

Let the Great World Spin

By Colum McCann
(Bloomsbury)

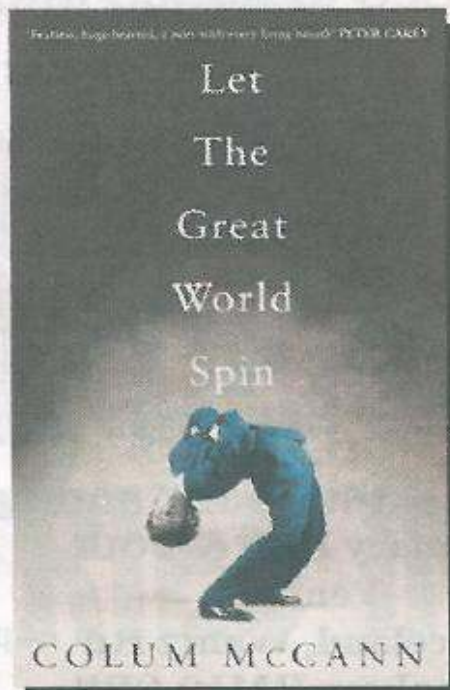
Recently crowned with the National Book Award, Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* is being hailed as the first important New York novel since the tragedy of 9/11.

McCann follows the lives of a number of very diverse characters, starting in Dublin with two young brothers, one of whom becomes a monk living in the Bronx.

As the story unfolds we meet Studio 54 party people, Park Avenue wives, Bronx hookers, Silicon Valley computer geeks, a city judge – all very different lives interlinked by the pivotal moment of the book, Philippe Petit's tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center in 1974.

But is *Let the Great World Spin* a novel of the city? A great part of the action takes place outside of New York City – in Dublin, California, Vietnam, upstate New York. Indeed the only NYC localities described in any detail (and slight detail at that) are the Bronx and Park Avenue.

The city itself is never really the centre of the story; the sense of space far less evoked than in the likes of Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* or other city novels such as



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Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The image of the tightrope walk – the subject of the recent Oscar-winning documentary *Man on Wire* – is of course a striking one. But unlike Joyce's 16 June, only a minuscule part of the action actually takes place during this pivotal moment, making it a mere accessory to the plot – as if it doesn't really matter.

Each character is developed extensively and with a lot of sympathy. One of the core messages, perhaps, is that family ties don't necessarily exist through blood but also shared feelings or interests.

Moreover, at least some of the chapters come across as short stories or even novellas in themselves, only interlinked with other characters' lives at a later point.

As a backdrop to the novel's main action and McCann's beautifully written characters, New York, with its stark social contrasts, works very well.

But let's take the novel as what it is: a very good read, but not one that defines New York post-9/11 – although it clearly has pretensions to that crown.



Isabel Roleff has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information about her work can be found at irishwritersexchange.com