

Ticket

THE IRISH TIMES culture magazine



It took a while to regain my sense of freedom in terms of music. The problem with any creative process is that, once the critic enters the room, you're not going to do anything
Tamara Lindeman



FILM

Boxed in Director Laura Carreira charts the lonely, unnerving life of a shelf picker for an online retailer

CULTURE

Hugh Linehan The future of the Washington Post died this week, although it had been on life support for a while

BOOKS

An urgent message Ash Sarkar makes the case for burying the culture Wars

Reviews Aer Dogs by Tom Lyons; Dark Like Under by Alice Chadwick; The Artist by Lucy Steeds

Saturday, March 1, 2025

irishtimes.com/culture

THE TIES THAT BIND

NOVELIST COLUM McCANN
ON CONNECTEDNESS AND
LIVING IN BROKEN TIMES



WHERE WE ARE MOST INSECURE

Vulnerability, both technological and human, is at the heart of Colum McCann's new novel, *Twist*, which has its roots in his connections to his home city and in an underwater world we might not be aware of



Colum McCann: 'Everybody thinks that the cloud lives in the air. The cloud is really right at the very bottom of the ocean.' Photograph: Nick Bradshaw

MARTIN DOYLE

Last August Colum McCann sat in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, in New York, watching Philippe Petit, almost 75 years old, traverse its nave on a high wire while Sting sang songs from a musical that he and McCann are writing about the tightrope artist.

Later that month the Irish author took part in a conversation at the Vatican with Pope Francis and two fathers bereaved by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Rami Elhanan and Bassam Aramin.

He is currently collaborating with George Mitchell, the former US senator, on a speech that the architect of the Good Friday agreement is to give in Belfast next month.

What these three things have in common

is that they are all fruits of McCann's fiction.

Let the Great World Spin, a 9/11 allegory from 2009 that won the US National Book Award and the International Dublin Literary Award, recounted Petit's high-wire walk between the World Trade Center's twin towers in 1974. Apeirogon, from 2020, explored the Middle East's most enduring conflict through the lives and deaths of two daughters, one Israeli, one Palestinian. TransAtlantic, from 2013, linked Frederick Douglass's visit to Ireland, in 1845, Alcock and Brown's first transatlantic flight, in 1919, and Mitchell's chairing of the Belfast peace talks in 1998.

Inspired by real events and people, they are now in turn inspiring real people and events. "I'm sitting there thinking, is this really my life now?" the writer says. "Am I this lucky that that this sort of stuff happens?"

He is home from the US to visit his 97-year-old mother, Sally, who still lives independently in Dublin, and, sitting in a seaside pub, to discuss his eighth novel, *Twist*, which is published next week, days after his 60th birthday.

It comes five years after Apeirogon, but its writing was interrupted by last year's American Mother, the deeply moving nonfiction book he wrote with Diane Foley about the kidnap and murder by Islamic State of her journalist son, James, 10 years before. McCann had written to her when he came across a photograph of James reading a copy of Let the Great World Spin. *Twist*'s tangled roots date back to the pandemic, when he was locked down in New York City with his wife and three children yet able to stay connected with his mother by that miracle of modern communication, the smartphone, which,

paradoxically, is blamed for our current epidemic of loneliness.

"We had that moment where it's like time was crushed and we were so dependent on these little machines, and it was a real mystery to me how I could call Sally in Clonkeen Road from New York. It's a wonder of science and it is also a wonder of connection."

This enigma of connection and disconnect started him thinking about a world in need of repair, specifically the ocean-crossing fibre-optic cables that link our continents and cities, and the people whose job it is to mend them when they are damaged, by accident or design.

"Everybody thinks that the cloud lives in the air," McCann says. "The cloud is really right at the very bottom of the ocean."

Twist is the story of two Irishmen: Conway, a freediver who helms an internet-



cable-repair vessel based in Cape Town, and Fennell, a writer commissioned by a magazine to describe a salvage operation at sea. McCann himself wrote a 10,000-word essay, *No Rest for the Wired*, on the subject for Alexander, an audio app.

As Fennell writes to his son: “It was no great surprise that the world felt as if it were in chains since they actually trawled the ocean floor and tied us up in easy knots.”

At one level a thriller examining the powerful, fragile network that connects the modern world, *Twist* also seeks to plumb its characters’ souls, an equally delicate operation, as Conway disappears off grid and Fennell searches for him.

The vulnerability of underwater cables to sabotage is big news now, with allegations of Russian and Chinese trawlers dragging their anchors on the seabed to wreak havoc.

But, five years ago, McCann had little to go on.

“You could actually take down the world’s internet, or certainly damage it very significantly, with a fleet of 20 ships,” he says. You don’t even have to go out to sea, as the landing stations are easily accessible. “It’s incredible to me that we have such access to something that’s fundamental. I’ve been in landing stations in Long Island and New Jersey. All I had to do was climb over a little gate. There was no surveillance that I could see. All you’d need is a crowbar to prop open the manhole.”

“It’s probably impossible to write about things you don’t know,” McCann says about the inspiration for *Twist*, “but if you write towards what it is you want to know, sometimes you discover things that you knew but weren’t entirely aware of.”

Knowledge is important, then, but

curiosity is perhaps the essential ingredient in firing the imagination.

“I knew almost nothing about Israel/Palestine before I embarked on *Apeirogon*. The same with this book. I’d never been at sea. I don’t know why I wanted to write about cable repairs except I knew we are living in broken times. Initially it was all going to be about repair – how do we repair ourselves? In the end the book ends up flipping itself on me, because it becomes about sabotage.

“It’s a deceptively simple book for me. I’m still trying to fathom it. It’s about two characters, it’s chronological, it goes in a straight line, it’s not multiple voices, not really outside my realm of experience, like I did with *Apeirogon* or *American Mother*, or *Let the Great World Spin*.

“I feel almost embarrassed at how seemingly simple it is. My narrator doesn’t go

wild with language, or off on crazy tangents. My own instinct is to go wild, but in certain ways I felt it was Fennell who wrote the book. It had to belong to him, not me. I don’t feel like characters are my galley slaves; I feel beholden because I have imagined him.

“With *Apeirogon* I felt I could go absolutely anywhere. The structure allowed me to do it; it felt right. With this book I knew it was going to be interior, realist, but I wanted the aftertaste to have echoes of Prufrockian loneliness.”

McCann had to fight for the title of his previous novel, *Apeirogon*, because his US publisher was understandably concerned that very few readers would know what the word meant: a polygon with an infinite number of sides.

Twist, the title of his new novel, met no such resistance. It economically captures the sense of something going awry, ♦♦

❖ with the secondary sense of an unexpected change of direction in the plot.

One of the beauties of fiction is that a novel can start off as one thing and evolve during the creative process into something very different. It is also very often in conversation with previous works of fiction. *Twist* begins in the vein of *The Great Gatsby* before veering off in the direction of *Heart of Darkness*, with a flicker of *Apocalypse Now*, the film that Joseph Conrad's novella helped inspire.

Stylistically, it is very different from *Apeirogon*, which had 1,001 very short chapters, exploding the novel form into shards of stories.

"Beckett said the job of the artist now is to find a form that accommodates the mess. So that is what I set out to do with *Apeirogon*: to capture the mess and some of the mystery and madness." As if in reaction to that, McCann next set himself the challenge of writing a simple love story. "I like to surprise myself and the reader. I generally never write the same sort of book."

He wanted to write something straightforward and almost confessional, through a character like Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby*'s narrator, looking back on his younger, more vulnerable years. But as his research led him to realise that the world's internet cables followed old colonial shipping routes, he conceived of a rupture of an Atlantic cable caused by a flood from the Congo river – a nod to *Heart of Darkness*'s plot, as is Conway working for a Belgian company, like Marlow in the original.

McCann's favourite scene in *Twist* is set in a dump on the outskirts of Accra, in Ghana, where the narrator is shown that locals are selling for scrap metals that have been mined from their continent, its riches reduced to what will feed a family for just a week.

There is also an awareness of the developing world bearing the brunt of climate change, an environmental concern signalled with an epigraph from Rachel Carson. Conway's partner, an actor, is interpreting Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as a climate play.

McCann deliberately decided not to treat this story in what might be seen as his trademark fashion, juxtaposing the contemporary story with that of the first sea cables laid from Valentia Island to North America, in the 19th century. (There are photographs of this in Conway's cabin, an allusion to what might have been.) This was his model for both *TransAtlantic* and *This Side of Brightness*. Now he wanted to do something different, focus on the contemporary, see if he could tell a story straight from A to Z, with one narrator and a straight timeline, and say something about who we are and where we are now.

McCann believes that fiction writers today face an uphill battle for relevance compared with the era of Philip Roth, Norman Mailer and Toni Morrison, who had more influence in the public sphere. Fennell says, "I was unsure what fiction and drama could do any more."

"You want to write a novel that breaks people's hearts and maybe wakes people up to some of the things that are going on," McCann says. "I need to engage with what is current. You could end up being pretentious, believing that you have something to say, and that's always a scary thing. You



Colum McCann with Diane Foley, mother of the late war journalist James Foley. Right: McCann with Benedict Kiely in the early 1990s. Photographs: Joel Sagat/AFP via Getty; Terry Cooper

could be like Claire Keegan and go small and beautiful and gorgeous, and the tiny becomes epic. But can the epic become tiny?"

McCann is evangelical about the essential nature of storytelling, however. "We might eventually be able to live without books, without opera, without drama. The one thing that we will never, ever be able to live without is stories. They can take away all the apparatus of printing, but essentially the world is held together with stories."

He is concerned not just with story but also with the sentence. "I think the music of a sentence is as important, if not more important than the words. The meaning gets parsed out in the music. I would like every sentence to sing."

Twist is studded with lapidary lines and a couple of virtuoso passages capturing the cornucopia that these internet cables contain. There are what McCann calls echoes from the garden of literature, small homages to writers such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Herman Melville, Philip Larkin and TS Eliot, whose *Prufrock* for a time influenced his description of Fennell. "We get our voice from the voices

of others," he says.

Donald Trump is referred to in *Twist* as "a damp white loaf". McCann's response to the election of the United States' most successful seller of sinister fictions since Stephen King was to lick his wounds. "But then I got this wonderful email from a friend. She said, 'We'll spend a day trying to figure all this out. But then tomorrow we ride at dawn.'"

As a dual passport holder, McCann could stick or twist, but his roots in New York are deep now. That said, he recalls a phrase of his late friend John Berger, the writer, who told him once, after a good few drinks apiece, that he considered himself "a patriot of elsewhere". "I'd like to be able to appropriate that phrase, because I like the idea of being elsewhere."

In 2012 McCann cofounded Narrative 4, a global educational organisation that promotes the exchange of stories to connect students to each other, to build a culture of inclusivity and connectedness.

He offers as an example bringing together schoolchildren from the south Bronx and eastern Kentucky, one group black and/or immigrant, urban, the other white or

Cherokee and rural. By exchanging personal stories, not ideas or beliefs, connections are made.

"Often I use the prompt of repair [*Twist*'s theme, again]. It could be a story about the repair of a bicycle, or of a relationship or a neighbourhood. And they begin to understand things about one another, that they aren't quite as distant as they thought. What we have in common breaks down the borders, the stereotypes."

Narrative 4 is now in 42 countries, in 40 per cent of Irish schools, with a budget of \$8 million a year, funded by donations that include \$25 million over five years from Jeff Bezos's parents, Mike and Jackie. The ambition is to build a platform for children globally to share their stories. "I believe stories lead to action lead to change." The real heroes, he says, are the teachers who run the courses.

In January McCann was back in Rome for a Narrative 4 event with 200 faith-based journalists and to give a jubilee speech for Pope Francis. "I thought he was one of the greatest listeners that I had ever come across. He felt like a spectacularly empathetic human being."

Next month Narrative 4 will bring young people from secondary schools north and south together. George Mitchell will address them. "He is keen to pass the torch to the next generation. We have had peace without reconciliation. It's not as strong as it could or should be."

"I have a powerful fondness for the North. My mum is from there. She grew up on a dairy farm near Garvagh. She came up to the Seamus Heaney HomePlace with me. It was a sort of homecoming."

Despite being a Dubliner born and bred, McCann once said that he felt more like a Northerner. Why was that?

"I'm not really sure. That's my new answer to everything: I don't know. I think that is an honest answer these days. I like to say we are diseased with certainty. I didn't grow up there, but I did a lot of my growing up there, seeing the tensions, ideas of the land."

Perhaps with age comes an acceptance that not everything is knowable or solvable. The omniscient narrator is dead. The complexities of Conway's motivation are not explained. Some US editors wanted more clarity, but McCann didn't want to produce a simple puzzle. It reminds me of Don DeLillo's line that a writer's job is to deepen the mystery. McCann quotes César Vallejo: "Mystery joins things together."

He is worried that readers will conflate him and his narrator, as Fennell is a journalist and a writer, middle-aged and Irish. "However, I found him more difficult to write than characters out of my immediate experience. There is a lot of talk about cultural appropriation. I wanted to pay a nod to it and stretch it."

"When [these critics] first emerged they were laughed at, but essentially what they were saying was entirely right. For centuries writers and corporations have condescended, stereotyped. On the same hand, there is a way to go in with head bowed and a degree of wonder and curiosity. It's a form of cultural celebration."

"I probably wouldn't be allowed to write about a 38-year-old hooker in the south Bronx now, from a first-person point of view [as he did in *Let the Great World Spin*]. But

we are coming out of it. We will look back on that time and say we were handcuffed, we came indoors, we put a GPS co-ordinate on our imaginations and said you can't go north or south of that.

"When I was meeting poor black families in Mississippi, then wealthy white people in Aspen, I didn't know how lucky I was. My first [unpublished] books were bad because they were based on my own experience. I've spent most of my career trying to operate outside this space. I am more honest. I don't want to look in the mirror in that way. Everything you write is autobiographical to some extent. By nature of putting your words down on the page, it has elements of the self."

Print is part of McCann's DNA. His father, Sean, was a writer as well as features editor of the Irish Press.

"The music of my childhood was my dad on his typewriter, writing kids' soccer books about Georgie Goode [obviously a nod to Georgie Best], a Traveller from an Irish family in England. He wrote on big rolls of paper – very Kerouac – with a carbon underneath, which he gave to me to do edits.

"My teacher in St Brigid's, in Foxrock, would read my dad's book aloud to the class. I remember a boy in front of me jumping up and punching the air when a goal was scored in the book. The imaginary had become real. This moment had been dreamed up by my father."

As a boy McCann cycled around Sallynoggin and Dún Laoghaire, in South Dublin, and Bray, in Co Wicklow, picking up football results and match reports. He studied journalism in Rathmines in 1982 and worked for the Connacht Telegraph, the Evening Herald and the Irish Independent before joining his father on the Press. He won young journalist of the year in 1993 for a feature on the physical abuse of inner-city children, "The bashed street kids", and wrote a "terrible" column called The Bottom Line.

He fondly remembers interviewing the journalist Con Houlihan in his home in Portobello in Dublin, struggling to make out a word, what with the strong Kerry accent and the way he covered his mouth when he spoke – until Houlihan rang his bookmaker and, in the clearest voice imaginable, placed a bet.

Benedict Kiely, the literary editor of the Press, was a friend of his father. "He is



probably the most significant Irish writer for me, perhaps because of the northern connection. Absolutely the best books about the North for me are his Proxopera, then Nothing Happens in Carmincross. He took me under his wing, took me to Long's in Donnybrook, telling stories, poems, songs.

"I also remember Mr [John] Banville in the newsroom, always wrapped in big, heavy scarves." Did that inspire McCann's famous taste in scarves? He laughs. "No. That was inspired by being on the road and wearing a bandanna."

He had been reading a lot of the Beat writers, such as Kerouac, and felt that he had to get away, so he left for the States to write a novel. He rented an apartment in Cape Cod with other Irish on J1 visas, bought a typewriter but realised he had nothing to write about, so crossed the US on a bicycle, from Boston to Florida, New Orleans, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, looking for experience, five or 50 kilometres a day, meeting interesting people. "Now I can look back and see I was listening for stories."

McCann wrote two unpublished books, Uncle Saccharine – "terrible title, terrible book" – about cycling across the US, and a nonfiction book, The Wilderness Llamas, about working with juvenile delinquents in Texas. His brother Sean bought the manuscripts, which kept him going, and he got £2,000 from the Arts Council – "pretty forward-looking for them".



Benedict Kiely is probably the most significant Irish writer for me, perhaps because of the northern connection. He took me under his wing, took me to Long's in Donnybrook, telling stories, poems, songs

He had won Hennessy New Writer of the Year in 1990, chosen by Clare Boylan and Desmond Hogan, but had wallpapered his bathroom with publishers' rejection slips by the time his short story Sisters was published in Analecta, the University of Texas's student magazine. When the Hennessy Awards founder, David Marcus, asked his father how Colum was getting on, he gave him the magazine, which Marcus sent to a literary agent. Sisters became the first story

in his collection Fishing the Sloe-Black River, which won the Rooney Prize in 1994.

McCann has written that art can outlast buildings. Which of his works is most likely to be read in 50 years' time? "It is not really for me to say," he replies, but he concedes that he is particularly proud of his short story about a young girl and the Troubles, Everything in this Country Must, which was made into an Oscar-nominated short film. He also hopes that Apeirogon will be read, perhaps Let the Great World Spin and maybe Dancer, his 2003 novel based on the life of Rudolf Nureyev.

Apeirogon has captured the public's imagination. "People come to me all the time and ask are Rami and Bassam still friends. And I say yes, of course they are." He admires the risks they have taken and still take, stepping out from their tribe, being friends, talking about things that matter. He is in contact with them every week. "So I'm actually thinking that I might embark on another book about them, which would be the first time I would ever do something along those lines."

McCann is baffled that both men are barred from visiting the US. Bassam has a conviction but Rami does not, so his exclusion must be political. "They're anti-occupation, but they are talking about peace. Peace threatens people who are making an awful lot of money out of what's happening in the West Bank, in Gaza and in Israel."

McCann is also contemplating what he calls a big Irish novel. "That's definitely on the horizon. It's shaping up in my head right now and will take a couple of years for me to think of, something that traverses time – and not just small amounts of time: something that goes back to St Kevin in the cave in Glendalough. I keep thinking about it.

"I do think it's time to come home within the next few years, in terms of the Irish novel. I do have these ideas, and they build for a long, long time. I'm reading some quite interesting stuff about ancient warfare, and I'm also interested in how we Irish were involved in some of those American slaughters." ●

Twist is published by Bloomsbury next Thursday. Colum McCann will discuss it at the Pepper Canister, Dublin, that evening (sold out); Kenny's, Galway, next Friday; and Lime Tree Theatre, Limerick, next Saturday

THREE SHORT COMEDIES

SEÁN O'CASEY

'WILDLY ENTERTAINING'
THE IRISH TIMES

DIRECTED BY
GARRY HYNES

NATIONAL TOUR
FEBRUARY – MARCH 2025

BELFAST, CORK, DUBLIN,
ENNIS, GALWAY, KILKENNY,
LIMERICK, LONGFORD,
ROSCOMMON, TRALEE,
WEXFORD

WWW.DRUID.IE