Lives Spin Together in Shadow of Twin Towers

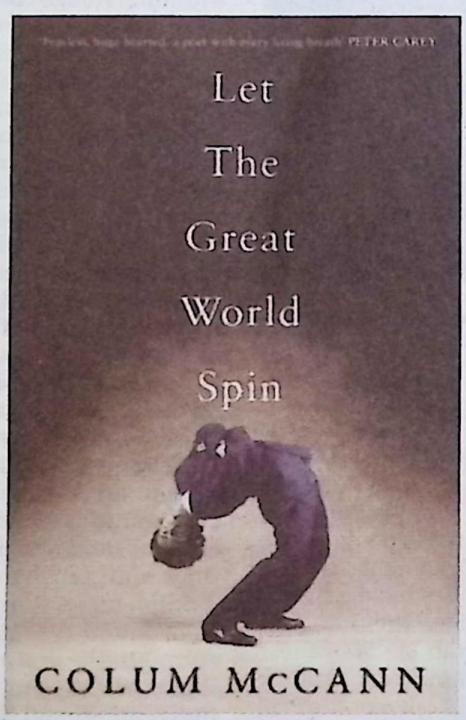
ADAM DUNN

One of the jacket blurbers for Colum McCann's seventh book describes his new novel as "cycloramic."

While you're looking that up in your phone's online dictionary, stop and consider the world as it was in 1974.

This was before the Internet - although several of the book's characters are engaged in creating it, beginning with the "Death Hack" body count programme from the Vietnam War, whose embers still smolder among the families of those it claimed.

It was before AIDS, when you could still buy sex in refrigerator cars next to New York's Major Deegan Expressway, as does one of McCann's more bawdy creations.



And it was before Sept. 11, 2001, when commuters heading to work downtown actually noticed what was going on above their heads one August morning when a Frenchman illegally strung a cable between the twin towers and walked on it, danced on it, even lay down on it, causing a citywide sensation that rippled through the populace.

It is this wave that McCann conjures, with a level of human detail almost brutal in its empathy.

A Park Ave. penthouse becomes a stifling prison for a grieving mother, whose support group members cannot stop talking about the man on the tightrope as they munch on bagels.

A fanatical priest cannot get the vision of the tightrope walker out of his head, even after being in a gruesome car crash that figuratively crucifies him on a steering column.

The driver who caused the crash will take up with the priest's wayward brother, and they will stand beside the mother of a prostitute who also died in the crash, who is brought to the graveside from her prison cell in chains and whose granddaughter will one day help heal the Park Ave. matron and another from her support group, herself a neighbour from the housing project where the hookers ply their trade.

There is all this and more, much more, in McCann's book, but arching over each interconnected life is the image of the World Trade Center, nearly a decade gone now, but whose long, jagged psychic scars remain, "and you go on, you must go on, because even if they're gone they can still be remembered."

McCann has written more than a supremely woven tapestry of imagined lives; through their struggles, he clears a path for healing and redemption from the cataclysm of a later time.

This review first appeared in the Milwaukee Sentinel Journal.