

# A miserable liar? Angela's Ashes inspired a new literary genre - but was Frank McCourt REALLY telling the truth?

By [Zoe Brennan for the Daily Mail](#)

**Updated:** 17:57 EST, 21 July 2009

Rarely has a book had such a compelling opening line. 'When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.'

And so Frank McCourt, who died on Sunday aged 78 after a battle with skin cancer, launched a new literary genre: the misery memoir. Dozens have followed him - so much so that they are now generically called 'mis-lit'. These tales of childhood woe have become highly lucrative.

Called 'inspirational memoirs' by publishers, 'mis-lit' now accounts for nine per cent of the British book market, shifting 1.9 million copies a year and generating £24 million of revenue. HarperCollins recently admitted to a 31 per cent increase in annual profits thanks to 'mis-lit'.

But as well as starting a publishing phenomenon, McCourt's searing bestseller *Angela's Ashes*, which has sold some five million copies, also began a terrible feud.

Locals called him 'a conman and a hoaxer', and claim he 'prostituted' his own mother in his quest for literary stardom, by turning her into a downtrodden harlot who committed



**Angela's Ashes: The memoir won the Pulitzer Prize - but was it filled with falsehoods?**

incest in his book.

One thing is not under debate - when it came to writing limpid, magical prose, McCourt was the real thing, following in his countrymen's footsteps to emerge as an Irish writer *par excellence*.

So just who was the real Frank McCourt? Did he win the Pulitzer Prize with his lyrical, poignant memoir under false pretences? Or was he indeed the ultimate rags-to-riches story, who survived the grinding poverty of Limerick's slums to rise like a phoenix from the ashes, triumphant?

The truth is, we may never know. Perhaps, as McCourt did in *Angela's Ashes*, we had better begin at the beginning. In the book, set in the Thirties, McCourt writes that his parents returned when he was four from New York to Ireland, against the tide of Irish emigration.

His family consisted of 'my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone'.

His mother, the Angela of the book's title - had become pregnant in New York after 'a knee-trembler - the act itself done up against a wall'. Four months later, she married Malachy McCourt, her family having pressed him to do the decent thing.

So began a downward spiral into alcohol and poverty, with a feckless father drinking his wages away.

Far worse was to come. The death of their daughter at seven weeks sent McCourt's parents into an abyss of despair, from which they never emerged.

They return, despondent, by boat to Ireland - with Angela pregnant again. But soon, one of the twins, Oliver, has died, too.

His second child's death precipitated McCourt Sr's complete decline into alcoholism. He

promised coal for the fire, rashers, eggs and tea for a celebration of Oliver's life, but instead took his week's dole to the pub.

School, full of bare-footed slum children, is no relief. The masters 'hit you if you can't say your name in Irish, if you can't say the Hail Mary in Irish. If you don't cry the masters hate you because you've made them look weak before the class and they promise themselves the next time they have you up they'll draw tears or blood or both'.

Then, worse. 'Six months after Oliver went, we woke on a mean November morning and there was Eugene, cold in the bed beside us.' He had died of pneumonia.

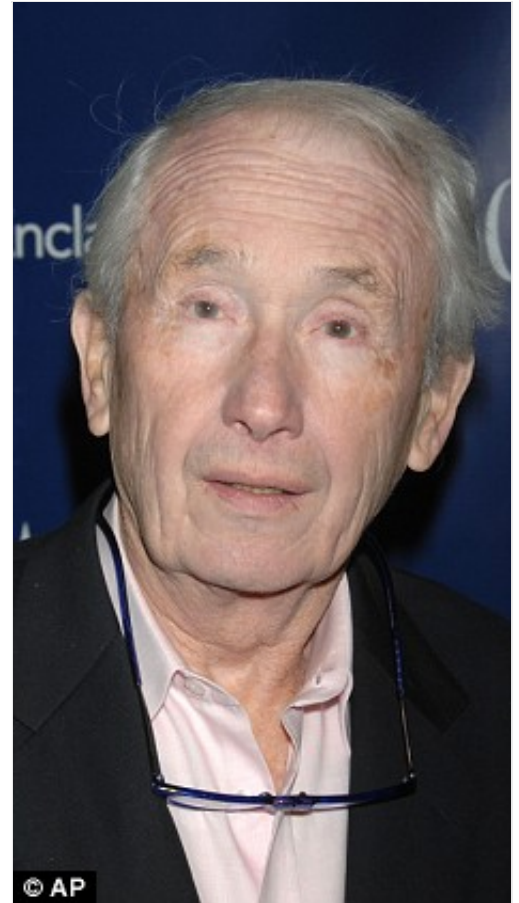
Another brother is born, Michael - Angela's sixth pregnancy. As her husband continues to drink away the dole, a friend tells her off for cursing God, saying: 'Oh, Angela, you could go to Hell for that.' 'Aren't I there already?' she replies.

Another baby arrives, Alphonsus Joseph. No matter that his family fight for charity vouchers for food, furniture and medicine and share a stinking lavatory with six other houses, McCourt Sr drinks the baby's christening money.

His father leaves for England, finally abandoning his family. When they are evicted for not paying rent, Angela takes her family to live with a cousin, Laman.

McCourt wrote that his mother and her cousin had an incestuous relationship. 'She climbs to the loft with Laman's last mug of tea. There are nights when we hear them grunting, moaning. I think they're at the excitement up there.'

Laman also beat the children. At 14, McCourt got a job as a telegraph boy. At 19, he left



**Subjective:** Frank McCourt said the memoir chronicled his family and his emotions

Limerick behind for ever for a new life in America. He first lived in Connecticut, where he became a teacher. He wrote *Angela's Ashes* in his mid-60s, and became hugely wealthy.

But how much of his landmark book was true? Did McCourt cross the line between fact and fiction?

Limerick locals, horrified at the squalid depiction of their town, counted a total of '117 lies or inaccuracies' in the 426-page book, that range from obscure details to wrongly accusing one local man of being a Peeping Tom. They called for a boycott of the film of *Angela's Ashes*.



## **Grinding poverty: The film adaptation starred Emily Watson and Robert Carlisle**

Paddy Malone, a retired coach driver who appears in the frayed school photograph on the book's original cover, is among McCourt's most furious detractors.

He, too, grew up in the Lanes of Limerick and went to the same school as McCourt.

'I know nothing about literature, but I do know the difference between fact and fiction,' says Malone. 'Mccourt calls this book a memoir, but it is filled with lies and exaggerations. The McCourts were never that poor. He has some cheek.'

Malone recalls the family having a pleasant green lawn behind their home, and Angela being overweight - despite the graphic descriptions of hunger in the book.

Limerick broadcaster Gerry Hannan spearheaded a campaign against Angela's Ashes, confronting McCourt on a TV show and calling him a liar.

Although he is too young to remember the period of which McCourt writes, Hannan is convinced McCourt has twisted Limerick's history to make his book more shocking.

'As far as I'm concerned, he's a conman and a hoaxer,' says Hannan. 'He knew the right things to say to get the result he wanted. He's a darling on television. He's got this beautiful brogue and he can put the charm on. And don't get me wrong, the book is beautifully written. But it's not true.'

Their three biggest criticisms of the book, aside from the endless grinding misery it depicts, include the description of a local boy, Willy Harold, as a Peeping Tom who spied on his naked sister. It turns out that Mr Harold, now dead, never had a sister - which McCourt did later acknowledge.

They also disputed McCourt's account of his sexual relations with Teresa Carmody, when he was 14. She was dying of TB at the time, and locals were outraged that he sullied her memory.

Frank Prendergast, a former Limerick mayor and local historian who grew up within 200 yards of McCourt's house, says that if McCourt did suffer, it was because he had a feckless father.

'He suffered a unique poverty because his father was an alcoholic, not because he lived in Limerick,' says Mr Prendergast. 'But he has traduced people and institutions that are

very dear to Limerick people.'

McCourt said: 'I can't get concerned with these things. There are people in Limerick who want to keep these controversies going. I told my own story. I wrote about my situation, my family, my parents, that's what I experienced and what I felt.

'Some of them know what it was like. They choose to take offence. In other words, they're kidding themselves.'

Time will tell whether his impressionistic account of a brutal childhood endures. But whether embellished or not, it certainly left its mark on Limerick - and on literature itself.

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# A Plan to Make Homelessness History

This is a story about a plan to end chronic homelessness in the United States. It's not an indeterminate "war on homelessness," but a methodical approach to do away with a major social problem. Each day, roughly 700,000 people in the country are homeless. About 120,000 are **chronically homeless**. They often live on the streets for years and have mental disabilities, addiction problems and life-threatening diseases like heart disease, cancer and diabetes. They are also five times more likely than ordinary Americans to have **suffered a traumatic brain injury**, which may have precipitated their homelessness. Without direct assistance, many will remain homeless for the rest of their lives — at enormous cost to society and themselves.

Against this backdrop, the **100,000 Homes Campaign** has set the goal of placing 100,000 chronically homeless people — pinpointing those who face the greatest risk of dying on the streets — into permanent supportive housing by July 2013. It's the human welfare equivalent of NASA's race to put a man on the moon. Whether the goal is achieved or not, the campaign is shifting the way cities address a problem that has often been seen as more of a nuisance than a public health emergency.

The campaign was launched this past July by a New York-based organization called **Common Ground** and close to 20 organizations that focus on homelessness, veterans' affairs, mental illness, housing and health care. So far 64 communities have come on board. **As of today, 6,816 people have been housed** — on track to hit 98,000 by the deadline. But organizers say they are gaining momentum.



Mattie LordDonna, who was homeless, with her original survey team, showed off the key to her new apartment in Phoenix.

The big story with street homelessness is that when cities make a concerted effort to reduce it, they succeed. New York, Denver, Wichita, Kansas and Norfolk, Va., for example, have significantly reduced their street populations, in some cases by more than half. They've done it by guiding homeless people into permanent supportive housing, with retention rates between 85 and 90 percent.

People who live on the streets tend to cycle through emergency rooms, addiction treatment, psychiatric care and jails. Housing them yields huge cost savings for society. In Los Angeles, the nation's homeless capital, 4,800 chronically homeless people — about 10 percent of the city's homeless population — [consume half a billion dollars in services annually](#) (pdf, p.23), well more than the remaining 90 percent. Providing supportive housing in Los Angeles is 40 percent cheaper than leaving people on the streets.

The shift in mindset that made it possible to solve this problem began in the early 1990s when a group called [Pathways to Housing](#) pioneered an approach called “[housing first.](#)” Historically, homeless people had to be deemed “housing ready” — typically drug and



alcohol free — before they could become eligible for permanent housing. In reality, this screened out most of the chronically homeless. Pathways showed that permanent housing was, in fact, the first thing people needed to stabilize their lives. Today, it has been adopted as government policy.

But even as a solution to chronic homelessness is within sight, housing agencies, and other groups, need to change the way they work to implement it. It's not just that there is a shortage of affordable housing, which is true. It's that, even when housing is available, public systems remain slow, complicated and confusing, and disconnected from the streets. They don't target the neediest people and they don't coordinate well with other agencies or nonprofits.

“There is no system that has existed to intentionally move people from homelessness into housing,” explains Rosanne Haggerty, Common Ground's founder, who has helped 20 U.S. cities, including New York, New Orleans and Denver, to reduce homelessness. “The problem isn't that hard to solve, but the connective tissue to make it happen has been missing.” The main role of the campaign is to help cities learn how to connect the dots.

Haggerty had to learn this herself in the late 1990s after Common Ground opened the Times Square Hotel, then the nation's largest supportive housing complex, and saw that it made no dent in street homelessness around Times Square. In response, in 2003, she launched a program called Street to Home, and recruited a graduate of West Point, Becky Kanis, who had spent nine years in the military, to reach out to every one of the 55 individuals living on the streets around Times Square, to persuade them to enter housing on their own terms.

Kanis and Haggerty wanted to learn how people on the streets lived; they were shocked to discover how they died — often in their 40s and 50s. If it were any other population, it would have constituted a health crisis. Homeless people had access to the health system — they made extensive use of emergency rooms — but their diseases were impossible to manage while they remained on the streets. Medicine for heart disease would get lost.

Diabetics had no refrigerators to store insulin. Doctors couldn't follow up with cancer patients.



Becky KanisA volunteer surveyed a homeless woman in New Orleans

Drawing on the work of two doctors, James O'Connell and Stephen Hwang, who had studied the causes of death among homeless people, Common Ground created a "vulnerability index" – an algorithm to rank people on the streets by risk of death.

Street to Home's outreach used that index to prioritize the homeless around Times Square, and they managed to get every person they met – except **one holdout known as "Heavy"** – into housing. "We learned that the only way to get chronically homeless people into housing was to go out and beg them to let us help them," explained Haggerty. Along the way, Common Ground developed the strategy that is now at the heart of the campaign: hit the streets and get to know the most vulnerable people, keep talking with them until they agree to enter housing (without pre-conditions), and then blanket them with supports to keep them there and help rebuild their lives.

Another thing that Common Ground discovered was that the homeless were an amalgam of many subgroups. They have now surveyed almost 14,000 chronically homeless people

and found that roughly 20 percent are veterans, 10 percent are over the age of 60, 4 percent have H.I.V. or AIDS, 47 percent have a mental illness and 5 percent remain homeless because they can't find housing with their pets.

This is vital information — because there are more than 20,000 housing authorities in the country, but less than a third have subsidies for “homeless” people. Far more prevalent are government subsidies for other groups — “VASH” for veterans, “202 Housing” for the elderly, “Shelter Plus Care” for people with disabilities, “HOPWA” for people with AIDS. Historically, these big buckets have gone underutilized for the chronically homeless — because nobody knew who they were. Now they can be tapped.

With new cities joining the campaign each month, Common Ground has outlined a [standard process](#) to roll things out. A local lead organization pulls together support from politicians, businesses, nonprofit groups, foundations, and volunteers. One of the early steps is recruiting local volunteers to go into the streets to conduct vulnerability surveys with homeless people — from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. three mornings in a row.

You might imagine that it would be hard to get people to show up in the pre-dawn hours, venture into alleyways, and ask strangers personal questions about their health. Just the opposite. In Phoenix, 175 people turned out; in San Diego, 250; in Omaha, 75; and in Chicago over 150, including Mayor Daley. In Phoenix, after the surveys were complete, organizers asked volunteers if they would like to contribute money — at \$1,000 a shot — to assist homeless people with furniture and move-in expenses. In 10 minutes, they raised \$50,000. “This wasn't a room of philanthropists,” Kanis added. “It was just volunteers. But you had people saying, ‘I'll take the guy in the wheelchair.’ ‘We'll take the two veterans.’ There was probably a five minute standing ovation.”

The other linchpin of the campaign is encouraging city partners — who participate in weekly webinars and monthly innovation sessions — to teach one another how to get around bottlenecks in government systems. “There's a half dozen things that each community struggles with that somebody has already figured out,” explains Kanis. “When you go to your housing authority with an idea they think is crazy, it helps if you

can say, ‘We’re just trying to do what Baltimore did...’ It takes away the excuses people have for saying something will never work.”

One leader on this front has been Laura Green Zeilinger, who led the effort by Washington, D.C.’s Department of Human Services to reduce homelessness. Zeilinger adopted Common Ground’s vulnerability index, registered homeless people across the district, and then re-imagined a housing placement process that took six to eight months and required a homeless person to make five separate visits to the housing authority. By pre-screening applicants and pre-inspecting apartments so they could be matched quickly, Zeilinger boiled the process down to one that can be completed in 10 days and requires a single visit by the homeless person – to sit through an orientation, sign the lease and pick up the keys. As a result, in a little more than two years, 1,200 of the most vulnerable people in Washington, D.C. have been placed into permanent supportive housing. This contrasts with 260 during the previous four years.

In times of emergency, people can accomplish big things. After the flash floods in Nashville this past May, citizens mobilized quickly to house the homeless who had lived near embankments for years. Until recently, however, chronic homelessness has been treated as an inconvenience, not a life or death matter. When someone has been living on the streets for 15 years, it’s easy to think, ‘What’s another few months?’ But if you happen to know that that person is Michael, who is a 62-year-old veteran with heart disease, it’s a different matter.

“We think this campaign is about much more than homelessness,” says Haggerty. “We’re all feeling so concerned for our neighbors who are struggling now. This is a way to do something with neighbors that helps the most vulnerable among us in a very dramatic way. And I think the feeling of having the power to change things is something that many people are looking for these days.”

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## Video



### Ending Homelessness

Project H3, an outreach program, helps people living on the streets in Phoenix find stable shelter. Video by Scott Foreman.

By None None on Publish Date December 21, 2010.

# Alcoholism and Its Effect on the Family

## **Alcoholism and Its Effect on the Family**

**Tetyana Parsons**

December 14, 2003

According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1966), alcoholism is defined as “ a diseased condition due to the excessive use of alcoholic beverages” (p.35) Silverstein in his book “Alcoholism” (1990) gives three criteria that the American Psychiatric Association listed for physicians to diagnose this disease (p.30) :

1. physiological problems, such as hand tremors and blackouts
2. psychological problems, such as an obsessive desire to drink
3. behavioral problems that disrupt social or work life



Alcoholics can be of any age, background, income level, social, or ethnic group. Very often alcoholism affects highly educated people. Several studies even showed that people who lack motivation are less likely to become addicted to alcohol than highly motivated individuals (Silverstein, 1990).

Alcoholism is also known as a family disease. Alcoholics may have young, teenage, or grown-up children; they have wives or husbands; they have brothers or sisters; they have parents or other relatives. An alcoholic can totally disrupt family life and cause harmful effects that can last a lifetime. According to U. S. Department of Health and Human Services and SAMHSA’s (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration) National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, seventy six

million American adults have been exposed to alcoholism in the family. Alcoholism is responsible for more family problems than any other single cause. According to Silverstein (1990), one of every four families has problems with alcohol.

Each member of the family may be affected by alcohol differently. Parental alcoholism may affect the fetus even before a child is born. In pregnant women, alcohol is carried to all of the mother's organs and tissues, including the placenta, where it easily crosses through the membrane separating the maternal and fetal blood systems. When a pregnant woman drinks an alcoholic beverage, the concentration of alcohol in her unborn baby's bloodstream is the same level as her own. A pregnant woman who consumes alcohol during her pregnancy may give birth to a baby with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is one of the three top known causes of birth defects. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, about 5000 babies are born each year with severe damage caused by FAS; another 35000 babies are born with more mild forms of FAS (Berger, p.37).

In general, the more severe the mother's drinking problem during pregnancy, the more severe the symptoms of FAS in infants. Babies born with FAS are shorter and underweight compared to normal babies. They have deformities of the brain and skull, and very characteristic facial features such as small eye openings; thin upper lips; long, flat faces; and a long groove in the middle of their upper lips. These children's central nervous systems are also damaged. As a result, children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome have difficulties in learning, attention span, judgment, memory, problem-solving, and frequently behavior problems. Children with FAS may also have problems with social skills. Their frustration easily turns to anger as they grow older. These children are hyperactive – unable to sit or stand still for a long time. They are often impulsive, poorly coordinated, and have impaired speech and hearing. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and its effects are permanent, often leading to lifelong problems with mental retardation.

Parental alcoholism also has severe effects on normal children of alcoholics. Many of these children have common symptoms such as low self-esteem, loneliness, guilt,

feelings of helplessness, fears of abandonment, and chronic depression (Berger, 1993). Children of alcoholics (COAs) may feel responsible for the problems of the alcoholic and may think they created the problem. COAs often experience high levels of tension and stress. Young children of alcoholics may have frequent nightmares, bed wetting, and crying. They also may not have friends and may be afraid to go to school. Older children of alcoholics may show such depressive symptoms as obsessive perfectionism, hoarding, staying by themselves, or being excessively self-conscious. Studies have shown that because children of alcoholics feel that they are different from other people, they develop a poor self-image, in which they closely resemble their alcoholic parents (Silverstein, 1990, p.75). Also, teenage children of alcoholics may develop phobias.

COAs more often have problems in school. The stressful environment at home prevents them from studying. Their school performance may also be affected by inability to express themselves. Often COAs have difficulty in establishing relationships with teachers and classmates. COAs tend more often to have to repeat the academic year and more often drop out of school. A United States government survey, "Exposure to Alcoholism in the Family", shows that 30 percent of young women who didn't complete high school had grown up in families with alcoholic parents (Berger, 1993, p.75). The same survey shows that only 20 percent of young men from alcoholic families went to college. Some COAs have such behavioral problems as lying, stealing, fighting, and truancy. These children live in extremely unstable home environments. They never know what to expect from an alcoholic parent. Because they are unable to predict their parent's mood, they don't know how to behave themselves. Just like non-alcoholic spouses, COAs think they can stop their alcoholic parent from drinking by hiding liquor, or by pleasing the parent with good grades in school. They may tiptoe around the house while the alcoholic parent sleeps, hoping not to awake the drunken person until enough time has passed for the alcoholic parent to "sober up". Children of alcoholics feel guilty for their failure to save their parents from the effects of alcohol.

Because crime and violence are associated with alcoholism, incest and battering are common in alcoholics' families. According to Berger, almost 30 percent of father –



daughter incest cases and 75 percent of domestic violence cases involve a family member who is an alcoholic. Incest and battering victims often blame themselves for what has happened. Because they feel so guilty, ashamed, and helpless, they themselves may turn to drinking as the way to escape the pain. “Children of alcoholics are people who have been robbed of their childhood” (Silverstein, 1990, p.75). Children of alcoholics, if untreated as children, carry their problems into later life.

Adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) often don't relate their problems to having grown up in a family with an alcoholic parent. Many of them have problems of depression, aggression, or impulsive behavior. Some studies have shown that ACOAs have problems with abuse of different psychoactive substances, and difficulty in establishing healthy relationships with others. They are frequently failures as parents themselves, often make poor career choices, and almost all ACOAs have a negative self-image (Berger, 1993, p.67). Adult children of alcoholics often have feelings of worthlessness and failure. They also may have problems with family responsibility because their alcoholic parent was irresponsible and didn't provide them with basic children's needs.

Many ACOAs have problems with intimacy, because their previous experience has taught them not to trust other people. They may also think that if they will love someone, this person will hurt them in the future, just the same as their alcoholic parent did. Unfortunately, research has shown that many ACOAs often find themselves intimately involved with someone who is an alcoholic, or in some way abusive (Wekesser, 1994, p.143). ACOAs are four times more likely than children of non-alcoholics to develop alcoholism. Genetic factors play a major role in the development of alcoholism. Another factor is inability to deal with stress in a healthy way. Joseph A. Califano, former United States Secretary of Health and Human Services, pointed out some other facts about ACOAs. He says, “sons of alcoholics see doctors more often than those raised in non-alcoholic homes. Further, they have higher rates of such psychological or mental disorders as anxiety, depression, and introversion” (Berger, p.69). Berger also states that adult daughters of alcoholics tend to have more reproductive problems and see their gynecologists and obstetricians more often. In

addition, they have higher rates of an eating disorder – bulimia.

Alcoholism also has negative effects on the spouse of an alcoholic. The spouse may have feelings of hatred, self-pity, avoidance of social contacts, may suffer exhaustion and become physically or mentally ill (Berger, 1993). Very often the spouse has to perform the roles of both parents. Family responsibilities shift from two parents to one parent. As a result, the non-alcoholic parent may be inconsistent, demanding, and often neglect the children. Having financial difficulties is another issue that families of alcoholics have to deal with. The family may have to give up certain privileges because of the large amount of money spent on alcohol and also possible joblessness. A survey, “Exposure to Alcoholism in the Family”, conducted in 1988 suggested that alcoholism is a major factor of premature widowhood (Berger, 1993, p.13). Alcoholism also is one of the major reasons for divorce.

Today, experts who study alcoholic families know that family and marital problems often start because of alcoholism, but they also learned that spouses and children may contribute to the drinker’s habit and make it worse. Some of the families allow heavy drinking to continue rather than deal with serious family problems, and keep the habit going in exchange for keeping the family together. Denial is an essential problem for alcoholics and family members. Family members use denial to rationalize the drinker’s alcohol dependency. In the beginning, denial is understandable because every family loves and wants to protect its members, but there comes a time when denial negatively affects family members. When family members deny the obvious and refuse to look for help, their behavior can trigger multiple emotional problems in the children of the family.

Members of alcoholic’s families very often become codependent. “Codependency is an unconscious addiction to another person’s abnormal behavior” (Wekesser, 1994, p.168). Most alcoholics have periods when they stop drinking for a short while and seemingly do well, leading the codependent person to believe that the problem can be solved. Often people who don’t know the alcoholic very well don’t suspect any problem. The alcoholic’s

codependent family members do everything possible to hide the problem, preserve the family's prestige and project the image of a "perfect family". The spouse and children may avoid making friends and bringing other people home, in order to hide problems caused by alcoholism. Codependent members often forget about their own needs and desires. They devote their lives to attempt to control or cure the drinker. Unknowingly, codependent family members often become "enablers". An enabler is "a person who unknowingly helps the alcoholic by denying the drinking problem exists and helping the alcoholic to get out of troubles caused by his drinking" (Silverstein, 1990, p.65). The enabler will clean up the alcoholic's vomit and make excuses to his or her boss, teacher, or friends. The enabler lies for the alcoholic, and thus enables the alcoholic to continue drinking.

While alcoholism treatment programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous help people with alcohol dependence to stop drinking and improve their life styles, family and marital therapy and various self-help groups help alcoholic families to improve their own well-being. Families of alcoholics need treatment just as much as alcoholics. Marriage and family counselors can help with the tensions created in the alcoholic's home. School counselors can provide information and support to adolescents who have family problems because of parental alcoholism. Therapists in hospitals and mental health centers, and state-run alcohol programs provide information and services for alcohol related problems. According to Silverstein (1990), Al-Anon and Alateen are two of the most successful organizations helping families of alcoholics. Al-Anon is designed to mainly help the spouses of alcoholics, while Alateen is designed to help children of the alcoholic. Both organizations' philosophy is based upon Alcoholic Anonymous's Twelve Step Recovery Program. The main goal of these organizations is to help family members understand that they are not responsible for an alcoholic's drinking problems and that family members' recovery does not depend upon the alcoholic's recovery.

Alcohol affects each member of the family – from the unborn child to the alcoholic's spouse. Its far-reaching affects result in not only physical problems for the alcoholics, but also may result in physical and psychological problems for other members of the

family. Treatment is complicated and often is not completely successful. Even if the alcoholic himself ultimately reforms, the family members who were so greatly affected may not themselves ever recover from the problems inflicted upon them.

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# What's in this article?

Listen



Anthony is in bed when he hears the front door slam. He covers his head with his pillow so he doesn't have to listen to the sound of his parents arguing. Anthony knows that his mother has been drinking again. He starts worrying about getting to school on time and realizes he will probably have to help get his younger sister ready too.

## Why Do People Drink Too Much?

Lots of people live with a parent or caregiver who is an **alcoholic** or who drinks too much. Alcoholism has been around for centuries, yet no one has discovered an easy way to prevent it.

Do you worry that a family member's or friend's drinking might be getting out of hand?

**Alcohol** can affect people's health and also how they act. People who are drunk might be more aggressive or have mood swings. They may act in a way that is embarrassing to them or other people.

**Alcoholism is a disease. Like any disease, it needs to be treated.** Without professional help, a person with alcoholism will probably continue to drink and may even become worse over time.

Diseases like alcoholism are no one's fault. Some people are more susceptible to wanting to drink too much. Scientists think it has to do with genetics, as well as things like family history, and life events.

Sometimes what starts as a bad habit can become a very big problem. For example,

people may drink to cope with problems like boredom, stress, or money troubles. Maybe there's an illness in the family, or parents are having marriage problems.

No matter what anyone says, people don't drink because of someone else's behavior. So if you live with someone who has a drinking problem, don't blame yourself.

Listen

## How Does Alcoholism Affect Families?

If you live with a parent who drinks, you may feel embarrassed, angry, sad, hurt, or any number of emotions. You may feel helpless: When parents promise to stop drinking, for example, it can end in frustration when they don't keep their promises.

Problem drinking can change how families function. A parent may have trouble keeping a job and problems paying the bills. Older kids may have to take care of younger siblings.

Some parents with alcohol problems might mistreat or abuse their children emotionally or physically. Others may neglect their kids by not providing sufficient care and guidance. Parents with alcohol problems might also use other drugs.



### Problem Drinker or Social Drinker?

Many people like to have a glass of wine, beer, or other alcohol, but they're not alcoholics. They're in control. They can stop after one or two glasses, and they usually drink in social situations or at specific times, like dinner. But when someone drinks so much that it changes their behavior and makes them unpredictable, mean, or embarrassing, it's a problem.

Despite what happens, most children of alcoholics love their parents and worry about something bad happening to them. Kids who live with problem drinkers often try all kinds of ways to prevent them from drinking. But, just as family members don't cause the addiction, they can't stop it either.

The person with the drinking problem has to take charge. Someone who has a bad habit or an addiction to alcohol needs to get help from a treatment center.

Alcoholism affects family members just as much as it affects the person drinking. Because of this, there are lots of support groups to help children of alcoholics cope with the problem.

### **What If a Parent Doesn't See a Problem?**

Drinking too much can be a problem that nobody likes to talk about. In fact, lots of parents may become enraged at the slightest suggestion that they are drinking too much.

Sometimes, parents deny that they have a problem. A person in denial refuses to believe the truth about a situation. So problem drinkers may try to blame someone else because it is easier than taking responsibility for their own drinking.

Some parents make their families feel bad by saying stuff like, "You're driving me crazy!" or "I can't take this anymore." That can be harmful, especially to kids: Most young children don't know that the problem has nothing to do with their actions and that it's all in the drinker's mind.

Some parents do acknowledge their drinking, but deny that it's a problem. They may say stuff like, "I can stop anytime I want to," "Everyone drinks to unwind sometimes," or "My drinking is not a problem."

Lots of people fall into the trap of thinking that a parent's drinking is only temporary. They tell themselves that, when a particular problem is over, like having a rough time at work, the drinking will stop. But even if a parent who drinks too much has other

problems, drinking is a separate problem. And that problem won't go away unless the drinker gets help.

Listen

## Why Do I Feel So Bad?

If you're like most teens, your life is probably filled with emotional ups and downs, regardless of what's happening at home. Add a parent with a drinking problem to the mix, and it can all seem like too much.

There are many reasons why a parent's drinking can contribute to feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness, embarrassment, worry, loneliness, and helplessness. For example:

- **You might be subjected to a parent's changing moods.** People who drink can behave unpredictably. Kids who grow up around them may spend a lot of energy trying to figure out a parent's mood or guess what that parent wants. One day you might walk on eggshells to avoid an outburst because the dishes aren't done or the lawn isn't mowed. The next day, you may find yourself comforting a parent who promises that things will be better.
- **It may be hard to do things with friends or other people.** For some people, it feels like too much trouble to have a friend over or do the things that everyone else does. You just never know how your parent will act. Will your mom or dad show up drunk for school events or drive you (and your friends) home drunk?
- **You might be stressed or worried.** It can be scary to listen to adults in the house yell, fight, or break things by accident. Worrying about a parent just adds to all the other emotions you may be feeling. Are you lying awake waiting for mom or dad to get home safely? Do you feel it's not fair that you have to be the grown up and take care of things around the house? These are all normal reactions.

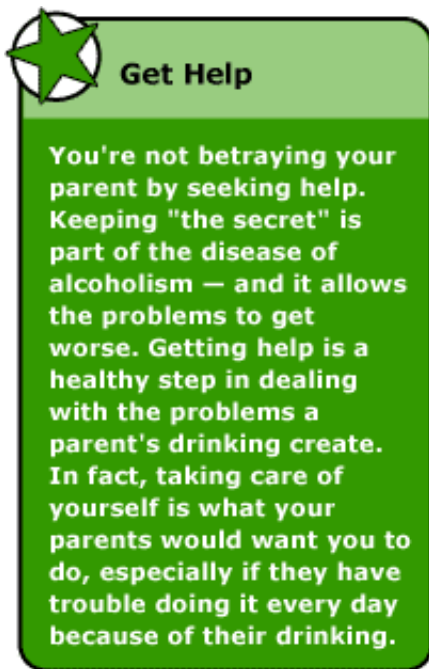


Although each family is different, people who grow up with alcoholic parents often feel alone, unloved, depressed, or burdened by the secret life they lead at home.

You know it's not possible to cause or stop the behavior of an alcoholic. So what can you do to feel better (or help a friend feel better)?

Listen

## What Can I Do?



**Acknowledge the problem.** Many kids of parents who drink too much try to protect their parents or hide the problem. Admitting that your parent has a problem — even if he or she won't — is the first step in taking control. Start by talking to a friend, teacher, counselor, or coach. If you can't face telling someone you know, call an organization like Al-Anon/Alateen (they have a 24-hour hotline at 1-800-344-2666) or go online for help.

**Be informed.** Being aware of how your parent's drinking affects you can help put things in perspective. For example, some teens who live with alcoholic adults become afraid to speak out or show any normal anger or emotion because they worry it may

trigger a parent's drinking. Remind yourself that you are not responsible for your parent drinking too much, and that you cannot cause it or stop it.

**Be aware of your emotions.** When you feel things like anger or resentment, try to identify those feelings. Talk to a close friend or write down how you are feeling. Recognizing how a parent's problem drinking makes you feel can help you from burying your feelings and pretending that everything's OK.

**Learn healthy coping strategies.** When we grow up around people who turn to alcohol or other unhealthy ways of dealing with problems, they become our example. Watching new role models can help people learn healthy coping mechanisms and ways of making good decisions.

Coaches, aunts, uncles, parents of friends, or teachers all have to deal with things like frustration or disappointment. Watch how they do it. School counselors can be a great resource here. Next time you have a problem, ask someone you trust for help.

**Find support.** It's good to share your feelings with a friend, but it's equally important to talk to an adult you trust. A school counselor, favorite teacher, or coach may be able to help. Some teens turn to their school D.A.R.E. (Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education) officer. Others prefer to talk to a family member or parents of a close friend.

Because alcoholism is such a widespread problem, several organizations offer confidential support groups and meetings for people living with alcoholics. Alateen is a group specifically geared to young people living with adults who have drinking problems. Alateen can also help teens whose parents may already be in treatment or recovery. The group Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) also offers resources for people living with alcoholics.

**Find a safe environment.** Do you find yourself avoiding your house as much as possible? Are you thinking about running away? If you feel that the situation at home is becoming dangerous, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-

**SAFE.** And don't hesitate to dial 911 if you think you or another family member is in immediate danger.

**Stop the cycle.** Teenage children of alcoholics are at higher risk of becoming alcoholics themselves. Scientists think this is because of genetics and the environment that kids grow up in. For example, people might learn to drink as a way to avoid fear, boredom, anxiety, sadness, or other unpleasant feelings. Understanding that there could be a problem and finding adults and peers to help you can be the most important thing you do to reduce the risk of problem drinking.

Alcoholism is a disease. You can show your love and support, but you won't be able to stop someone from drinking. Talking about the problem, finding support, and choosing healthy ways to cope are choices you can make to feel more in control of the situation. Above all, don't give up!

Reviewed by: [D'Arcy Lyness, PhD](#)

Date reviewed: October 2013

# Huckleberry Finn and the N-Word



Remember when the NAACP issued a moratorium on the word "nigger?" Is it not ironic that their ally in this fray would be a white literary critic from the Deep South? Indeed the NAACP and Dr. Gribben come from two very different positions in this debate, but they reached a similar conclusion: popular culture would be better off without people saying "nigger." I think they're both wrong. Words cannot be buried, NAACP, and Huck Finn cannot be sanitized without undermining the main thrust of the work, Dr. Gribben. Besides, getting rid of the word "nigger" is not going to eradicate racism. It will only add another veil behind which racists will hide.

With that said the debate is an interesting one, albeit entirely one-sided. Dr. Gribben and his publisher, [NewSouth Books](#), believe the censorship is appropriate because: 1) many readers are alienated by the repeated use of "nigger" in Huck Finn and 2) few teachers assign Huck Finn due to its controversial language. Critics dispute the censorship because: 1) it adulterates the spirit of Twain's novels and 2) it attempts to sanitize the racism endemic in American history. Even a cursory survey of the articles and editorials written about this controversy reveals that most journalists, teachers, and academics oppose the censorship.

A corollary to the debate is Dr. Gribben's choice to replace "nigger" with "slave." A [New York Times editorial](#) rightly has criticized the move as misleading: "Substituting the word 'slave' makes it sound as though all the offense lies in the 'n-word' and has nothing to do with the institution of slavery." Dr. Gribben nevertheless defends the word exchange, because the term "slave," he argues, "is closest in meaning and implication," and because the exchange relieves readers' unease with some of Twain's vulgar passages: "Although the text loses some of the caustic sting that the n-word carries, that price seems small compared to the revolting effect that the more offensive word has on contemporary readers." (See Dr. Gribben's [introduction](#) to the revised novel.)

Still my sense is that, if "nigger" and "slave" were so interchangeable, Twain would not have opted for the former more than two hundred times. (See [Francine Prose's note](#) for more on this issue.)

The blogs are also abuzz with this story, and true to form they are quite eclectic in their concerns. Writing for "The Plum Line," for example, [Adam Serwer](#) likens the censorship of Huck Finn to the Republicans' refusal to read aloud the three-fifths clause during the House's oration of the Constitution at today's session. Superseded or not, Serwer argues, the clause should be read, as a reminder that the document was man-made and that "it possessed flaws at the moment of its creation that still reverberate today." I couldn't agree more.

In another blog [Ishmael Reed](#) criticizes the censorship of Twain's Huck Finn for distracting from the novel's literary strengths. He argues that, unlike other authors of the period, Twain created a black character in Jim who possessed more integrity than the vile white characters around him. For Reed the debate only reveals that art and literature are under attack within the ivory towers: "The fact that a critic has taken to tampering with Twain's great work is another sign that the atavistic philistinism that has taken hold of our politics and culture has found a place in academia."

Among the more bombastic blog posts I've read is that of [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#), curiously titled, "A Nation of Cowards." (I say "curiously" only because Coates never effectively ties the title to the web log.) Like Reed, Coates criticizes Dr. Gribben and his publisher mostly for the offense that they commit against the novel's author. Most poignant about this post is Coates effort at empathy, and the words he used to phrase it: "I'm obviously not Mark Twain, but having written a book, I can only imagine how hard Twain worked. I would be incensed if someone went through my book and took out all the 'niggers' or 'bitches' or 'motherfuckers.' It's really just a hair short of some stranger, in their preening ignorance, putting their hands on your kid."

(Note to readers: While I dig the solidarity with Twain, the comparisons between kids and anything "beloved"--dogs, cars, and, in this case, books one has written--really need to stop. This goes to Mr. Coates and all of the childless folks who seem to think they know what it's like to love a kid...)

My take on all this is still evolving. I do not disagree with Dr. Gribben and his publisher's critics. But the more I think about it, the more I wonder if it's such a bad idea to get Huck Finn back into the hands of America's youth. Are over two hundred less references to "nigger" too costly a price to pay for the re-popularization of this novel? My gut says yes, and I trust my gut, but the conversation is worth having, especially after scholars and educators read both the un-edited and edited volumes in tandem, [as the publisher has suggested](#). Until then the jury is out on the effectiveness of the revisions.

Nonetheless there's a bit of irony here, and it is not lost on me. I find it strange that I am bedfellows with University of North Texas English Professor [James Duban](#), who argues that the most important part of this controversy is that more kids will read Huck Finn. And I never expected to stand beside the Boston Globe's [Rob Anderson](#) who defends the censorship of "nigger" in Huck Finn because: "If any word deserves to be nixed, the 'n word' would be it." I feel like I'm slowly gravitating toward the NAACP position I began this piece by criticizing.

Back in July of 2007 the NAACP in Detroit staged a [funeral for the "n-word."](#) The event mirrored the funeral for Jim Crow held in Detroit in 1944, and came on the heels of a national controversy in which radio personality Don Imus used racist and sexist language to describe the Rutgers University women's basketball team. The funeral fueled a renewed national discussion about the use of racist terminology. NAACP leaders asserted that the time had come to ban racial slurs.

Some of the [black scholars](#) I have long respected echoed the NAACP's sentiments. Dr. Cornel West, for example, argued that the n-word had been used to denigrate African

Americans to such an extreme that it ought to be stricken from the language: "You see, [African-Americans] need a renaissance of self-respect, a renewal of self-regard. And the term itself has been associated with such abuse...It associates black people with being inferior, subhuman and subordinate. So we ought to have a moratorium on the term. We ought not to use the term at all."

Other scholars believed the n-word could not be "buried" in theory or in practice. Dr. Michael E. Dyson, in fact, believed that the moratorium on the slur only ensured its immortality: "I think the Holy Ghost of rhetorical fire will insist that the N-word not be buried. I don't think you can bury words. I think the more you try to dismiss them, the more power you give to them, the more circulation they have."

Back then Dr. Dyson made more sense to me than did Dr. West, mostly because the latter proposed a symbolic act that did little to alleviate the problems facing underprivileged minorities in America. We could bury the word "nigger" in a pine box one thousand times and nothing would really change. Weren't there other forms of action we could pursue? I felt as Dr. Dyson did: "[There are many more issues that the NAACP should be focused on: structural inequality, social injustice, this war in Iraq, the imperial presidency, which has subverted the democracy of the country."

But, three and a half years later, in this current controversy, we're not talking about a bigoted blowhard blabbering "nappy-headed hos." We're talking about a nineteenth-century American satirist creating a story about Missouri in slavery times and writing at the dawn of Jim Crow. He didn't use "nigger" to be purely salacious; he placed it in the text to be a looking glass for his readers, so they might see the racist world in which they lived. For this I think each of the two hundred and nineteen times he wrote "nigger" in the original text should remain.

Yet what good is Twain's classic if no one reads it? How will young Americans experience the vileness of antebellum whites in Missouri? How will they learn about

Jim's nobility? How will they witness Finn's maturation? Will the next generation of readers lose more by reading a text void of the word "nigger" than they will gain by having to read Huck Finn in the first place? If I side with Dr. West or Mr. Anderson, it's not because the term "nigger" is so hurtful that it shouldn't be uttered, but because Twain was *that* good of an author, and the characters of Jim and Huckleberry Finn *that* important to American culture, to let a racial slur push the novel off high school reading lists.



# Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You

“All modern American literature,” Ernest Hemingway once wrote, “comes from one book by [Mark Twain](#) called ‘Huckleberry Finn.’”

Being an iconic classic, however, hasn't protected “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” from being banned, bowdlerized and bleeped. It hasn't protected the novel from being cleaned up, updated and “improved.”

A new effort to sanitize “Huckleberry Finn” comes from Alan Gribben, a professor of English at Auburn University, at Montgomery, Ala., who has produced a new edition of Twain's novel that replaces the word “nigger” with “[slave](#).” Nigger, which appears in the book more than 200 times, was a common racial epithet in the antebellum South, used by Twain as part of his characters' vernacular speech and as a reflection of mid-19th-century social attitudes along the Mississippi River.

Mr. Gribben has said he worried that the N-word had resulted in the novel falling off reading lists, and that he thought his edition would be welcomed by schoolteachers and university instructors who wanted to spare “the reader from a racial slur that never seems to lose its vitriol.” Never mind that today nigger is used by many rappers, who have reclaimed the word from its ugly past. Never mind that attaching the epithet slave to the character Jim — who has run away in a bid for freedom — effectively labels him as property, as the very thing he is trying to escape.

Controversies over “Huckleberry Finn” occur with predictable regularity. In 2009, just before Barack Obama's inauguration, a high school teacher named John Foley wrote a guest column in *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in which he asserted that “Huckleberry Finn,” “*To Kill a Mockingbird*” and “*Of Mice and Men*,” don't [belong on the curriculum anymore](#). “The time has arrived to update the literature we use in high school classrooms,” he wrote. “Barack Obama is president-elect of the United States, and novels that use the ‘N-word’ repeatedly need to go.”

Haven't we learned by now that removing books from the curriculum just deprives children of exposure to classic works of literature? Worse, it relieves teachers of the fundamental responsibility of putting such books in context — of helping students understand that “Huckleberry Finn” actually stands as a powerful indictment of slavery (with Nigger Jim its most noble character), of using its contested language as an opportunity to explore the painful complexities of race relations in this country. To censor or redact books on school reading lists is a form of denial: shutting the door on harsh historical realities — whitewashing them or pretending they do not exist.

Mr. Gribben's effort to update “Huckleberry Finn” (published in an edition with “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by NewSouth Books), like Mr. Foley's assertion that it's an old book and “we're ready for new,” ratifies the narcissistic contemporary belief that art should be inoffensive and accessible; that books, plays and poetry from other times and places should somehow be made to conform to today's democratic ideals. It's like the politically correct efforts in the '80s to exile great authors like Conrad and Melville from the canon because their work does not feature enough women or projects colonialist attitudes.

Authors' original texts should be sacrosanct intellectual property, whether a book is a classic or not. Tampering with a writer's words underscores both editors' extraordinary hubris and a cavalier attitude embraced by more and more people in this day of mash-ups, sampling and digital books — the attitude that all texts are fungible, that readers are entitled to alter as they please, that the very idea of authorship is old-fashioned.

Efforts to sanitize classic literature have a long, undistinguished history. Everything from Chaucer's “Canterbury Tales” to Roald Dahl's “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” have been challenged or have suffered at the hands of uptight editors. There have even been purified versions of the Bible (all that sex and violence!). Sometimes the urge to expurgate (if not outright ban) comes from the right, evangelicals and conservatives, worried about blasphemy, profane language and sexual innuendo. Fundamentalist groups, for instance, have tried to have dictionaries banned because of definitions

offered for words like hot, tail, ball and nuts.

In other cases the drive to sanitize comes from the left, eager to impose its own multicultural, feminist worldviews and worried about offending religious or ethnic groups. Michael Radford's 2004 film version of "The Merchant of Venice" (starring Al Pacino) revised the play to elide potentially offensive material, serving up a nicer, more sympathetic Shylock and blunting tough questions about anti-Semitism. More absurdly, a British theater company in 2002 changed the title of its production of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" to "[The Bellringer of Notre Dame.](#)"

Whether it comes from conservatives or liberals, there is a patronizing Big Brother aspect to these literary fumigations. We, the censors, need to protect you, the naïve, delicate reader. We, the editors, need to police writers (even those from other eras), who might have penned something that might be offensive to someone sometime. According to Noel Perrin's 1969 book, "Dr. Bowdler's Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America," Victorians explained their distaste for the colorful, earthy works of 18th-century writers like Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding by invoking the principle of "moral progress" and their own ethical superiority: "People in the 18th century, and earlier, didn't take offense at coarse passages, because they were coarse themselves."

In 1807 Thomas Bowdler — an English doctor, from whose name comes the verb bowdlerize — and his sister published the first edition of an expurgated Shakespeare, which he argued would be more appropriate for women and children than the original, with its bawdy language and naughty double-entendres. In their "Family Shakespeare" version of "Romeo and Juliet," Mercutio's playfully suggestive line "the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon" is changed to the far blander "the hand of the dial is now upon the point of noon." Similarly, Iago's declaration in "Othello" that "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" is changed to "your daughter and the Moor are now together."

This is the academic equivalent of Ed Sullivan in 1967 prudishly making the Rolling

Stones change “Let’s spend the night together” to “Let’s spend some time together.” Or Cole Porter having to change “cocaine” in “I Get a Kick Out of You” to “perfume in Spain.”

Euphemisms are sometimes pushed on writers by their publishers. Rinehart & Company persuaded Norman Mailer to use “fug” in his 1948 novel “The Naked and the Dead” instead of the F-word. Mailer later said the incident caused him “great embarrassment” because Tallulah Bankhead’s press agent supposedly planted a story in the papers that went, “Oh, hello, you’re Norman Mailer. You’re the young man that doesn’t know how to spell.”

Some years later Ballantine Books published an expurgated version of “Fahrenheit 451,” Ray Bradbury’s celebrated sci-fi classic about book banning, in which words like “hell” and “abortion” were deleted; it was reportedly 13 years before Mr. Bradbury became aware of the changes and demanded that the original version be restored.

Although it’s hard to imagine a theater company today using one of Shakespeare adaptations — say, changing “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” in “Macbeth” to “out, crimson spot!” — the language police are staging a comeback. Not just with an expurgated “Huckleberry Finn” but with political efforts to clamp down on objectionable language. Last year [The Boston Globe reported](#) that California lawmakers first voted for, then tabled a resolution declaring a No Cuss Week, that South Carolina had debated a sweeping anti-profanity bill, and that conservative groups like the Parents Television Council have complained about vulgarities creeping into family-hour shows on network television.

But while James V. O’Connor, author of the book “Cuss Control,” argues that people can and should find word substitutions, even his own Web site grants Rhett Butler a “poetic license” exemption in “Gone With the Wind.” “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a hoot”? Now that’s damnable.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: February 9, 2011***

*A critic's notebook on Jan. 7 about a new effort to sanitize the language of "Huckleberry Finn" misattributed another example of such efforts — the editing of "Out, damned spot!" in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" to "out, crimson spot!" Some scholars cite an 1865 adaptation by Thomas Bulfinch and the Rev. S. G. Bulfinch as a source of that change; it was not Thomas Bowdler, the English doctor whose name produced the verb "bowdlerize."*

# Raking over the Ashes

There is at least one thing that hasn't changed in [Limerick](#) since Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes*, lived here - the weather.

This south-western city that hugs the River Shannon is still capable of producing a damp chill that slithers under your coat and tickles your throat. In the book, McCourt blamed the weather for the pneumonia and consumption that were rampant in his neighbourhood. Limerick was saturated with just such a chill the day I set out on the *Angela's Ashes* tour.

But my guide, Michael O'Donnell, hadn't moved 10 feet from the tourist centre before he was assuring me that little else has stayed the same.

"Limerick today is a different place," he stressed. "It's a much more modern, vibrant city."

Limerick was once poor and run down with a reputation for violence that earned it the nickname "Stab City". But Ireland's economic boom has turned the city's fortunes around. It buzzes with a new energy. Like the rest of [Ireland](#), the population is predominantly young and increasingly prosperous. And people are hoping that *Angela's Ashes*, which sold millions of copies worldwide, will bring in the tourists.

Not that *Angela's Ashes* is an obvious draw. McCourt's Limerick of the 1930s was a miserable place. The streets where his family lived, called the lanes, were cramped and filthy. Dirt, cold and malnourishment killed two of his brothers and gave him typhoid. He left when he was 19. Not much of a plug for the city. But that hasn't deterred the organisers of the *Angela's Ashes* walking tour.

Many of the roads and buildings that feature in the book are gone (the Lyric Cinema, for example, is now a car park). So, much of the tour focuses on the one institution that has lasted, namely the Catholic Church. We look at the church where McCourt had his first

communion, the church where he saw his mother begging for food, the church where he confessed having "the excitement" with a young woman dying of consumption.

Roden Lane, the street where McCourt lived the longest, has been torn down along with most of the other lanes in Limerick. But you can get close to the spot where it once stood. The street next to it is now solidly middle class with lime-green town houses and Toyotas and Volkswagens parked out front.

In the evening, I took a cab to suburban Dooradoyle for the Irish premiere of Alan Parker's *Angela's Ashes*. The movie has stoked the embers of a controversy that was first ignited when the book was published in 1996.

Some of the older residents, many of whom knew the McCourt family, say the book is inaccurate and insulting. McCourt, they say, accuses his neighbours of sexual transgressions, trashes beloved institutions like the Catholic Church and the charitable St Vincent de Paul Society and overstates the poverty.

Rita McClosky, born and raised in Limerick, was one of the few people I met at the premiere who thought the book was an insult. "I lived 100 yards from where he lived," she said. "And I know there was poverty in those years, but he exaggerated."

But most of those gathered in the neon lobby of the Omniplex were full of praise for McCourt. "I loved the humour and the dialogue," said local resident, Suzanne Kennedy. "I think the people of Limerick should be very proud."

## **The practicals**

Tara Mack flew to Shannon from Stanstead with Virgin Express (020 7744 0004). Flights start from £68. She stayed in Hanratty's Hotel, Limerick (00353 61 410999), where a double room costs Ir£50 a night inc.breakfast. St Mary's Integrated Development Programme organises the *Angela's Ashes* tour (00353 61 318106). at a cost of Ir &#163;4pp.

# The Problem With Memoirs

A moment of silence, please, for the lost art of shutting up.

There was a time when you had to earn the right to draft a memoir, by accomplishing something noteworthy or having an extremely unusual experience or being such a brilliant writer that you could turn relatively ordinary occurrences into a snapshot of a broader historical moment. Anyone who didn't fit one of those categories was obliged to keep quiet. Unremarkable lives went unremarked upon, the way God intended.

But then came our current age of oversharing, and all heck broke loose. These days, if you're planning to browse the "memoir" listings on Amazon, make sure you're in a comfortable chair, because that search term produces about 40,000 hits, or 60,000, or 160,000, depending on how you execute it.

Sure, the resulting list has authors who would be memoir-eligible under the old rules. But they are lost in a sea of people you've never heard of, writing uninterestingly about the unexceptional, apparently not realizing how commonplace their little wrinkle is or how many other people have already written about it. Memoirs have been disgorged by virtually everyone who has ever had cancer, been anorexic, battled depression, lost weight. By anyone who has ever taught an underprivileged child, adopted an underprivileged child or been an underprivileged child. By anyone who was raised in the '60s, '70s or '80s, not to mention the '50s, '40s or '30s. Owned a dog. Run a marathon. Found religion. Held a job.

So in a possibly futile effort to restore some standards to this absurdly bloated genre, here are a few guidelines for would-be memoirists, arrived at after reading four new memoirs. Three of the four did not need to be written, a ratio that probably applies to all memoirs published over the last two decades. Sorry to be so harsh, but this flood just has to be stopped. We don't have that many trees left.

**1**



That you had parents and a childhood does not of itself qualify you to write a memoir. This maxim, which was inspired by an unrewarding few hours with “Disaster Preparedness,” by Heather Havrilesky, is really a response to a broader problem, a sort of grade inflation for life experiences. A vast majority of people used to live lives that would draw a C or a D if grades were being passed out — not that they were bad lives, just bland. Now, though, practically all of us have somehow gotten the idea that we are B+ or A material; it’s the “if it happened to me, it must be interesting” fallacy.

And so Havrilesky, a former writer for Salon who is now a critic for the iPad publication *The Daily*, spends 239 pages dragging us through what seems to be an utterly ordinary childhood in North Carolina. Her mother is a little odd, but no odder than yours or mine. There is a divorce, but so what? There are siblings. “We filled each other with fear and anger, then made jokes and laughed together, to soften the blows,” she writes — in other words, they did what all siblings do.

The prose isn’t particularly surprising, and, more to the point, neither is the selection of anecdotes: cheerleader tryouts, crummy teenage jobs and, that favorite of oversharers everywhere, the loss of virginity. Maybe the vignette about the time she and her sister wrote to Amy Carter at the White House would have made a passable subplot in an episode of a mediocre Disney sitcom. The rest belongs on a blog.

## 2

No one wants to relive your misery. Say you get stuck under a rock and have to cut off your own arm to escape. If, as you’re using your remaining hand to write a memoir about the experience, your only purpose in doing so is to make readers feel the blade and scream in pain, you should stop. You’re a sadist, not a memoirist; you merely want to make readers suffer as you suffered, not entertain or enlighten them.

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*Neil Genzlinger is a staff editor at The Times.*

## Page 1

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So in a possibly futile effort to restore some standards to this absurdly bloated genre, here are a few guidelines for would-be memoirists, arrived at after reading four new memoirs. Three of the four did not need to be written, a ratio that probably applies to all memoirs published over the last two decades. Sorry to be so harsh, but this flood just has to be stopped. We don't have that many trees left.

**1**

That you had parents and a childhood does not of itself qualify you to write a memoir. This maxim, which was inspired by an unrewarding few hours with “Disaster Preparedness,” by Heather Havrilesky, is really a response to a broader problem, a sort of grade inflation for life experiences. A vast majority of people used to live lives that would draw a C or a D if grades were being passed out — not that they were bad lives, just bland. Now, though, practically all of us have somehow gotten the idea that we are B+ or A material; it’s the “if it happened to me, it must be interesting” fallacy.

And so Havrilesky, a former writer for Salon who is now a critic for the iPad publication The Daily, spends 239 pages dragging us through what seems to be an utterly ordinary childhood in North Carolina. Her mother is a little odd, but no odder than yours or mine. There is a divorce, but so what? There are siblings. “We filled each other with fear and anger, then made jokes and laughed together, to soften the blows,” she writes — in other words, they did what all siblings do.

The prose isn’t particularly surprising, and, more to the point, neither is the selection of anecdotes: cheerleader tryouts, crummy teenage jobs and, that favorite of oversharers everywhere, the loss of virginity. Maybe the vignette about the time she and her sister wrote to Amy Carter at the White House would have made a passable subplot in an episode of a mediocre Disney sitcom. The rest belongs on a blog.

**2**

No one wants to relive your misery. Say you get stuck under a rock and have to cut off your own arm to escape. If, as you’re using your remaining hand to write a memoir about the experience, your only purpose in doing so is to make readers feel the blade and scream in pain, you should stop. You’re a sadist, not a memoirist; you merely want to make readers suffer as you suffered, not entertain or enlighten them.

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