An excerpt from:

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It's the birthday of novelist [**Colum McCann**](http://www.colummccann.com/?elq=dcbf85e5843246cdae73f34892d62e1b&elqCampaignId=5777) ([**books by this author**](http://www.amazon.com/gp/search?ie=UTF8&keywords=Colum%20McCann&tag=writal-20&index=blended&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325&elq=dcbf85e5843246cdae73f34892d62e1b&elqCampaignId=5777)), born in Dublin, Ireland (1965). He's the author of *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), which won the 2009 National Book Award. His fiction has been translated into 30 languages.

He grew up in suburban middle-class Dublin in a house full of books and majored in journalism. At age 21, he moved to the United States, intent on writing the great American novel that summer. He didn't get very far. He decided he needed to go see America, so he hopped on a 15-speed Schwinn and bicycled around the country. He cycled 12,000 miles, winding through 40 states, collecting stories all along the way — stories that still make their way into his fiction a couple of decades later.

He has had a happy life, he says, the kind that doesn't make for an interesting story. He said, "For me, the logical conclusion is that I have to write outside my life." He said that it feels like going to college every time he writes a book: "I take a brand-new three-year crash course in that which I want to know." To research one novel, he lived with homeless people in subway tunnels. For another, he went to Russia and hung around "hospitals and dancehalls and Stalin-era apartments."

For a different novel, he spent a year looking at maps at the New York Public Library, and then headed off to of Eastern Europe to wander through Gypsy camps, "carting [his] ignorance," he said, "to Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, and Italy." That research was for his novel *Zoli*, based loosely on the life of a Polish poet from the 1950s.

Every novel is a failure, he says, in that "you can never achieve what you truly want to achieve. That thing you dreamt on the riverbank is never the thing you achieve when you are back at the writing table, or when the paper is coming out of the printer." He wanted to "bounce back fast" from *Zoli*. He set out to write an epic.

That epic: *Let the Great World Spin*. It's set in the 1970s and weaves together the stories of a dozen New York protagonists, including prostitutes, a young radical Irish monk, and a Park Avenue mother in mourning for her son killed in Vietnam. He once said, "If I had a gun to my head, and somebody asked me what this book was about, I would say it's about achieving grace in the face of trauma and not making a grief-fest out of 9-11." Though the story famously begins with the image of the tightrope walker high in the air between the twin towers, McCann said that for him, that's not really what it's about. For him, "the core image of the novel" is "when two little girls emerge from a Bronx housing complex and get rescued by strangers."

He said, "I wanted it to be a Whitmanesque song of the city, with everything in there — high and low, rich and poor, black, white, and Hispanic. Hungry, exhausted, filthy, vivacious, everything this lovely city is. I wanted to catch some of that music and slap it down on the page so that even those who have never been to New York can be temporarily transported there."

To get the voice of protagonist Tillie, the 38-year-old grandmother and longtime prostitute, McCann did a lot of research. He went to the New York Public Library and looked through records, trying to track down 1970s Bronx prostitutes. He tried talking with women on the stroll. He shadowed police detectives around the Bronx. He rummaged through piles of rap sheets, trying to figure out which crimes his Tillie might have committed. He read the memoir of a pimp.

He said that it took him a really long time to get Tillie's voice — about four or five months. He was on the verge of giving up. He told his wife he just didn't think he could do it. Then one night this line came floating to him, which went: "The skinniest dog I ever seen is the one on the side of the Greyhound buses." It was a simple line, he said, but he recognized it as the voice he was trying to channel. He wrote all night, he said, "and wound up with six pages." He said: "Tillie started whispering all this stuff to me: 'I'm Rosa Parks. I'm black and on the pavement. I'm a chewing gum spot.'" He had some of his cop friends read a section of it and they told him: "This is perfect. This is a woman we know."

The Tillie monologue, which is set in her jail cell and spans almost 40 pages, begins:  
"They didn't let me go to Corrigan's funeral. I woulda walked the bakery line to get there. They put me back in the pen instead. I weren't crying. I laid straight out on the bench with my hand over my eyes.

I saw my rap sheet, it's yellow with fifty-four entries. Typed up not so neat. You see your life with carbon copies. Kept in a file. Hunts Point, Lex and Forty-ninth, West Side Highway, all the way back to Cleveland. Loitering. Prostitution offense. Class A misdemeanor. Criminal possesion controlled substance 7th degree. Criminel trespass 2nd degree. Criminal posession narcotic drug, Class E felony. Prostitution solicitation, Class A, Misdemeaner Degree o.

The cops musta got a D in spelling.

The ones in the Bronx write worse than anyone. They get and F in everything except pulling us up on our prop'rties."

Colum McCann said: "I think a good novel can be a doorstop to despair. I also think the real bravery comes with those who prepared to go through that door and look at the world in all its grime and torment, and still find something of value, no matter how small."

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