Mission Possible
A study of four autobiographies treating difficult childhoods

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1. Introduction

This is a study of four autobiographies, *Desert Flower* and *Desert Dawn* by Waris Dirie and *Angela’s Ashes* and *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt. These are all books that have been written by authors who have had a tough childhood and are looked upon as role models in contemporary culture. The study will concern the difficult times that the authors go through, what makes them strong, able to move on and create their own lives. The essay will also look at what it is that makes the difference, what factors help the authors to achieve something and become successful in life. Both authors have also used their writing as therapy and this will be looked upon both as a way of working with their childhood, and as a way to inspire others.

This particular subject was chosen because using these autobiographies in the classroom could be a great help to inspire the students. The autobiographies are about survival and about being able to achieve something in life despite coming from a broken background. The books have also inspired me personally to realize that despite your background you can do whatever you want in life. This could also have an effect on students experiencing complicated parental relations. Many adolescents take comfort in hearing or reading about people in a similar situation to their own and this can help them build up confidence. They may also be encouraged to realize they are not to blame for a destructive childhood and thus they may feel able to move forward and process their memories successfully. My hope is that this paper may help teachers understand how these books may be used to help young people to become more secure with their background. In a brief appendix to the paper, I will give a few teaching suggestions.

The background will present a definition of autobiographies, as well as take up the problem that can occur with working with autobiographies. The background will also include a number of psychological theories that will be helpful when trying to understand what it is that makes
the authors get on in life despite their childhood. In the sections concerning the authors, quotes from the books will be presented and connected with the ideas presented in the background.
1. Background

Autobiography in its modern form may be taken as writing that purposefully and self-consciously provides an account of the author’s life and incorporates feeling and introspection as well as empirical detail. (Drabble and Stringer 34)

Autobiographies can be found inspiring by the reader and may be useful in classrooms. The problem with autobiographies that needs to be taken into account is that the memories and the persons described in the book are products of the author’s memory. Thus, events in the book are purely remembered by the author and can not therefore be objective, and this needs to be taken in to account when reading the text. Drabble and Stringer address this question by saying that the “truthfulness” and the precise accuracy of the text is best to be left to “biographers and philosophers” (34). For example, the author Waris Dirie had a ghost-writer when writing her books. A ghost-writer is a writer who is consulted and compensated in order to write a book, article or something with similar content which later will be credited to someone else. For her first book, Desert Flower, she had help from Cathleen Miller and when writing the second book, Desert Dawn, the ghost-writer was Jeanne D’Haem. The ghost-writers are mentioned in the beginning of each book. The use of ghost-writers can cause difficulties when the information about the ghost-writer’s part in the writing process is left out. However, like the question about accuracy, the writer’s effect on the text can arguably be left out.

The authors of the autobiographies used in this essay have both had disadvantaged childhoods, but have still achieved something and been successful in life. In other words, their childhood traumas have not destroyed their lives. According to Cronström, an author and psychologist who has written several books about children and young adults with problems, every child has his or her individual boundary concerning which situations are challenges that
are possible to survive, and which ones are simply too harmful to live with (36). In the cases of Frank McCourt and Waris Dirie, both authors have found a middle way to master very difficult challenges and overcoming their childhoods. This study will describe the factors contributing to the authors surviving despite the fact that they had so many odds against them. They both have the inner strength to move on after a gruelling upbringing, a strong personality and the willingness to make something of their lives. The fact that both authors had someone who helped them, in this case their mothers will also be addressed. Thirdly, the supporting social structures that help the authors find their niche in life and something they love doing will be dealt with. The background will also briefly discuss the importance of using writing and reading as therapy.

**Children and Death**

In both autobiographies, the authors describe situations where they lose brothers and sisters\(^1\), and the issue that there is no time for grieving is addressed by both authors. Life goes on; in order to survive, the authors as children needed to realize that the grieving process not can be too time-consuming. Children do grieve; there is no difference in the amount of grief when comparing children to adults in grieving. Around the age of four or five a child starts to understand that the dead person will never come back, at least not for a long time, and around the age of six the child is familiar with the knowledge that the dead person will never return (Björklund and Eriksson 24). According to many psychological theories, children need to ask questions about death and need to have these questions answered by adults. However, Björklund and Eriksson also mention a difference between the grieving process of children

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\(^1\) I will discuss this on pages 9 and 20 in this paper.
and adults: without demonstrating it, the child can still be grieving even though not showing it in the same way (27). The loss of someone close will always remain with the child, but can also be a source of strength. Having been able to deal with this kind of situation as a child, it is likely to help an individual to deal with similar or other difficult situations more easily later on in life.

When having lost someone in the family it is important to have support in the family. In the case of these authors, both were very young when they lost their brothers and sisters, and the losses have left marks that may surface later in their lives. This is, however, nothing that has been described in any of the books used for this study. Nevertheless, as Granot says, “it must be made clear that the loss and its implications will remain with the individual throughout his life. The loss will continue to affect many aspects of life, and most certainly the emotions” (25). These authors have been able to move on; hence, they have been ‘successful’ in their grieving as they have grieved and moved on. This is definitely a contributing factor to the inner strength both authors show.

Achievements and Success

Both authors of the autobiographies end up working within areas providing them with identity. Waris Dirie works as a supermodel and later also becomes a spokesperson for the UN, and Frank McCourt worked as a teacher in New York. After their rough childhoods both authors find supporting structures; when they find something important and meaningful to work with they also find their place in society. As Jill Ammon-Wexler states, “intense difficulties, hardships and major obstacles are actually often major contributors to success. It's true that difficult childhoods do leave some people wounded and disadvantaged. But for
others, a tough childhood actually drives them to outrageous achievement and success!” (http://www.trans4mind.com/). Ammon-Wexler’s point is certainly supported by Dirie and McCourt: both authors turn their hard background into a source of strength. The authors will not permit their childhoods to have a crippling effect on their lives. Not everyone may have the inner strength, nor encounter the support needed to create another life; leaving the problems behind can end in disastrous ways. Cronström talks about when the pain and memories have been too much and led to suicide attempts, when the person who has had a tough childhood has not had the strength to look for help or to move on (214).

**Family Relations**

Both Dirie and McCourt refer to their mothers several times in the books. They both want to make their mothers proud and this can be linked to the close relationship a lot of children have to their mothers. Since the mother carries the child for nine months, a closer relationship between the child and the mother is not uncommon - a closeness which is also supported and encouraged by most societies.

In the books used for this essay the authors do not mention that they blame their parents for their childhood, but conclusions can be drawn from quotes from the books (see next section). Both authors show an understanding of the cultures they live in, realizing that some of the things befalling them are simply due to their parents transposing traditions to the next generation.

A study of children of alcoholics in Denmark shows that having alcoholic parents can result in an “increased mortality” (Christoffersen and Soothill 107). The same study also showed that “self-destructive behaviours (e.g. attempted suicide or drug addiction)” are not entirely
uncommon among children of alcoholics (107). Having alcoholism in the family can have a negative effect on children, but like other negative experiences, it can also be a source of mental strength and a help to create a strong personality. Here it is important to remember Cronström’s point that children cope in different ways, each child has his or her own boundary and individual way of dealing with challenges (36).

Both authors fall in love and become parents. According to Cronström, having children can be tough if one has had a harsh childhood. Having healed the wounds of past experiences is vital to whether the person feels secure enough with him- or herself to raise children (195).

**Writing and Reading as Therapy**

In many ways, writing about experiences that are negative in some ways, is a form of therapy and a way of working through experiences. Writing down painful feelings and memories is sometimes easier than talking about them. According to Bolton, “the most important rule for this kind of writing is that there are no rules” (16). Bolton also mentions the potential of memories, that the author thought were forgotten, which come back to the surface again, thus making it possible for the author to process these memories (22). There is a major positive aspect of writing as therapy:

> Writing is private, a communication with the self, until you decide to share it – usually after solitary reflective rereading. Or it can be destroyed unshared, if necessary, even with yourself. Once something has been said and heard, it can never be unsaid. (ibid.)

A negative aspect of using writing as therapy is the usually slow process of writing (Bolton 24). The author sometimes wishes to work with the text to make it better, and the fact that
writing is a process that sometimes can take time, and this can stress the author and make the therapy a stressful feature rather being helpful. On the other hand, the slowness of writing may enable better processing of the difficult topic.

Just as writing can be a form of therapy, reading a text, like the ones used in this study, can be therapeutic for the reader. Using reading as therapy may be referred to as bibliotherapy and the word describes “the process of using books to help children work through real-life problems” (http://www.education.com/). Reading about people in a similar situation, and learning that there can be a way out might help.
2. Waris Dirie

Waris Dirie was born in Somalia into a family of nomads. Around the age of five, Dirie was circumcised by a gypsy woman in the desert, and by the age of thirteen, Dirie’s father arranged her marriage and Dirie found herself being sold to an old man for five camels. Dirie decided to flee Somalia and later met fashion photographer Terence Donovan and appeared on the cover of the Pirelli calendar. From this her modelling career took off and Dirie has modelled for famous fashion houses like Chanel. In 1993, Dirie became Special Ambassador for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation and have worked strongly against circumcision. 2

My sister ran away; my brother went to school in the city. I learned sad facts about our family, about life. The rain stopped coming, and taking care of our animals was more and more difficult. Life became harder. And I became harder with it. Part of that hardness formed watching my brothers and sisters die. Originally there were twelve in my family, but now there are only six of us left.

(Desert Flower 20)

Here Dirie has reached the part in life where she has realized that some members of her family will not come back. The loss of brothers and sisters will, as previously mentioned by Björklund and Eriksson, always remain with Dirie throughout her life, but can also be a source of inner strength. Living as a nomad in the desert of Somalia, there was no time for grieving, life went on, but as children may, Dirie could grieve within. The fact that Dirie was able to grieve for the loss of brothers and sisters at a young age helped her become strong and

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2 These biographical facts are taken from Desert Flower and Desert Dawn by Waris Dirie.
develop the inner strength to deal with difficult situations. One of these situations was Dirie’s circumcision:

Mama leaned over me and whispered to me, ‘You know I can’t hold you. I’m on my own here. So try to be a good girl, baby. Be brave for Mama, and it’ll go fast.’ I peered between my legs and saw the gypsy woman getting ready. She looked like any other old Somali woman – with a colourful scarf wrapped around her head and a bright cotton dress – except there was no smile on her face. She looked at me sternly, a dead look in her eyes, then foraged through an old carpet bag. My eyes were fixed on her because I wanted to know what she was going to cut me with. I expected a big knife, but instead, out of the bag she pulled a tiny cotton sack. She reached inside with her long fingers, and fished out a broken razor blade. Turning it from side to side she examined it. The sun was barely up now; it was light enough to see colour but no details. However, I saw dried blood on the jagged edge of the blade. She spat on it and wiped it against her dress. While she was scrubbing, my world went dark as my mother tied a scarf around my eyes as a blindfold. The next thing I felt was my flesh, my genitals being cut away. I heard the sound of the dull blade sawing back and forth through my skin. When I think back, I honestly can’t believe that this happened to me. I feel as if I were talking about somebody else. There’s no way in the world I can explain what it feels like. It’s like somebody is through the meat of your thigh, or cutting off your arm, except this one is the most sensitive part of your body. However, I didn’t move and inch because I remembered Aman and knew there was no escape. And I wanted Mama to be proud of me. I just sat there as if I were made of stone, telling myself the more I moved around, the longer the torture would take. Unfortunately,
my legs began to quiver of their own accord, and shake uncontrollably, and I prayed, Please God let it be over quickly. Soon it was, because I passed out.

*(Desert Flower 45)*

Having gone through an event like this at the age of five, problems can appear later in life, the trauma of the circumcision can cause psychological as well as physical problems (http://www.cirp.org/library/psych/). Dirie shows an incredible inner strength by being able to survive this event with having her sense of self intact at such a young age. By surviving and being able to move on from both loss of brothers and sisters and the circumcision, Dirie has collected more strength that may be useful later in life. As previously discussed by Björklund and Eriksson, the loss of someone close will always remain throughout life, but can amongst having gone through tough events like this will help one get stronger.\(^3\) Dirie’s personality will grow stronger from everything that she experiences and having gone through these events at a young age without breaking will definitely help making Dirie’s personality stronger. What makes Dirie admirable is that she later chooses to share the story of her circumcision with the world. Despite having gone through the circumcision, and it being such a personal event, Dirie shares it in order to help coming generations.\(^4\) Next in her young life, Dirie had to deal with another challenge: her father wanted to marry her off with a much older man.

‘You have been just like a son to me, working hard as any man, taking care of the animals. And I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to miss you very much.’ When he said this, I thought my father was afraid I would run away like my sister Aman had. When Papa had tried to arrange her marriage, she ran away. He was afraid I was going to run away, too, and leave him and Mama with all the

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\(^3\) For more information see Background page 4-5.

\(^4\) This is discussed further on page 15 in this essay.
hard work. A flood of tenderness came over me, and I hugged him, feeling guilty for being so suspicious. ‘Oh Papa, I’m not going anywhere!’ He pulled back from me, and stared at my face. In a soft voice he said, ‘Yes, you are, my darling.’ ‘Where am I going? I’m not going anywhere – I’m not leaving you and Mommy.’ ‘Yes, you are, Waris. I found you a husband.’ (Desert Flower 55)

This is a turning point in Dirie’s life; she decides to run away from her family. Running away is an action that takes an extreme amount of courage and strength, especially at the age of thirteen. Previous events, like Dirie’s circumcision and having had the tough life in the desert, can be contributing factors to the action that Dirie takes. Dirie sees the event of her escaping as the only way out, and running away is in many cases the only way for a woman to avoid an arranged marriage.

After having run away, Dirie gets discovered as a model in London and later moves to New York where her modelling career takes off.

I was having a great time meeting people in New York, and my career took off like a rocket. I worked for Benetton and Levi’s, and appeared in a series of commercials for a jeweller, Pomellato, wearing white African robes. I did makeup ads for Revlon, then later represented their new perfume, Ajee. (Desert Flower 180)

Dirie has found her niche as she finds out that being a model is something that she is good at. The authors find themselves in supporting structures after having found a profession providing them with identity.\(^5\) Being a model is something Dirie enjoys and the profession gives her a sense of belonging, which also plays a great role in the maintenance of confidence

\(^5\) As discussed in Background page 5-6.
and self-esteem. The feeling of belonging to a group gives psychosocial acceptance and makes one stronger (http://www.helium.com/). Dirie has found the supporting structures, as mentioned above, and they help her deal with her life. Along with the structures of society, having a family around is something that gives a sense of belonging. Despite having found a profession, Dirie sometimes finds herself lonely, having left her family in Somalia.

I had no family nearby and my relationship with my fiancé, Dana, had deteriorated. I wanted to find my mother, but when I asked a Somali man about Somalia, he said, ‘Forget about Somalia. It does not exist anymore.’ (Desert Dawn 11)

Dirie finds herself missing her family despite all the events in the past. In order to have a functioning social network, belonging to a family is an important factor. Dirie’s family of origin is far away and “belonging is simply another form of love” (http://www.helium.com/). Mothers and children often have a very close relationship and Dirie’s close relationship with her mother can be one reason why she wants to return to Somalia. Dirie continuously refers to her mother throughout the books, thus signifying this strong connection to her mother. Furthermore, her mother was the person who helped her escape the forced marriage.

By having gone through so many tough events, like losing brothers and sisters, being circumcised, almost being married off and the running away from her family, Dirie has an incredible mental strength and a strong personality which helps her go through the times when she misses her family. Dirie shows a great amount of determination and persistence in not giving up trying to find her family in Somalia. She feels that if she is to move on with her life she needs to see them. Despite all the past events, the love for one’s family is something

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6 Further discussed in Background page 6-7.
strong. Dirie has in one sense never blamed her family for what has happened in the past, and by wanting to go back to see her family, Dirie has accepted what has happened. This acceptance towards her family makes it easier for Dirie to move on and deal with the pain for what was done to her in her childhood (http://family.jrank.org/). The social structures of her professional situation and her new friends combined with Dirie’s inner strength are contributing factors to help her move on. She also has an understanding of the events in the past; circumcision and arranged marriages are traditions in many Northern African countries. Dirie understands that the actions taken were not meant to harm her, they are traditions that her parents were passing on to the next generation.

Despite the arranged marriage, Dirie meets her father when back in Somalia.

‘Papa, oh Papa! Really it’s me.’ ‘What, Waris? She’s been gone too long to suddenly arrive out of nowhere.’ ‘Father, it is me.’ ‘What? Is this really Waris? Oh my daughter, my daughter. I thought you were dead and gone.’ he said, turning his head towards me and squeezing my hand tightly. (Desert Dawn 123)

The love for the family is something that makes one forgive and Dirie does seem not to have any anger against her father. Dirie later starts her own family. Giving birth to her son Aleeke gave her life a whole new meaning:

From the day he was born, my life changed. The happiness I get from him is everything to me now. I pushed aside all the little stupid things that I used to complain and worry about. I realized that none of that matters at all. Life – the gift of life – is what matters, and that’s what giving birth to my son made me remember. (Desert Flower 223)
Having a child can mean that the mother goes back to her own childhood. After having had a harsh childhood, having a child of one’s own can be tough. As a parent one will always remember and bring the experiences of one’s own childhood into the future (Rayner 203). However, despite her tough childhood, Dirie does not find any problems with her own background. After having found so many supporting structures, having a child is something that helps Dirie even more to find happiness.

Dirie became a Special Ambassador for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, which is an event that gives Dirie a huge amount of pride:

I accepted the UN’s offer to become a Special Ambassador and join its fight. One of the highest honours of my position will be working with women like Dr. Nafis Sadik, the executive director of the UN’s Population Fund. She is one of the first women who took up the fight against FGM, raising the issue at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. I will travel back to Africa again soon to tell my story, and lend support to the UN. (Desert Flower 232)

By working for the UN, one of Dirie’s assignments is to inform other women around the world about circumcision and the effects of it. One of Dirie’s concerns about her assignment is that her family will be disappointed in her since the issue of circumcisions in Somalia, and many other Northern African countries, is something that is taboo. She is a bit ambivalent in this question: she does not want to disappoint her family by talking about something that she is not supposed to talk about, but she also wants to save young girls from going through the horrors of a circumcision like she did.

\footnote{As discussed in Background page 7.}
By writing the book, Dirie wants to share her story with the rest of world. The writing may also have functioned as a form of therapy for Dirie.\(^8\) By writing down what happened in the past, Dirie could work through the events and at the same time help others that are in the same situation. As Bolton puts it: “writing is a private, communication with the self, until you decide to share it” (22), and it is a big decision to make, sharing your story with the rest of the world. By sharing it, Dirie has become a role model that shows the world that despite your background, nothing is impossible. Dirie has accomplished many things in her life, even though she had a tough childhood, but many of the things that she went through made her stronger and has helped her develop a strong personality.

\(^8\) As discussed in Background page 7-8.
3. Frank McCourt

Francis “Frank” McCourt was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1930 to an Irish family. McCourt moved to Ireland with his family in 1934 and the family was later abandoned by McCourt’s alcoholic father when Frank was only eleven. At the age of thirteen McCourt left school and started working to save enough money to move back to America. He returned to America at the age of nineteen and later earned a degree from New York University and worked as an English teacher at several high schools in New York.⁹

McCourt had a tough childhood. After the family moved back to Ireland McCourt’s father had a hard time finding a job and became an alcoholic. The family sometimes had not enough money to buy food, “Mam says, Leave those boys alone. They’re gone to bed half hungry because you have to fill your belly with whiskey” (Angela’s Ashes 26).

McCourt’s father later leaves to move to England to get a job and he is expected to send the family money for food, but the money does not arrive.

Michael who is only five and won’t understand anything till he’s eleven like me wants to know if we’re having fish and chips tonight because he’s hungry. Mam says, Next week love, and he goes back out to play in the lane. You don’t know what to do with yourself when the first telegram doesn’t come. You can’t stay out in the lane playing with your brothers all night because everyone else is gone in and you’d be ashamed to stay out in the lane to be tormented with smells of sausages and rashers and fried bread. (Angela’s Ashes 279)

McCourt here is old enough to know that his alcohol abusing father has drunk alcohol for all the money he has earned in England. McCourt feels ashamed that his father has let the family

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⁹ These biographical facts are taken from Angela’s Ashes and Teacher Man by Frank McCourt.
down and this does affect his self-esteem, but as McCourt becomes a teacher he finds a way of using his experiences in life to inspire his students.

When I told stories about the docks they looked at me in a different way. One boy said it was funny to think you had a teacher up there that worked like real people and didn’t come from college just talking about books and all. (Teacher Man 65)

McCourt does not mention a lot of his own feelings about his father’s alcoholism, but clearly it has an effect on him. It is a well-established fact that having a parent who abuses alcohol “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” (http://allpsych.com/journal/alcoholism.html).

When having alcoholism in the family and especially when the children live through it to the extent that McCourt and his brothers and sister do, it is hard to move on in life without the alcoholism having an effect in terms of low confidence. This is true of McCourt:

Teacher? I never dreamed I could rise so high in the world. Except for the book in the suitcase, everything I wore or carried off the ship was secondhand. Everything in my head was secondhand, too: Catholicism; Ireland’s sad history, a litany of suffering and martyrdom drummed into me by priests, schoolmasters and parents who knew better. (Teacher Man 33)

Here, McCourt describes the feeling he has about becoming a teacher. With his background, McCourt did not think it was possible to achieve so much as becoming a teacher. Having had an alcoholic father, McCourt’s self-esteem and hopes about achieving something were not so high. Becoming a teacher was something that McCourt found almost impossible coming

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10 More on this in Background page 6-7.
from the background like his, but by achieving his college degree and becoming a teacher McCourt proves, not only to himself but also to others, that nothing is impossible. McCourt has found supporting structures in society, which help him find his place in society: they also help him build up a social stability.

As I mentioned above, McCourt discovers that he can use his experiences that he has had in his tough life as a help to inspire his students. McCourt is brave and does not feel ashamed about his background so he shares it with his students.

Children to alcoholic parents can also experience difficulties with intimacy later on in life (http://allpsych.com/journal/alcoholism.html). Intimacy, though, is something that McCourt does not seem to have a problem with, as described in the quote below.

She smiled at me and smiled and smiled. I felt so happy I could barely stay in my skin. She reached across the table and put her hand on mine and my heart was a mad animal in my chest. Let’s go she said. We walked to her apartment on Barrow Street. Inside, she turned and kissed me. (Teacher Man 45)

In her study, Cronström talks about the difficulties one may have entering into close relationships after having had a difficult childhood, being able to trust someone and not letting the fear of being betrayed take over (189). For McCourt, love is a great feeling and is something that helps him move forward in his life. He has, however, difficulty maintaining long-term relationships before reaching middle age. McCourt later has a daughter, something that is not mentioned a lot in the books, but it is an event that has clearly not been difficult for McCourt despite his own background.11 Instead, he has turned the birth of his daughter into something positive, taking fatherhood seriously.

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11 As discussed in Background page 6-7.
McCourt, like Dirie, also experiences losing brothers and sisters. He does not describe a lot of emotions and feelings about the loss, but clearly the loss of close relations will have an effect on life and will always remain.\(^\text{12}\) McCourt describes his brother’s funeral:

Next day we rode to the hospital in a carriage with a horse. They put Oliver in a white box that came with us in the carriage and we took him to the graveyard. They put the white box into a hole in the ground and covered it with dirt. My mother and Aunt Angie cried, Grandma looked angry, Dad, Uncle Pa Keating, and Uncle Pat Sheehan looked sad but did not cry and I thought if you’re a man you can cry only when you have the black stuff that is called the pint. (\textit{Angela’s Ashes} 92)

McCourt does not mention a lot of emotions about the loss of his brothers and sister and he was young when he lost them. Nothing is mentioned about the loss having caused psychological problems later in McCourt’s life and no conclusions can be drawn from the books, but the loss can have had an effect on McCourt’s inner strength. Having had to deal with grief as a young child and being able to move on have probably affected McCourt’s strength, making him stronger.

The death of a sibling is a tremendous loss for a child - they lose a family member, a constant companion, and often a best friend. Younger children may not understand what death really means and may be confused about why their brother or sister died. (http://www.cancer.net/)

McCourt decides to move forward with his life, leave his background behind and create a life of his own in America. After having worked for several years he has finally earned enough

\(^{12}\) More on this in Background page 4-5.
money to leave Ireland for America. He describes the moment he enters New York like this: “I’m on deck the dawn we sail into New York. I’m sure I’m in a film, that it will end and lights will come up in the Lyric Cinema” (Angela’s Ashes 455).

By moving back to America on his own, leaving his family on Ireland, McCourt shows that he believes in himself enough to move to another country on his own. The inner strength achieved from everything McCourt has gone through in life has helped. When he later becomes a teacher, the last piece falls into place. McCourt has found his place in society and he has, by his own standards, been successful. His social network and his inner strength continue to make him feel sufficiently secure in society and with himself. It is also confirmed to McCourt that the teaching profession is something that he is good at and that he has succeeded in inspiring his students. One of his students confirms his success:

Mr. McCourt, I got a letter from Serena. She said this is the first letter of her life and she wouldn’ta wrote it but her grandma told her. She never met her grandma before but she loves her because she can’t read or write and Serena reads the Bible to her every night. She said, this gonna kill you, Mr. McCourt, she said she gonna finish high school and go to college and teach little kids. Not big kids like us because we just a great pain but little kids that don’t talk back and she say she sorry about the thing she did in this class and to tell you that. Someday she gonna write you a letter. (Teacher Man 146)

McCourt’s reaction to this is that there “were fireworks in my head. It was New Year’s Eve and the Forth of July a hundred times over” (ibid.). He has found the one thing in life that he enjoys and is good at. 13 The students find him and the teaching methods he uses inspiring and

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13 This is treated in Background page 5-6.
this is a confidence boost for him. Despite his tough background, McCourt has proved that achieving what he wanted in life is not impossible. When it is time for McCourt to retire, his students show him that they have appreciated him, “The bell rings and they sprinkle me with confetti. I am told to have a good life. I wish them the same. I walk, color speckled, along the hallway. Someone calls, Hey, Mr. McCourt, you should write a book. I’ll try” (Teacher Man 257-258).

After retirement, McCourt decides to write the books, Angela’s Ashes and Teacher Man. The writing can be seen as a way of working with the emotions and feelings from the childhood. McCourt himself said in an interview with the Academy of Achievement: “When I was writing the first 150 pages I didn't know what I was going to do with it but I had to write it anyway. I had to get it out of my system” (http://www.achievement.org/).

By writing about the experiences the author can become a kind of expert on the area of the problem and this makes the process of dealing with the pain easier for both the author and the reader (Bacigalupe 363). McCourt also wants to share his story with the world, which can be a major positive aspect during the use of writing as therapy. Like Dirie, sharing his story with the world also makes McCourt a role model. McCourt shows that nothing is impossible, no matter what type of background one may have. Writing the books can also been seen as a way of inspiring others who have to deal with a tough childhood.
4. Conclusion

The main idea of this study was to look at autobiographies written by authors that had a harsh childhood, but still managed to achieve something in their lives and become happy. What I started with was to look at autobiographies and the problem that can occur when working with them. Autobiographies are memories that the authors have put down on paper and memories are elusive. It is impossible to remember everything, and some things the author can have remembered wrongly and some things may have been twisted. This is something that both students and teachers need to have in mind when working with autobiographies.

Both authors studied in this essay had some factors in common that have helped them get on with their lives and create lives of their own. The main thing that unites Frank McCourt and Waris Dirie is having lost brothers and sisters during their childhoods. Children do not grieve any differently from adults, and the loss will always remain with the child. What McCourt and Dirie show in their books is that they find strength by living through their loss, and they do not let grief obstruct them in their lives.

Another similarity between the two authors is that they both leave their families behind and start their own lives. McCourt left Ireland for America at the age of nineteen, and Dirie ran away from her family at the age of thirteen when her father wanted to marry her to with an older man. Incidentally both writers end up in New York. Despite the fact that running away and leaving the family behind is something tough, both McCourt and Dirie find supporting structures in society which help them move on. The intense difficulties they both have experienced have made them stronger and have provided them with a way of handling hurdles along the way.
Both McCourt and Dirie also refer a lot to their mothers and it seems that their mothers are very important to them. This can be linked to the fact that many children have a closer relationship to their mothers than to any other person, since the mother carries the child for nine months and therefore develops a closer relationship. Another common factor is that neither author blames their parents for their tough upbringing. They show an understanding of their parents and act as if though they know that their parents never really wanted to hurt them.

Writing about experiences that have been negative and hard may be seen as a form of self-therapy. By writing the books both McCourt and Dirie work through their experiences gaining strength through the process, but by sharing them with the world they also show a willingness to share their story with others. This has made them both role models and their stories are looked upon as inspiring by many people. This is something that can be useful in teaching. Inspiring students can be difficult and using authors that the students can find inspiring can be a good help.

What these two authors have in common most of all is that they both demonstrate what is needed in order to carry on after a very difficult childhood. They have strong personalities, built up by all the tough events that happened in the past, and they have access to someone who supports them, in this case their mothers. Furthermore, both Dirie and McCourt have later found a social network consisting of work, a stable income, family and friends. This has helped them set up their new lives. All these things combined help them move on in life. If one of these factors had been missing the outcome could have been different.

To sum up, I have explored some of the reasons why these authors have not only survived, but created good lives for themselves. This analysis shows what aspects of the books can be useful in my teaching career when trying to inspire my students. The books have inspired me
and the stories told by the authors have made me come to realize that there is not much in the world that is impossible.
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Appendix: Teaching Suggestions

The four books used in this study can all be used in a classroom. In this section some ideas on how to use them will be presented. The ideas will be for Upper Secondary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, but some ideas can probably also be used in year 9. *Desert Flower* and *Desert Dawn* are written in a fairly easy read language and can therefore be used in year 9, whereas *Angela’s Ashes* and *Teacher Man* are a bit more complex and take more time to read. Consequently, these two books can be used in Upper Secondary school. When using Waris Dirie’s books, starting with *Desert Flower* would be best for the students. If only *Desert Dawn* is used, a short summary of the first book would help the students to understand the story since *Desert Flower* gives a background that is needed in order to fully follow the story in *Desert Dawn*. Frank McCourt’s books can be used in any order and using both books is not necessary for the sake of understanding the content.

*Angela’s Ashes*, the longest of the books discussed in this essay, is quite a complex book and can be ‘heavy’ to read. For very proficient learners, reading *Angela’s Ashes* can be useful practice and a good challenge. As Harmer says in *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, “students should be reading material which they can understand” (283), otherwise they easily lose interest and the book has the opposite effect. In addition, the *input hypothesis* is important for the teacher to have in mind in the classroom. Lightbrown and Spada call this i+1 and explain the hypothesis in the following way:

The ‘i’ represents the level of language already acquired, and the ‘+1’ is a metaphor for language (words, grammatical forms, aspects of pronunciation) that is just a step beyond that level. (37)
This means that students always need to be challenged, on a suitable level, for a learning process to take place. The teacher should aim at making the students inspired by reading and learning, which will not succeed with a too difficult book. Therefore, if the learners are very good readers of English, the book may provide that small step just above their own level. For those who find it too difficult, some chapters from the book can be chosen instead to give them practice and to challenge them on a small scale. To provide the students with some help, a list of difficult words and their explanations in English can be provided. The students can also be given a task encouraging them to look up some words on their own. The students need to understand that they should not look up the meaning of every single word. As Harmer says, “in responding to natural hunger for vocabulary meaning, both teachers and students will have to compromise” (287). Looking up every unknown word they do not understand will be too time-consuming and non-inspiring for the students.

*Angela’s Ashes* has also been made into a movie and when having read a few chapters from the book, the students can finish by watching the movie. Watching a movie is often highly appreciated by students in general, but Harmer discusses the problem that can occur when watching movies: students can “associate it with relaxation” and need to be given a task to do while watching (308). Therefore, when working with a movie like *Angela’s Ashes*, the students can be given 10-15 questions, in English, on the movie’s content. The questions, which should be answered in English, can simply concern small details from the movie, just to keep the students focused while watching. This movie also includes different varieties of English and watching the movie will be good practice for the students to understand various accents. These different connotations of English pronunciation can later be discussed in class. When having worked with *Angela’s Ashes*, the students can work with *Teacher Man*. This book is not as complex to read as the previous one, and can be good reading practice. If the
time is limited, only working with *Angela’s Ashes* will still be meaningful. Though, if there is
time and the class have treated both books, a finishing touch can be to have a class discussion.
This discussion can first start in small groups, later expanding the groups and finishing the
discussion in the whole class.

When working with *Desert Flower* and *Desert Dawn*, which are quite easily and rapidly read,
treating the themes the books bring up can be found useful for the students. It may be
problematic to keep the students motivated while reading and therefore the students need a
task to do while reading. According to Harmer the teachers need to inform the students
“exactly what their reading purpose is” and what amount of time the students have to finish
the task (286). Since the books address important themes such as female circumcision and
arranged marriages, these can be important issues to discuss in class. Here, however,
sensitivity is crucial; the teacher needs to have an awareness that circumcision and arranged
marriages may be very real issues to some of the learners. If the teacher knows that there are
students in the class that have been exposed to things like circumcision or arranged marriages,
discussing these themes may not be appropriate unless the student him- or herself wants to
and is comfortable with talking about it. Furthermore, the teacher should be prepared to bring
in backup, such as a school welfare officer or the school nurse. Discussing themes like this
may scare teachers, due to the sensitivity of the subject, but the themes should not be ignored
if opportunity is given to discuss any of them. The Curriculum for the Non-Compulsory
School System, Lpf 94, mentions that aspects of “cultural diversity” (3) should be included in
all subjects and that students should have an understanding of their own culture and that of
others. Therefore, these themes should not be ignored, but as mentioned before, sensitivity is
crucial in treating them and the teacher needs to know his or her students before stepping into
a discussion like this. To make the students feel comfortable discussing these themes, a good
way to start is to use small groups carefully monitored, later expanding the groups and finishing off with a class discussion. A good tool to help the students with getting the discussions started is to provide them with some questions they need to answer before starting.

However, when using groupwork as a way of working in the classroom, there are certain aspects that need to be taken into consideration. Harmer says: “individuals may fall into group roles that become fossilised, so that some are passive whereas others may dominate” (166). Furthermore, this and the fact that the topic in question may be personal to some students can result in students becoming more passive than usual. When using groups in a discussion concerning sensitive themes, creating the groups based on friendship in the class can be useful. Harmer mentions that sometimes it is best to create groups based on friendship to ensure comfort among the participants (168). On the other hand, it is vital to ensure that nobody is left out of a group. It is of considerable importance not to ask for a repetition of statements that have been made in the smaller groups in the whole-class discussion, but leave this up to the students own initiative.