



Let the Great World Spin: a novel

by Colum McCann

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2009 National Book Award Winner

Amazon.com's "Book of the Year"

Oprah.com's "Books You Can't Put Down" Summer Reading

Summary

In the dawning light of a late-summer morning, the people of lower Manhattan stand hushed, staring up in disbelief at the Twin Towers. It is August 1974, and a mysterious tightrope walker is running, dancing, leaping between the towers, suspended a quarter mile above the ground. In the streets below, a slew of ordinary lives become extraordinary in bestselling novelist Colum McCann's stunningly intricate portrait of a city and its people.

Description

The novel begins in August 1974 as a tightrope walker makes his way through the dawn light across the World Trade Center towers, stunning thousands of watchers below. Using the true story of Philippe Petit as a pull-through metaphor, McCann crafts a portrait of the city and a people. There's Corrigan, a radical young Irish monk, who struggles with his own demons as he lives among the prostitutes in the burning Bronx. A group of mothers gather in a Park Avenue apartment to mourn the sons who died in Vietnam – they soon discover how much divides them even in their grief. Further uptown, Tillie, a 38-year-old grandmother, turns tricks alongside her teenaged daughter, determined not only to take care of her “babies” but to prove her own worth.

Elegantly weaving together these and other seemingly disparate lives, McCann's powerful allegory of 9/11 comes alive in the unforgettable voices of the city's people, unexpectedly drawn together by hope, beauty, and the tightrope walker's “artistic crime of the century.” McCann's most ambitious work to date, *Let the Great World Spin* has already been described as a triumphant American novel

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

McCann's sweeping new novel hinges on Philippe Petit's illicit 1974 high-wire walk between the twin towers. It is the aftermath, in which Petit appears in the courtroom of Judge Solomon Soderberg, that sets events into motion. Solomon, anxious to get to Petit, quickly dispenses with a petty larceny involving mother/daughter hookers Tillie and Jazzlyn Henderson. Jazzlyn is let go, but is killed on the way home in a traffic accident. Also killed is John Corrigan, a priest who was giving her a ride. The other driver, an artist named Blaine, drives away, and the next day his wife, Lara, feeling guilty, tries to check on the victims, leading her to meet John's brother, with whom she'll form an enduring bond. Meanwhile, Solomon's wife, Claire, meets with a group of mothers who have lost sons in Vietnam. One of them, Gloria, lives in the same building where John lived, which is how Claire, taking Gloria home, witnesses a small salvation. McCann's dogged, DeLillo-like ambition to show American magic and dread sometimes comes unfocused—John Corrigan in particular never seems real—but he succeeds in giving us a high-wire performance of style and heart.

Booklist

Starred Review After the rigors of *Zoli* (2007), his historical tale of Romani life, best-selling literary novelist McCann allows himself more artistic freedom in his shimmering, shattering fifth novel. It begins on August 7, 1974, when New Yorkers are stopped in their tracks by the sight of a man walking between the towers of the World Trade Center. Yes, it's Philippe Petit, the subject of the Academy Award-winning documentary *Man on Wire* and one of McCann's many intense and valiant characters. The cast also includes two Irish brothers: Corrigan, a radical monk, and Ciaran, who follows him to the blasted Bronx, where he encounters resilient prostitute Tillie and her spirited daughter Jazzlyn. Gloria lives in the same housing project, and she befriends Claire of Park Avenue as they mourn the deaths of their sons in Vietnam. McCann's hallucinatory descriptions of a great city tattooed and besmirched with graffiti, blood, and drugs in the midst of a financial freefall are eerie in their edgy beauty, chilling reminders of how quickly civilization unravels. Here, too, are portals onto war, the justice system, and the dawning of the cyber age. In McCann's wise and elegiac novel of origins and consequences, each of his finely drawn, unexpectedly connected characters balances above an abyss, evincing great courage with every step.

NY Times Book Review

"One of the most electric, profound novels...in years. "Let the Great World Spin" is an emotional tour de force. It is a heartbreaking book, but not a depressing one. [It] can feel like a precursor to another novel of colliding cultures: "The Bonfire of the Vanities".

Biography

<http://www.collummccann.com>



Colum McCann (born February 28, 1965) is an Irish writer of literary fiction whose novels include *Songdogs*, *This Side of Brightness*, *Dancer*, *Zoli* and *Let the Great World Spin*. McCann teaches fiction at CUNY Hunter College's Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing. His fiction has been published in 30 languages. He has written for numerous publications including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, *The Times*, *The Irish Times*, *Granta* and *La Repubblica*.

In 2009 McCann was awarded the National Book Award for *Let the Great World Spin*. In 2003 he was named as one of *Esquire Magazine's* "Best and Brightest." He has also been awarded a Pushcart Prize, the Rooney Prize, the Irish Novel of the Year Award

Colum was born in Dublin in 1965 and began his career as a journalist in *The Irish Press*. In the early 1980's he took a bicycle across North America and then worked as a wilderness guide in a program for juvenile delinquents in Texas. After a year and a half in Japan, he and his wife Allison moved to New York where they currently live with their three children, Isabella, John Michael and Christian. Colum teaches in Hunter College in New York, in the Creative Writing program, with fellow novelists Peter Carey and Nathan Englander.

Bibliography

Songdogs (1998)

Fishing in the Sloe-Black River (1998)

The Side of Brightness (1998)

Everything in this Country Must (2001)

Dancer (2003)

My Discovery of America (2005) Foreword

Zoli (2006)

Let The Great World Spin (2009)

Fish Anthology (2009) Editor

MoonFire: The Epic Journey of Apollo 11 (2010) written by Norman Mailer, contribution from McCann

Interview with the Author (from the author's website)

Tell us about your new novel, *Let the Great World Spin*.

Well, on one hand it is a simple narrative of lives entwined in the early 1970's. Most of it takes place on one day in New York in August 1974 when Phillipe Petit (unnamed in the

book) makes his tightrope walk across the World Trade Center towers, a walk that was called “the artistic crime of the 20 th century.”

Instead of focusing on Petit, however, the book follows the intricate lives of a number of different people who live on the ground, or, rather, people who walk the ground’s tightrope. They accidentally dovetail in and out of each other’s lives on this one day – an Irish monk living in the housing projects, a Park Avenue mother of a Vietnam vet/computer expert, a 38-year-old hooker in the Bronx, an errant artist who has lost her way, a subway tagger and so on. The lives braid in and out of each other. It’s a collision, really, a web in this big sprawling complex web that we call New York. A French editor has described the book as a sort of “New York Ulysses,” and maybe it fits in the sense that it mostly takes place on one day, and that it embraces the intricacy of the ordinary, but I’m very wary of the comparison of course, there’s only one Ulysses.

It’s also a social novel that looks at the ongoing nature of our lives, how the accidental meets the eternal. And it functions as a 9/11 allegory. The book leapfrogs forward to 2006, where the present meets the past, and questions it, even authenticates it. I suppose it’s a novel that tries to uncover joy and hope and a small glimmer of grace. I’d argue that sort of sentiment necessary these days. You also want it to be a rollicking good story. You want it to break hearts. You want people to finish the story and then immediately want to begin it again.

And maybe it’s just a novel about the polyphonic city ... my love letter to old New York in all her clothes, shabby and dignified both.

Let the Great World Spin spans so many nooks and crannies of New York City – what research did you do for this book?

Do you really want to know?! I have a bit of an errant imagination, I suppose. That’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it! Seriously, for many months I tried to imagine the life of Tillie – the 38 year old grandmother/hooker -- but her voice was elusive. I read a lot. I watched some movies and documentaries. I went out on the beat with a lot of cops, including homicide detectives. Out in their squad cars. It was wild. We even copped what we thought was a murder one night, but it turned out to be something else, a guy who blew his heart out with cocaine. But I saw my first dead body in the “field” – a strange and disconcerting sight.

I also enjoyed finding out about the hackers (the computer programmers) of the early 70’s. I’m hoping to get a copy of my book to Bill Gates ... he was one of the early hackers in the 70’s. He was one of the pioneers of the blue box program that’s at the centre of one of the chapters.

There is an enormous cast of characters – an incredible variety of voices – in this novel. Who was your favorite to write? Any that did not come easily?

It all started out with Corrigan, although his story is narrated by his brother. And the voices grew from Corrigan. He contains all these other voices. He introduced me to all the others, so he was my fulcrum voice. I was interested in ideas of faith, art, poverty. But then there was another thread I wanted to go for, the wealth and the technology, and the voices that might accompany this, and a sneaky favorite of mine is the wealthy Park avenue mother, Claire. Don’t tell anybody ... but I also live on NY’s Upper east Side. The area has got the worst rap in the city really – everyone finds it diseased with all this WASPy mentality. But nothing is ever exactly what it seems ... and again I was more interested in finding out what goes on behind the curtains. She came to me already fully formed. I knew her. And I ended up loving her, her broken-ness. I think she’s true. I have a feeling that a lot of Upper East Side women will like her, and maybe even feel represented in the fact that she’s not a cliché.

Much of your fiction engages issues of social class and the working poor, including this one; do you consider this a political novel, or yourself a political writer?

Yes. And yes. It sometimes seems to me that the contemporary social novelist has muzzled himself or herself a bit in recent years. There is a fear of seeming too engaged. We want our novels untainted by politics. We don't want history or social activism. For some people, there is the air of the impure about the social novel -- it is nearly always seen as ideological, or political, and therefore limited. I don't see it that way. I see the social novel as an open text, an open field for us to step into, and maybe breathe in a new air. But it's up to the reader to make sense of this. A novel has to be left open, so a reader can step inside. It's not up to me to tell people how to think. I paint a photograph, if you will, and then other people inhabit it. I'm nothing without a good reader.

The World Trade Center at this point is quite a loaded symbol; would you call this book a 9/11 allegory?

Intentionally so, yes. In fact 9/11 was the initial impetus for the book – my question to myself was: How do we talk about these things? But I am aware of the pitfalls of labelling it a “9/11 novel,” especially for American readers many of whom, like me, are tired of the idea of a 9/11 genre. But it has to be looked at. And 9/11 is certainly part of the book's construction, but it is not limited to that. But in this sense it is very much a book of hope and in some ways it's an anti-9/11 novel. 9/11 is not mentioned (or at least it is only mentioned glancingly, in a single sentence, towards the end.

My father-in-law Roger Hawke was one of the lucky ones, he got out on 9/11. He was working (as a lawyer) on the 59 th floor and got out with just a few moments to spare. And he walked uptown to the apartment where my wife and I were living, and he was covered in dust, and I remember my daughter Isabella smelling the smoke off his clothes and she said: ‘Poppy's burning,’ and I said, ‘No, no, love, it's just the smoke on his clothes from the buildings,’ and she said No, no, he's burning from the inside out.’ And it struck me immediately that she was talking about a nation

I felt it was quite impossible to write something that would break your heart, because anyone with any sort of heart had it broken that morning. And I'm not just talking about the hands-on grief, that *look-at-me-I'm-burning* sort of grief, I'm talking about what it meant for the world, the horrors that the Bush administration would unfold in its name, the terrible way they turned justice into revenge, the dark mark of hatred that reared itself both in the Islamic world and in Britain and here in the States. I mean, I just recall being so very hopeful for the first few days, thinking that maybe now we would understand grief, maybe we could be empathetic, maybe we could turn some good out of this. But then the months went on and it kept getting worse, until of course they unfolded the map of Iraq to level it, and it turned into a tragedy of Shakespearian proportions. And still the question was: how do I write about this? How do I get from one end of the tightrope to the other?

I remembered the Petit walk pretty early on, and I knew that was my novel—that had to be it. Originally I was just going to write the novel and have him fall, mess with history, the facts, the textures. I was raring to go. I mean, it's the obvious image. I'm not exactly at the edge. But I couldn't deny the power of the image.

It was even on the cover of the September 11 th *New Yorker* on the fifth anniversary.

Yes, that great drawing where the city becomes a ghost at his feet. The walk across the World Trade works on so many levels, it even has that Nietzschean ring to it, the over-man stuff. But I always that at the heart of my novel it wouldn't be ‘about’ Petit's walk. I knew I was writing a 9/11 novel, one written in advance. But it was an emotional response, rather

than a measured intellectual one. And the fact that all this stuff took place thirty years ago was perfect, because I could lay it over the present, like tracing paper. And let the reader decide. And my benchmark was my father in law. He couldn't stomach anything about 9/11. He hated the books and the screenplays and the ra-ra-ra industry that grew up around it, the missiles slammed into Baghdad in defense of greed, he was, like a lot of Americans, disgusted by it all. He woke at night dreaming of those young firemen running up the stairs past him while he escaped. He said he'd never read a 9/11 novel. But he eventually read mine and he knew what was going on with it, he felt it, he felt all that grief, and yet it's exactly as you say, he recognised immediately that it was a novel about creation, maybe even a novel about healing in the face of all the evidence. He liked it. In many ways, it's his book. It's my response to him. *Look at that, you're alive, your grandkids are jumping in your lap.* This is powerful stuff to me. This is the glue. This is what we were meant for.

I was never conscious until I'd finished the novel that I had Corrigan and Jazzlyn (two of the main characters) becoming two towers. Small and ordinary towers, I suppose, those lives that fall. And they are the only ones who never get to tell their stories. Everyone else tells the story for them. But they go on living. This, I suppose, is the art of how we come to survive.

So I think in many ways it is a book about healing, and about moving on even in the most difficult times. We recover. Then in another respect it's just a novel about the 70's – that mad, wonderful time in our history. Flared jeans, shaggy hair, disco lights, that sort of thing. But even then the questions were the questions we have now Soldiers coming home from the war, questions of technology, questions of faith, questions of belonging and the ultimate question of WILL WE FALL? In fact the two times – now and '74 – fold over onto each other in all sorts of extraordinary ways. So the novel is about NOW but in the guise of long ago.

Another thing that this novel anticipates, or reflects perhaps, is the Obama era.

The last chapter is very much a metaphor for the Obama years and the promise of being able to break from the past.

What other writers influenced *Let the Great World Spin*?

I'm always dubious about comparing it to other writers, just of because who I will obviously forget, I'm a bit of a throwback to the old Steinbeck social novel, maybe even the Dresier mould. I don't know, it might be an idea to talk about DeLillo, Berger, Doctorow, I feel embarrassed even bringing up their names. My own colleague (at Hunter College), Peter Carey. Jim Harrison. They're big and brave. Among the younger writers I admire are Zadie Smith, Dave Eggers, Junot Diaz, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nathan Englander and dozens more, so many more, John Wray, Marlon James, Darrin Strauss, David Mitchell, these ARE great writers and they tend to look at the big issues, and are brave in what they want to confront.

Has Petit read or responded to your book?

Phillippe is a very private man I sent him the book. I have no idea how he felt. But the story of the book – which I know he must recognise – is that we are all funnamblists. He did his walk high in the air. I try mine on the page. My characters tightrope the street. We are connected.

Discussion Questions (from Random House, reprinted in Oprah.com)

<http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200907-omag-reading-guide-let-the-great-world-spin>

1. Let the Great World Spin is told through the eyes of eleven different characters. What is the effect of this chorus of voices? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story this way? If you had to choose a single character to narrate the whole book, who would it be, and why? What do you think might be lost, or gained, by narrowing the story to a single perspective?
2. As McCann explains in the author's note, the book's title comes from "Locksley Hall," an 1835 poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which was itself inspired by a series of ancient Arabic poems. Why do you think McCann chose to use this title for such a modern American story? What does the title mean to you, and do you think it affects your relationship to the book as a reader? Would this be a different novel, do you think, if it had been called something else, like "Highwire"?
3. The narrative takes place almost exclusively in New York City, but could it have taken place in any other city in the world? How can this be seen as a specifically "New York" novel, and how might it not be? Are there ways in which the characters are emblematic of their time and place, or is there an "everyman" quality to them?
4. The novel opens with an extraordinary tightrope walk between the World Trade Center towers. This is a fictionalization of a famous stunt by Philippe Petit in August 1974—yet the tightrope walker in the novel remains anonymous, unrelated to any of the other characters. What do you think the effect is of weaving this historical fact into the fiction of the other characters' stories? What do you think McCann intends to achieve with this, and in what ways do you think he succeeds?
5. How important do you think this historic walk is in the novel itself? In what ways would the stories—and story—McCann is telling be different if the novel had been set on a different day, or in a different era?
6. Do you see ways in which the tightrope might function as a metaphor, or symbol, throughout the book?
7. In the chapter titled "This Is the House That Horse Built" we get an intimate glimpse into the life of a New York prostitute in the 1970s. She considers herself a failure. Do you agree with her? Or do you think she achieves grace despite the circumstances of her life?
8. All but one of the chapters in Let the Great World Spin are set over the course of a couple of days in early August 1974. Why do you think McCann chose to jump thirty-two years, to 2006, for the final chapter? In what ways do these pages add to, complicate, or even change the story that came before? Why do you think he chose the character of Jaslyn to tell that final piece of the story?
9. What do you think Jaslyn discovers at the end of the novel?
10. What parallels do you see between the society of the 1970s, as McCann depicts it in the novel, and today? How do you believe these similarities and differences speak to the changes in America and the world over the past several decades? Would it be fair to say that America itself is one of the evolving characters in the novel, a separate figure whose story is also being told?

11. Adelita says: "The thing about love is that we come alive in bodies not our own." What does she mean by this?

12. It can be argued that Corrigan and Jazzlyn are the book's two main characters, yet they die in the opening chapters. Why do you think McCann chose to allow their lives to be destroyed so early in the book? Why did he choose not to tell any of the story through their points of view? In what ways do you think that decision makes these two people more—or less—central and powerful in the story as a whole? Could it be said that it is sometimes the stories not told that affect us the most?

For Further Reading

Brooklyn: A Novel by Colm Tóibín

Falling Man by Don DeLillo

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers

The Man who Walked between the Towers by Mordicai Gersteinn

We All Fall Down by Eric Walters

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer

Everything Matters A Novel by Ron Currie

The Emperor's Children by Claire Messud

9-11 by Noam Chomsky

Mirette on the High Wire by Emily Arnold McCully

This Is Where I Leave You by Jonathan Tropper

The Thing Around Your Neck by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned: Stories by Wells Tower

Far Bright Star by Robert Olmstead

Perfection: A Memoir of Betrayal and Renewal by Julie Metz

Heroic Measures: A Novel by Jill Ciment

Netherland by Joseph O'Neill

The House on Fortune Street: A Novel by Margot Livesey

Chronic City by Jonathan Lethem

What I Thought I Knew: A Memoir by Alice Eve Cohen

The Glass Room by Simon Mawer