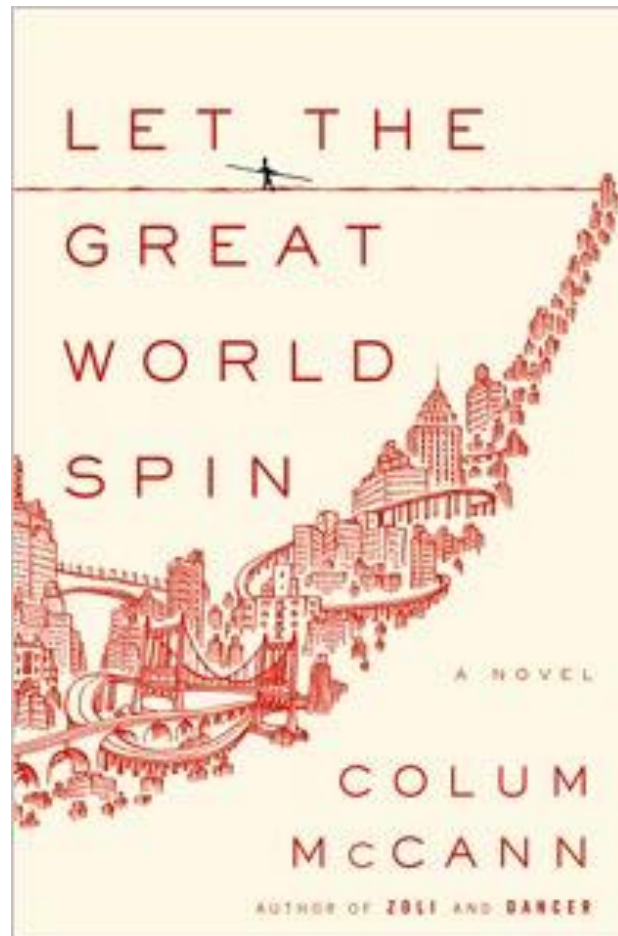


## About the book...



Corrigan is an Irish monk battling his dark side on the streets of the Bronx. Tillie is a young grandmother who becomes a prostitute to make ends meet. An artist witnesses a hit and an accident that forever alters her life. And a group of grieving mothers deal with the deaths of their sons in Vietnam. The stories of these individuals come together to create a unique, vivid portrait of American life

*-Books & Authors*

## About the Author... (*Books & Authors*)



Born February 28, 1965, in Dublin, Ireland; son of Sean (a journalist) and Sally (a homemaker) McCann; married Allison Hawke (a teacher), c. 1992; children: Isabella, John Michael, Christian.

**Education:** Attended Clonkeen College; Dublin Institute of Technology Rathmines, degree in communications; graduate studies at University of Texas at Austin.

**Career Information:** Writer and freelance journalist. Has worked for various newspapers, including the *Herald*, *Evening Press*, and *Connaught Telegraph* in Ireland, and with the United Press in New York, NY; *Evening Press*, youth correspondent, 1984-85; Worked variously as a taxi driver on Cape Cod, MA, bartender, bicycle mechanic, volunteer for a program in rural Texas for troubled urban youths, and apartment manager; Hunter College, New York, NY, teacher in the creative writing program.

**Awards:** Best first fiction and best new writer, Hennessy *Sunday Tribune* Awards, 1991, for short story "Tresses"; Rooney Prize for Irish Literature,

1994; Ireland Fund of Monaco Princess Grace Memorial Literary Award, 2002; Irish Novel of the Year Award, 2003, for *Dancer*; Pushcart Prize; Irish *Independent* Hughes and Hughes/ *Sunday Independent* Novel of the Year, 2003; "Writer of the Year," *Esquire*, 2003; Academy Award nomination for Best Live Action Short, 2005, for "Everything in This Country Must;" National Book Award for Fiction, National Book Foundation, 2009, for *Let the Great World Spin*; inducted into Aosdana, 2009; Chevalier des arts et lettres, 2009; Deauville Festival of Cinema Literary Prize, 2009; Impac Award, 2011, for *Let the Great World Spin*.

## **Writings:**

### **NOVELS**

- *Songdogs*, Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- [\*This Side of Brightness\*](#), Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 1998.
- [\*Dancer\*](#), Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2003.
- [\*Zoli\*](#), Weidenfeld & Nicolson (New York, NY), 2006.
- [\*Let the Great World Spin\*](#), Random House (New York, NY), 2009.

### **SHORT STORIES**

- *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, [England], c. 1993.

- *Everything in This Country Must*, Holt (New York, NY), 2000.
- (With Others) *From the Republic of Conscience: Stories Inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Liberties Press (Dublin, Ireland), 2000.

### **Media Adaptions:**

The stories "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," "Smoke," "Everything in This Country Must," and "Blue in the Face" have been adapted for film.

### **Sidelights:**

Colum McCann is an Irish writer whose debut novel *Songdogs*, is a work *Times Literary Supplement* writer John Tague characterized as "an exciting book, because it vibrates with the energy of a new writer finding his voice." McCann's story takes place over a seven-day period when a young man, Conor Lyons, returns home to County Mayo, Ireland, to visit his father. Lyons has been away several years on an arduous trek with the ultimate goal of finding out what happened to his beautiful and mysterious mother, who disappeared when he was twelve.

In *Songdogs* McCann tells the story of Lyons' recent journey in flashback as the young man attempts to sort out and clean up the eccentric, unwashed, and unhealthy life into which his father has sunk. The

son's travels parallel the path that his father had once traversed decades before: the elder, Irish-born Lyons had been an itinerant photographer whose adventures took him through the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s across the Atlantic to Mexico, where he met his wife, and Finally to America in the 1950s. The author recreates this first journey in the text by recounting Conor's scrutiny of his father's archive of images. The key to his mother's disappearance lies in the Lyons' disintegrating marriage, some apparently risqué photographs that scandalized the rural Irish community, and an incident of disturbing abasement. "It's a nice paradox that the novel's satisfying structure encloses stories of loss, compromise, and unsolved mystery," according to Hermione Lee in the *New Yorker*.

Other critics responded equally favorably to *Songdogs*, and although *New York Times Book Review* contributor Scott Veale noted that "a first-novelish quality seeps in occasionally," he concluded that "for the most part Mr. McCann's hand is strong and sure. The halting interplay between father and son, in particular, is delicately portrayed." Reviewing what he termed "this hugely inventive debut" for the *London Observer*, Tim Adams asserted that "if there is a fault in this book it is that of stasis, paragraphs develop images, then leave them hanging. But stasis is also *Songdogs*'s central metaphor." Lee similarly commented: "This comedy of torpidity is finely done.

And, for all its sadnesses, *Songdogs* reads like a celebration."

"It's always a joy when a second novel lives up to the promise of a writer's debut," remarked a *Publishers Weekly* contributor in 1998, "but this outstanding follow-up to *Songdogs* is a triumph." The reviewer was referring to *This Side of Brightness*, a novel spanning four decades during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1916 New York City, a group of men known as "sandhogs" undertake the arduous and treacherous task of tunneling underneath the East River to lay the groundwork for the city's fledgling subway system. The job brings together a mosaic of Polish, Irish, Italian, and African American laborers who establish strong bonds based on mutual respect: "There is democracy beneath the river," one character states. "In the darkness every man's blood runs the same color."

The story follows Nathan Walker, a black man transplanted from Georgia who joins the company. In the early pages of the book, Walker and three colleagues are caught up in tragedy when a blowout occurs in the tunnel they are digging (McCann based this scene on an actual incident). While Walker survives, his Irish coworker and friend Con O'Leary is killed. Walker takes it upon himself to look after O'Leary's young, pregnant widow. When the child, Eleanor, is born, the three characters stay in touch

over the years--to the point where Walker marries Eleanor.

The legacy of Nathan and Eleanor's mixed-race marriage is one of both love and grief. As a *World of Hibernia* reviewer related: "Their son, Clarence, ... is killed 'resisting arrest' after he himself killed both the man who ran over his mother in a car crash and a policeman who tried to apprehend him." Clarence's wife, Louisa, "slips into alcoholism and heroin addiction." Their son, Clarence Nathan, "in direct contrast to his grandfather," works the girders high above the city. He witnesses the death by train accident of his eighty-nine-year-old grandfather in the very tunnel Nathan Walker risked his life digging so many years earlier. "It is then that Clarence Nathan seeks refuge underground, becoming 'Treefrog.'"

To *Booklist* writer Bonnie Smothers, "it's not surprising to find [McCann] tackling the peculiar, unexplored and violent nexus" between the persecuted Irish and African American populations. Likewise, a *BookPage* Web site reviewer cited the author for addressing "the big issues of race, love and time with a literary majesty that completely befits the nature and scope of this family epic."

In 2000 McCann released *Everything in This Country Must*, two stories and a novella centered on "The Troubles" as experienced by three teenagers in modern-day Northern Ireland. The title story is told

from the point of view of a fifteen-year-old Irish farm girl as she and her father try to rescue their draft horse, which is trapped in a flooded river. Their efforts prove in vain; and when British soldiers appear on the scene to help, it becomes clear that the father would rather lose the beloved horse than acknowledge the hated British. The girl then knows that the horse must die, "because everything in this country must." This story and the two others, declared Smothers in *Booklist*, "are beautifully, poetically written, but the suffering is so palpable that reading about these characters is painful."

"I think the idea of place is very important to language," McCann told Peter Costanzo for the *Title Page* Web site. Speaking of his work on *This Side of Brightness*, McCann continued: "The language in it is much more pared down than the language of, say, the West of Ireland. It's a different landscape, a stark world of light and dark, people living underground. And so the geography demands a different type of word use. Ultimately, though, it is a test of the imagination to match place, time, language and human stories together--to weave them into some proper tapestry."

*Dancer* is McCann's fictionalized biography of famed Russian defector and ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev. It is not a biography in the classic sense, as much of the work is fictionalized, characters are created or meshed together, and events in Nureyev's life are



imagined rather than reported. The book is "more a character study of the many people in the dancer's life and the cultural changes that took place during his lifetime," observed Theresa Connors in the *Library Journal*. Beginning with Nureyev's childhood in Russia, where he danced to entertain wounded soldiers in a hospital during World War II, the book relates his early training and grueling practice sessions; his determination to perform, even against his father's wishes; his defection and emergence into a wider, more accepting world; and the irresistible call of money, fame, and sex that eventually led to Nureyev's death from AIDS.

McCann, in a novel that stands as a "a lovely showcase for his fluid prose and storytelling skill," explores Nureyev's effect on the people he knew, and the impact others had on the phenomenally talented artist, noted a *Publishers Weekly* contributor. Adam Dunn, writing in *Publishers Weekly*, called the novel "a noteworthy literary achievement: a seamless narrative with a constantly roving POV." "*Dancer* is neither a biography of Nureyev nor does it quite stand as an independent novel," observed Judith Mackrell in the London *Guardian*. "Like its subject, it spins with virtuoso, charismatic brilliance around a core of willful mystery."

In *Zoli*, McCann turns his attention to the gypsies of Eastern Europe. Zoli is a young girl living in Slovakia following World War II, who watches as her parents

are brutally murdered by a group of soldiers. Taken in by a group of Romani, Zoli turns to music, and eventually becomes trapped by her success and fame, which puts her in the middle of a tug of war between her own people and the communist regime that seeks to use her as a spokesperson for their cause. McCann traveled extensively through Eastern Europe to research the lives of the local gypsies before writing the book. Reviewing the novel for *Booklist*, Joanne Wilkinson remarked: "McCann tells a very convincing and very powerful story about the strength of community and the burden of exile." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* wrote of McCann: "His world of caravans, music and family is rich with sensual detail."

McCann secured international fame with his novel *Let the Great World Spin*. The book was honored with the National Book Award for Fiction, garnered the author a Chevalier des arts et lettres, and led to McCann's induction into the prestigious Irish literary society Aosdána. "McCann backs himself to step out into the spaces his novel opens up and it is always thrilling to follow him," Adams observed, this time writing in the *Guardian*. The story briefly portrays high-wire performer Philippe Petit, who achieved renown after walking between the World Trade Center's Twin Towers in August, 1974. McCann then connects this act (which is based on a true story), on the events of 9/11. The plot, however "is not the story of Philippe

Petit, whom McCann inhabits but never names," Tom Junod remarked in *Esquire*. It is also "not the story of another dancer suspended, by force of miracle, in thin air. Rather it is the story of the people on the ground and what it is like to be implicated in a freedom they can never attain," he added. To quote Adams, "McCann's language has been all about precision and detail, the surprise of finding new ways never to put a foot wrong. He has been led before, by the nerve and grace of his style as much as anything, to gravity and its defiance."

In a rare negative assessment, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor remarked that "peripheral characters command occasional chapters ... and this series of linked stories never really gels as a novel." The plot is "unfocused and overlong, though written with verve, empathy and stylistic mastery," they concluded. Despite this, praise for the book was proffered by Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. "In McCann's wise and elegiac novel of origins and consequences, each of his finely drawn, unexpectedly connected characters balances above an abyss," she commented. "Here and elsewhere, *Let the Great World Spin* can feel like a precursor to another novel of colliding cultures: *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's classic portrait of New York in the 1980s," Jonathan Mahler wrote in his *New York Times* review. "But McCann's effort is less disciplined, more earnest, looser, rougher, more flawed but also more soulful--in other words, more

like the city itself." Mahler went on to note that "In recent years, we've seen the emergence of a new generation of New York novelists led by Jonathan Lethem and Colson Whitehead, both native New Yorkers. McCann brings an immigrant's refreshing sense of awe to the same terrain."

## **Reviews**

### *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.

### *Publisher's 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.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

The famous 1974 tightrope walk between the World Trade Center towers is a central motif in this unwieldy paean to the adopted city of Dublin-born McCann (Zoli, 2007, etc.). Told by a succession of narrators representing diverse social strata, the novel recalls Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), except that where *Bonfire* was deeply cynical about Reagan-era New York, McCann's take on the grittier, 1970s city is deadly earnest. On the day that "the tightrope walker" (never named, but obviously modeled on Philippe Petit) strolls between the Twin Towers, other New Yorkers are performing quieter acts of courage. Ciaran has come from Dublin to the Bronx to rescue his brother Corrigan, a monk whose ministry involves providing shelter and respite to an impromptu congregation of freeway underpass hookers. Corrigan chastely yearns for Adelita, his co-worker at a nursing home. Claire, heiress wife of Solomon, a judge at the "Shithouse" (Manhattan criminal court), has joined a support group of bereaved mothers whose sons died in the Vietnam War. With much trepidation, she hosts the group—including Gloria, Corrigan's neighbor and the only African-American member—at her Park Avenue

penthouse. Two of Corrigan's prostitute flock, Jazzlyn and her mother Tillie, are picked up on an outstanding warrant, and he accompanies them to their arraignment in Solomon's courtroom, where the newly arrested sky-walker is among those waiting to plead. Cocaine-addled painters Blaine and Lara, once again fleeing the Manhattan art scene, also flee the accident scene after their classic car clips Corrigan's van from the rear as he's driving Jazzlyn home. (Tillie, having taken the rap for her daughter, is in jail.) Peripheral characters command occasional chapters as well, and this series of linked stories never really gels as a novel. Unfocused and overlong, though written with verve, empathy and stylistic mastery.

### **Discussion questions** ([www.litlovers.com/](http://www.litlovers.com/))

1. Why do you think the tightrope walker attempted his feat? How might the tightrope operate as a metaphor, or symbol, throughout the book? In what ways do each of the characters walk their own tightrope?
2. Who do you think is the main character in the book? Is there one character who best keeps the novel together? Why this character?

3. Silence and darkness are pervasive images and topics throughout the novel. Why do you think they are included in the book? What might the author be trying to say about these elements?
4. The novel is told through eleven different characters, each with a very different voice. Why do you think McCann decided to write the book this way? How effective do you find this style of writing?
5. The book is primarily set in the 1970s. How do you think the country has changed since then? How has it remained the same? In what way do people act differently? Do they have different values? Which characters or examples from the book best support your view?
6. How does the inclusion of historical elements -- such as Phillippe Petit, the tightrope walker -- in the novel influence your reading of this work of fiction?



7. Adelita says: "The thing about love is that we come alive in bodies not our own." What does she mean by this?
8. What do you think Jaslyn discovers at the end of the novel?
9. In what ways do the events of 9/11 influence our contemporary reading of this novel?
10. Is this an optimistic or pessimistic novel? Which chapters or scenes best illustrate this?

### **Read Alikes** (*NoveList*)

- Jeffrey Archer, [\*Only Time Will Tell\*](#) (2011)
- T. Coraghessan Boyle, [\*Drop City\*](#) (2003)
- Andrew M. Greeley, [\*Second Spring\*](#) (2003)
- David Mitchell, [\*Cloud Atlas\*](#) (2004)
- Jennifer Donnelly, [\*The Tea Rose\*](#) (2002)

### **Watch Alikes**

- [\*Man on a Wire\*](#) (2008)
- [\*Manhattan\*](#) (1979)
- [\*Mean Streets\*](#) (1973)
- [\*Midnight Cowboy\*](#) (1969)
- [\*Rebirth\*](#) (2011)

## Listen Alikes

- Miles Davis, [\*On the Corner\*](#) (1972)
- Gil Scott-Heron, [\*The Revolution Will Not Be Televised\*](#) (1988)
- Sugar Hill Gang, *Rapper's Delight* (1996)
- Pink Floyd, [\*Dark Side of the Moon\*](#) (1973)
- Jonathan Safran Foer, [\*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close\*](#) (2005)



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