that his university education had not prepared him for the potential food fight on his first day of teaching. In time, McCourt learned that a great way to engage his students was by teaching to their interests. In his classroom, literature and composition were studied by discussing current music, movies, and even

recipe books. McCourt was willing to change his agenda for the day in order to entice student interest. He seemed to master the ability to “think on his feet” in classroom situations. For some readers, McCourt’s approach to teaching might seem too far-fetched; even McCourt had times when he doubted his effectiveness:

I’m twenty-seven years old, a new teacher, dipping into my past to satisfy these American teenagers, to keep them quiet and in their seats. I never thought my past would be so useful. . . . I argue with myself, You’re telling stories and you’re supposed to be teaching. . . . You’re a fraud. You’re cheating our children. . . . I’m a teacher in an American school telling stories of my school days in Ireland. It’s a routine that softens them up in the unlikely event I might teach something solid from the curriculum. (pp. 38-39)

Eventually, McCourt became cynical about the feasibility of using lesson plans or adhering to any formal pedagogy: “You’re required to follow a lesson plan. First you are to state your aim. Then you are to motivate the class . . . motivate . . . by telling about my aunt’s husband who was gassed in World War I” (p. 78). Ultimately, he seems to have given up on meeting State educational requirements and of following his superiors’ rules.

Perhaps one reason why McCourt was so focused on engaging students was because deep within him was a desire to belong—to be accepted. The book is filled with examples of ego-centric/teacher-centered pedagogy. Although classroom discussions were often based on his students’ interests, McCourt still led the discussions back to his own life history and personal interests. Deep within, he was motivated by a desire to be liked, sometimes determining success according to students’ accolades, not student learning.

In his latter years of teaching in both high school and college settings, McCourt again attempted to follow the curriculum but often found himself moving back to his own style of engagement. According to today’s instructional theory, McCourt’s teaching style had some degree of effectiveness in enabling students to learn. McCourt is a master at “teaching responsively” as outlined by Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) because McCourt worked to develop relationships with his students and developed a “safe” learning environment. In addition, McCourt “attend[ed] to students’ backgrounds and needs” (2006, p. 19) and helped students see the importance of what they were learning. The problem with McCourt’s style, however, was that he seemed to have little, if any, focus toward clear instructional goals or outcomes. This approach to instruction negates any research on the effectiveness of goals and standards in education (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005; Reeves, 2002).

To a degree, McCourt’s *Teacher Man* presents a case study of the life cycle of maturing teachers. According to Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2001), as teachers grow in their profession, they have various concerns that are aligned with their professional experiences. New teachers are often focused on the “survival stage” where concerns deal with self-adequacy, acceptance, and respect. Maturing teachers move their focus toward developing teaching tasks such as instructional issues and student discipline. Superior teachers are, in contrast, most concerned with instructional impact on student learning—having a greater concern for all students. Was McCourt a superior teacher, or was he more concerned with personal acceptance and respect? Although

entertaining, this book reveals that while McCourt's humanity enabled him to reach students, his insecurities often kept students from embracing deeper content that would have opened new levels of learning for them and their teacher. This book can be recommended for "light reading" for high school and college instructors who enjoy learning through real-life examples.

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Dr. Calvin G. Roso is an Assistant Professor in Graduate Education at Oral Roberts University where he specializes in K-12 curriculum and instruction. He earned a B.S. in Education from UW-Madison in 1986, an M.A. in Education from Oral Roberts University in 1997, and an Ed.D. in Education from Oral Roberts University in 2004. Roso has been involved in education since 1991. His positions have included a curriculum editor, school curriculum coordinator, and high school English teacher. Dr. Roso has been a consultant for schools in the United States on various curriculum-related topics and has conducted curriculum courses and workshops in England, Sweden, Africa, and Latin America. He has written several articles on various curriculum issues and has published several teachers' curriculum study guides through Progeny Press in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He may be reached at croso@oru.edu.
