

## Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher:	Shachter / Boone / Overbeck /Boden	School:	Liberty High School
Book Title:	Let the Great World Spin	Genre:	Literary Fiction
Author:	Colum McCann	Pages:	400
Publisher:	Random House	Copyright:	December 2009

*In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.*

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

In the dawning light of a late-summer morning, the people of lower Manhattan stand hushed, staring up in disbelief at the Twin Towers. It is August 1974, and a mysterious tightrope walker is running, dancing, leaping between the towers, suspended a quarter mile above the ground. In the streets below, a slew of ordinary lives become extraordinary in bestselling novelist Colum McCann's stunningly intricate portrait of a city and its people.

Let the Great World Spin is the critically acclaimed author's most ambitious novel yet: a dazzlingly rich vision of the pain, loveliness, mystery, and promise of New York City in the 1970s.

Corrigan, a radical young Irish monk, struggles with his own demons as he lives among the prostitutes in the middle of the burning Bronx. A group of mothers gather in a Park Avenue apartment to mourn their sons who died in Vietnam, only to discover just how much divides them even in grief. A young artist finds herself at the scene of a hit-and-run that sends her own life careening sideways. Tillie, a thirty-eight-year-old grandmother, turns tricks alongside her teenage daughter, determined not only to take care of her family but to prove her own worth.

Elegantly weaving together these and other seemingly disparate lives, McCann's powerful allegory comes alive in the unforgettable voices of the city's people, unexpectedly drawn together by hope, beauty, and the "artistic crime of the century." A sweeping and radical social novel, Let the Great World Spin captures the spirit of America in a time of transition, extraordinary promise, and, in hindsight, heartbreaking innocence. Hailed as a "fiercely original talent" (San Francisco Chronicle), award-winning novelist McCann has delivered a triumphantly American masterpiece that awakens in us a sense of what the novel can achieve, confront, and even heal. - Barnes and Noble

2009 National Book Award Winner  
2010 Ambassador Book Award Winner  
2009 Prix Deauville  
Amazon.com's "Book of the Year"

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

CP English 12's central focus is to bridge the gap in both learning an experience between high school and college. With this in mind, the texts we chose must have direct links to our curriculum and skill development, but also must promote the reading of texts at the maturity and complexity that a student is likely to encounter in college and in life.

With this in mind, *Let the Great World Spin* is a novel that allows us to study the craft of writing within the context of our learning to use lens to enhance one's voice, forward writing, and close reading abilities.

Common Core Standards:

RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.3. Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

RL.11-12.5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

RL.11-12.6. Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Curriculum Map Indicators

Annotate a text (i.e., highlighting, underlining, writing in margins, etc.) in order to interact with it

Close-read in order to interpret increasingly challenging texts

Compare texts to previously read texts, past and present events, and/or content learned in other coursework

Explain the relationship between the time in which a literary work is set, the time during which the author wrote, and the time in which the reader reads (i.e., *A Modest Proposal* as commentary on English treatment of the Irish poor in light of British imperialism and the readers' understanding of Democracy)

Identify, analyze, and evaluate the author's use of parallel plots and subplots in increasingly challenging texts

Recognize an author's choice of narrator and evaluate the overall impact of that choice in increasingly challenging texts

Identify, analyze, and evaluate the ways in which the devices the author chooses (e.g., irony, imagery, tone, sound techniques, foreshadowing, symbolism) achieve specific effects and shape meaning in increasingly challenging texts

**Include two professional reviews of this title:** (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

New York Times Book Review - <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/books/review/Mahler-t.html?pagewanted=all>

Philippe Petit, the French acrobat who in 1974 walked across a tightrope between the twin towers, wasn't on the payroll of the Port Authority, but in retrospect he probably should have been. At the time, the newly opened World Trade Center was shaping up as a huge mistake. Not only had the project cost far more than it was supposed to, but a city spiraling toward bankruptcy didn't exactly need millions more square feet of office space. Worse still, the towers were out of scale and utterly unattractive — “the largest aluminum siding job in the history of the world,” as one critic put it. They were the ugly stepchild of New York's skyscrapers, seemingly destined to be forever denied a place in the life and lore of the city. But in the span of a single summer morning, Petit gave the towers a history of their own. His stunt represented nothing less than a symbolic passing of the torch: in the remake of “King Kong” two years later, the furious, lovelorn gorilla takes his last stand not astride the Empire State Building but atop the World Trade Center.

For all the hoopla that greeted Petit's walk, it was largely forgotten until 9/11, when it was rediscovered amid the sudden nostalgia for all things twin towers. There was Petit's own memoir about the walk, “To Reach the Clouds,” as well as a memorable New Yorker cover on the fifth anniversary of the attacks and an Oscar-winning documentary, “Man on Wire.” Now Colum McCann has repurposed Petit's daring act as the leitmotif for “Let the Great World Spin,” one of the most electric, profound novels I have read in years.

McCann makes little effort to hew to the facts of Petit's story; he doesn't even name the wire walker. But the author appears to have remained faithful to the stunt's larger truths. Like Petit, McCann's acrobat doesn't simply focus on safely crossing 210 feet of braided cable, 110 stories up; he dances joyously among the clouds, reveling in his fleeting moment of human transcendence: “He was pureness moving. . . . He was inside and outside his body at the same time, indulging in what it meant to belong to the air.”

I don't want to overstate Petit's role in this book. The walk is really little more than a cultural touchstone and a literary conceit, the event around which McCann has assembled his cast. But the metaphorical possibilities of the walker — the paradox of this innocent, unsanctioned act of “divine delight” being carried out between two buildings that would one day be so viciously and murderously destroyed — are hard to ignore, particularly in a novel so concerned with the twin themes of love and loss.

“Let the Great World Spin” will sneak up on you. It begins slowly and quietly on the other side of the ocean. There, in a seaside town in Ireland (McCann was born in Dublin but now lives in New York), we are introduced to two of its central characters, a budding monk named Corrigan and his aimless brother, Ciaran. They soon find their way to a bleak project in the 1970s South Bronx (“Kids on the 10th floor aimed television sets at the housing cops who patrolled below”), where Corrigan informally ministers to the prostitutes who peddle their wares beneath the Major Deegan Expressway while Ciaran tends bar at an Irish pub in Queens and tries to make sense of the strange life that his ascetic brother has chosen.

From here, the book's sweep gradually expands as the brothers' story collides with those of several others, among them an aging black hooker, a Guatemalan nurse and a 20-something artist. The circle continues to widen, six-degrees-of-separation-style, with the players growing ever more diverse. The film "Crash" inevitably comes to mind — there's even a fatal car accident — only without the reductive moralizing. "It had never occurred to me before," one character says, "but everything in New York is built upon another thing, nothing is entirely by itself, each thing as strange as the last, and connected."

Like a great pitcher in his prime, McCann is constantly changing speeds, adopting different voices, tones and narrative styles as he shifts between story lines. Inevitably, some of his portraits work better than others. That prostitute, boldly rendered in the first person, feels disappointingly clichéd from a writer of such imaginative gifts. Far more original and nuanced are a Park Avenue housewife and her husband, the judge Solomon Soderberg, who are trying in different ways to cope with the death of their son. It is a mark of the novel's soaring and largely fulfilled ambition that McCann just keeps rolling out new people, deftly linking each to the next, as his story moves toward its surprising and deeply affecting conclusion.

In a loose sense, what connects everyone in this novel is the high-wire walker; the day of his stunt is a pivotal one in all of their lives. But they are bound more powerfully by something else: grief. "Let the Great World Spin" is an emotional tour de force. It is a heartbreaking book, but not a depressing one. Through their anguish, McCann's characters manage to find comfort, even a kind of redemption.

Always in the background is a time and a place — the waning days of Nixon and Vietnam, and New York in the 1970s. McCann gives us snapshots of the decaying city, slipping in occasional references to cultural landmarks like Max's Kansas City and Studio 54 (which didn't actually open until 1977, McCann might like to know for the paperback edition). But he also finds other vantage points from which to gaze at the heaving muck of New York, most memorably Manhattan's municipal courthouse. "He watched the parade come in and out," McCann writes of the judge's job processing criminals, "and he wondered how the city had become such a disgusting thing on his watch. . . . It was like surveying the evolution of slime. You stand there long enough and the gutter gets slick, no matter how hard you battle against it."

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. 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.

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. "Every now and then the city shook its soul out," he writes. "It assailed you with an image, or a day, or a crime, or a terror, or a beauty so difficult to wrap your mind around that you had to shake your head in disbelief."

Jonathan Mahler, a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, is the author of "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning" and "The Challenge," which is just out in paperback.

Review #2

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4000-6373-4>

Let the Great World Spin

Colum McCann / Author . Random \$25 (349p) ISBN 978-1-4000-6373-4

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. (June)

Reviewed on: 03/09/2009

**What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?**

Title: **The Dubliners**

Author: **James Joyce**

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

**Document any potentially controversial content:**

All "controversial" content is given within the context of characterization and perspective that is part of the lens in which a specific character interacts with the world. Viewing this material outside the context of the character's development and experiences may skew its purpose.

Profanity - Multiple uses of "fuck", "shit", "bitch", "pussy", "Goddamn", "Jesus", etc.

Slang - Various terms including anatomical references: "dick" "tit"

Stereotypes - "Nigger" "faggots" - Multiple characters are prostitutes

Religious - God, Jesus Christ

Violence - There is death and physical conflict between characters

Sex - Prostitution; sex between consenting adults

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)**

Gifted/Accelerated  Regular  At Risk

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

**Reading level of this title (if applicable):**

**Date Submitted to Department Chair:** 10/28/11

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults