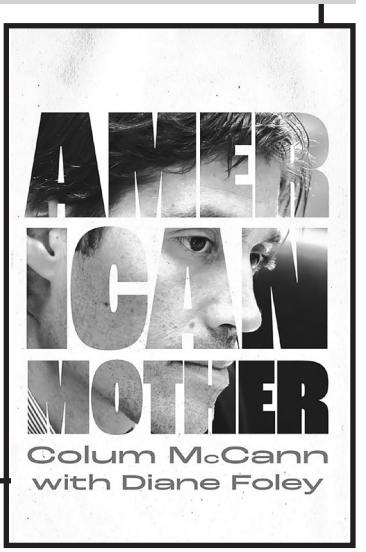
Otherness, Empathy, and the Power of Writing

Siân Griffiths

A Conversation with
Colum McCann



In this interview, we hear from a man who has explored the power of narrative in its most profound form: the power to create empathy, and through that empathy to engender peace. Colum McCann is the author of seven novels, three story collections, and two works of non-fiction. He's earned many accolades, including the 2009 National Book Award for his novel Let the Great World Spin, *and his work has been published in over forty languages.*

In his novels, McCann shatters the singular narrative plot line, and from its pieces he offers individual but interconnected stories, tucking us briefly into each life, allowing us to inhabit, among other places, the cockpit of the first transatlantic flight, the impoverished streets of the 1970s Bronx that form the beat of mother/daughter sex workers, the grief of a Palestinian father who lost his daughter, the grief of an Israeli father who lost his daughter, the borrowed rooms of an enslaved writer as he first visits Ireland, the frozen midwestern lake turned ice farm from which an immigrant family hoists their living, the line on which a tight rope walker balances, Trade Center-high, over Manhattan.

As McCann writes, "The thing about love is that we come alive in bodies not

*our own." It heartens me to know that his books have been read and quoted by presidents and statesmen. Of McCann's latest work, the musician and activist Sting writes, "*American Mother *is a book that will shake your soul out." I suspect all of McCann's books could be described this way. Which is to say that, if you read with an open heart, the work of Colum McCann just may make you a better, more compassionate human being.*

McCann's humanitarian work extends well beyond the page. He is president and co-founder of the non-profit global story exchange, Narrative 4. *This organization brings students from vastly differing backgrounds together to swap stories and find within them their shared humanity. As McCann writes, "It's an act of radical empathy. . . . You tell my story and I'll tell yours."*

It has become commonplace to despair at our world, its politics, its hatreds. Though he does not flinch from writing of profoundly sad events, McCann's work is nothing short of a miraculous balm against cynicism. As he has said, "We have a duty to hope – despite all the evidence in front of us." This is the brave work we must shoulder. His writings show us how.

In previous interviews, I've heard you tell a story about watching your father write his first book. Will you share that story again here?

Sure. I grew up in a house filled with books. My dad was a professional football player; he played for Charlton Athletic in England. My dad took a job as a newspaper reporter and then became a features editor. Writers used to come to our house all the time, looking for a few bob so they could go down to the pub. Taxis would pull up outside of the house, and out would come people like Benedict Kiley, or Con Houlihan—famous literary figures. Back then, there were no "drink links," what we called ATM machines back then, and the banks would all be closed. So, they came knocking at our door, looking for twenty pounds to go out on the town. My dad would give them the twenty pounds and say, "I want an article from you next week." And they would, inevitably, do the article for him the next week. I can almost hear the taxi slushing its way down the street, on the way to the pub.

My father wrote books, so the sound of my childhood is the sound of typing coming from our garden shed. He started to write kids' soccer books when I was about seven years old. He would come inside with these big reams of paper, and he would give me the stories that he was working on and ask me what I thought of them. I would just tell him, "I don't know" at that stage. I was his first editor, you know. Those stories eventually got published. The first one is called *Goals for Glory*, another one is called *We are the Champions*—they're quite popular in England and Ireland. In my school, Mr. Kells was my third-grade teacher. He said that if we behaved ourselves, on Friday afternoons, he would, over the course of a number of weeks, read one of these books aloud to the class. I was a bit embarrassed by all of this, but secretly very proud. I remember that on the last day, when he read the last chapter of the book, there was a moment when the character of the book,

Georgie Goode, scored a goal and won the championship at the end, against all odds. A kid who sat in front of me, Christopher, jumped up out of his desk in excitement. I remember thinking, that's really odd. That story came from my father's head; it came from my father's fingers; I saw that story on paper, and now it's being transferred, not only into the air, but into somebody's body. I remember thinking that was a very peculiarly wonderful thing. I think that was the first moment when I realized the power of writing. I was beginning to think that I wanted to write, too.

What was the *moment that you first thought of yourself as a writer? I feel like that's a big step for a lot of writers – going from, I'm a person who* wants *to write, to I* am *a writer.*

You know, I was published at a very early age. I was a soccer reporter at the age of twelve. I'd get on my bicycle and pedal to various games, and then go back home to phone in my reports. I was a journalist right up until the age of twenty-one-years-old. When I came to the United States, I rode a bicycle across the United States for a year and a half. I wrote two books, and they failed miserably—they're still in a drawer somewhere. My mantra is, "No matter, try again, fail again, fail better."

It's originally Samuel Beckett's mantra, obviously. I *felt* like a writer when I was going through those years and years of rejection slips. I suppose it wasn't until I had my third book out that I actually had the gumption to go to a party, and when people asked me, "What do you do?," I'd say, "I'm a writer." And then they'd say weird things to me like, "What do you write?," and I'd say, "I write fiction," and they'd say, "Oh, I hate fiction," and I'd say, "Oh, thanks."

I've been writing now, more or less full-time, for almost thirty years. I've had all sorts of jobs. I was a bartender for a while— I probably made more money bartending than doing anything else. I dug ditches; I was a teacher; I've done all sorts of odd jobs as well. I feel very lucky to be able to make a living as a writer now.

It's become popular lately to cite studies that show that reading encourages empathy. I don't doubt those studies; I'm sure they're correct. But, I've also read a lot of books that seem to reduce people and their characters, making easy heroes and villains, and asking little of the reader in terms of empathy. Those books may offer rollicking plots, but they don't do much in terms of expanding our humanity. Your work seems to embrace the inverse of this. You go deep into each of your character's minds and really inhabit them. You write from hugely varied points of view – from historical figures like Frederick Douglass, or Alcock and Brown, to lesser known people like Rami and Bassam in Apeirogon*, or invented figures like Corrigan, the radical Irish monk, or Tilly, the Black sex worker, in* Let the Great World Spin*. Including that variety of experiences and voices seems fundamental to your writing and is a core part of your art. What draws you in that direction?*

This is a very contemporary notion—who gets to write what and why—and I think it's incredibly important to confront it. I have written about a variety of topics, in all sorts of different directions. People are talking a lot these days about cultural appropriation. This all started at the university level in the 1980s—back then, it was considered a rarefied thing. All these people were speaking from ivory towers, and people thought it was a bit of a crazy notion, but it wasn't, because there was truth in it. The idea has filtered down into popular culture. And it's a good question, because writers have gone in, artists have gone in, corporations have gone in, and plundered different cultures. They've condescended, and patronized, and done all sorts of things. I have to give kudos to people who say, "You've got to be careful about what sort of territory you step into, and what sort of story you tell."

But on the same hand, and this is really important, the *exact same* hand, *not* the other hand; it's *not* the *opposite* argument. There is a way to go into a topic, or into a culture, or into a place, or into a character, with your head bowed, saying, "I need to know." Approaching a topic in that way will help it become an active cultural celebration, because it will increase my own engagement, my own community, my own nationality, by allowing us entry into the story. I talk a lot with my friend Marlon James, the Jamaican novelist, about this. We actually did a public debate about this, and we both came up with the notion that it's all about honesty. It comes down to how honest you are with the character and with the stories. I've written novels from all sorts of different points of view. Like with my last book, I went into Israel and Palestine and some people said I have no right. In fact, I questioned myself in doing so. But we write towards our obsessions. I think every novel I've written is actually an Irish novel, even if it has taken place outside of Ireland.

I would counsel younger writers out there not to be afraid, not to be limited, not to let these lanes of narrowness that are occurring in certain cultural circles limit you. It's a fad, and it will go away. I like the world. I'm interested in other people. I really like listening to other people's stories. One of the things that I learned when I was traveling through the U.S. on that bicycle was that the value of the art of listening was actually much more profound than telling the story. I like to live my life and my stories out loud.

What kind of research do you do to get into the voice of your characters so that they feel authentic, and believable, and lived in as fully as your characters always do?

Always go for the most extreme detail. They say, "God is in the details." The devil is in the details, too. I wrote a book called *Dancer*, which is a fictionalization of the life of Rudolf Nureyev. I knew nothing about dance when I wrote the book. I mean, honestly, you should see me dance, you'd laugh. I'm Irish, I can't dance. Anyway, I was researching this book while my daughter Isabella was going to ballet school. I remember taking her to the ballet, *The Nutcracker,* at Christmas time. We were sitting there in the seats, and snow was coming down on stage during the performance. Isabella leaned across me, took my hand, and said, "Oh, Daddy, it's so beautiful, is it real?" There were fifty dancers up there on stage, and I'm thinking, I'm going to go talk to these dancers next week, and I'm going to tell them what my beautiful little daughter said about the performance.

And so, I went and told them the next week, and they said, "That's the moment we hate most in the ballet." I asked why, and they said, "The snow that's coming down as we're up there looking angelic, and beautiful, and totally at ease. . . well, that's actually Styrofoam. That Styrofoam gets swept up every night and put back up in the net, with

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little bits of dust, and little bits of mouse poop, and pegs of earrings. It's all coming down on us, and all we want to do is stand there and sneeze." It was such an extreme thing, such an extreme detail, it seemed so absolutely true that only a dancer would know it; it would be almost impossible to imagine that sort of detail. So, sometimes you go for that sort of detail to get in behind your character. And that sort of detail can take care of a lot of other details that go before it. Am I talking smoke and mirrors? Well, kind of—you want to have all the truth and all the honesty at the same time. I promise you, if I only wrote about myself, and the world that I lived in, I would bore myself to tears. I like waking up in the morning, looking in the mirror, and saying, "Thank God, I don't have to spend the next twenty-four hours with *you*." I like escaping into other places.

For me, writing a book is almost like going to university again. I generally spend three or four years on a book. My most recent book, ***American Mother,*** my first nonfiction book, was a little quicker than that.

I want to come back to that, because I'm curious how it was to work with another person while crafting a narrative. But before I do, I want to explore the idea of detail. One of the things that I love about your writing is that you don't hesitate to stretch out a small moment. You pay particular attention to minute details. I'm thinking of the sweatshirt that falls off the tight rope walker at the beginning of the opening scene in Let the Great World Spin. *Some might think that level of detail is boring, but it never is in your work. When describing this falling sweatshirt, for instance, the people who are watching think, at first, that it's a body falling, which creates a heart-gripping moment.*

I'm also thinking of the moment in Apeirogon *where the focus is on a child's candy bracelet as her father is traveling with her in an ambulance and she is dying. It's a devastating scene, paired with such careful description. Each written moment is so closely observed that your writing never feels overwrought; it feels spare and concise. The simple physical objects convey incredible depth of emotion. How do you approach finding the* right *detail – the one that feels unexpected and yet rings with truth? Do you find yourself writing and then discarding details? Or, does the image come first and help you create the scene? Or, is it something radically different?*

My new favorite phrase is, "I don't know." It's a good phrase to arm yourself with—particularly in these times when we are all so certain of things. Often, as a writer, you don't know what it is you're doing. You're flying by the seat of your pants and you're hoping to God to get through the day. When you're creating a novel, there are times when you just enter into the mystery and you're hoping to pierce through and get to the other side. The one thing that I *do* know is that the tiny can reveal the great; small can become epic. If we try to be *too* epic at first, and only epic, it falls and becomes pretentious, or declaratory; it just doesn't feel right. And if it remains ***only*** tiny, unless it has a real intention to reveal something epic about human nature, it won't work either. But, a little bit of both, working together, help the details of the real world reveal the other world—the world that we all want to know about. And the other world that we all want to know about is in the ineffable things, the difficult things for us to actually put a map on, issues like love and pride; pity, sacrifice, and compassion; all of these different things, even violence and hatred. It's hard to talk about them as ideas unless you're a philosopher, and I'm certainly not a philosopher. I can find a moment that reveals these things and then allow the reader to step in somewhere.

The other important thing is, the writer should not attempt to ***tell*** the reader anything. I think you have to treat your reader as somebody who's much cleverer than you are. They

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will get more out of the book than you are able to tell them. You prepare the landscape, but you don't *tell* people anything, you *allow* people to *feel*. One thing I've tried to do is to enter the pulse of the moment. I want my reader to go in and feel like they're at the very beating heart of what's going on. I want them temporarily removed from the world. I'm also very interested in the inexecutable, the thing that people say you *can't* do, that you *can't* write.

I was very scared to talk about Israel and Palestine. But most books that I go into, I go into scared about. I always abandon a book at least once. Mostly, it's because I want some self-pity, or I want pity from my family; that "poor you, you don't have to wash the dishes, love. I know you're going through a hard time" kind of attention. But also, it's partly because I want to test how much I love my characters. I want to leave them for a while, because when I leave them and then come back, I realize that it was worth it after all. If you embark on a new project halfway through the project that you're in, it's not necessarily a bad thing, because you realize this is not as good as what you were doing before, so you go back to it.

I think you said something similar in a recent BBC interview. You said something like, "To be a writer, you have to be reckless; you have to be ready to leap off the ledge."

Kurt Vonnegut said, "We should be continually jumping off of cliffs and developing our wings on the way down."

It makes me think, because so seldom when I'm sitting at my desk, is there a cliff, right? But, I feel that call to bravery, to do something different. In a book like American Mother*, when did you feel those moments where you had to be courageous when facing the page?*

American Mother, for those of you who haven't read it, is my most recent book; it just came out two weeks ago. It's a nonfiction piece about Diane Foley, who is the mother of James Foley, the journalist who was killed in Syria, in 2014.

In order to prepare for the book, I went to a courthouse in Virginia with Diane to talk to her son's killer, a British jihadist who had been part of an infamous torture group. I knew this was going to be my first book of nonfiction, and I wanted to capture her story. I wanted to take myself out of the story; I didn't want it to be like Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood*—which is a great book, by the way; I didn't want to become a character in the book. I wanted the characters to concentrate around Diane and her son, Jim.

In doing so, I had to do a number of things. For instance, Diane is a woman of deep faith. I had to put myself into her shoes. She finds it very difficult to articulate what that faith is. Because faith is a difficult thing to articulate anyway, putting a language around what you believe, and then to try to convince others of its truth, is a difficult thing. So, I had to put words to the thoughts that

she had and then show them to her. Saying "Prayer is the bread of the soul" is not something that I believe, necessarily, but it is something that Diane believes in. That was a huge challenge for me—being consistently honest to her and yet also consistently honest to the reader at the same time.

Occasionally, she would tell me that I was pushing it. She'd say, "You're a good fiction writer, Colum." Even sometimes in ***Apeirogon***, there were times I pushed the "truth." For example, if any of you read ***Apeirogon***, it's about an Israeli and a Palestinian; both men have lost their daughters. One of the characters, Rami, the Israeli, drives a motorbike. He's seventy years old. He drives a motorbike; he drives very fast, and very well. In the first scene, he's on a motorbike going through the streets of Jerusalem. After he read it, he called me up and he said, "Colum, I love all this, but you have me on the wrong bike." I said, "I know." Then he said, "What do you mean, you know?"

In the book, I put him on a bike with gears. I didn't want to put him on an automatic, because the bike with gears has words like "clutch," "gear," and "revometer." You can physically put the reader on the bike using language and terminology so that they actually get on the bike with Rami. That was the most important thing—I wanted the reader to be on the bike with him. If I changed his bike in order to get the reader on the bike, on the *real* bike, that's a form of manipulation of the truth, but it gets to a deeper honesty that's going on there. While working with Diane to write this book of nonfiction, I wasn't allowed to do that. She wouldn't allow me to do that. My father used to say, "A good marriage is feeling easy in the harness." And I think with the truth, there's some similarities in that phrase; but sometimes I just want to break free of the harness.

Creative writing is often heralded as self-expression, but when I'm writing, part of the challenge is to enact a kind of self-erasure so that I can fully inhabit another person's experience. You write, "We step into the shoes of others in order to be more able to step back into our own." And, in a recent BBC interview, you said, "I sometimes think that by not writing directly about myself, I might, in fact, be writing more directly about my own particular experience." I think it's because it removes the temptation to lie. It made me wonder, are those seemingly contradictory ideas of self-expression and self-erasure actually linked? What are your thoughts on that—how do you feel yourself negotiating those two things?

That's a great question. First of all, never believe a writer, especially when they're on the spot and they're being asked questions; all sorts of answers will come up. I once said, "Writing about *real* people shows an absolute failure of the imagination." I said this to ***Atlantic Monthly Magazine***. About six months later, I embarked on the book about Rudolf Nureyev, so, take everything with a grain of salt. Of course, you've got to find your own salt; you've got to find your own water, shake it out, evaporate it, and make it for yourself.

I feel much freer when I'm not writing about myself. I have become *way* too conscious, and I would lie *way* too much if I was writing directly about myself. Now, I do some journalism and have written about my father, but, in general, I find a real liberation that comes with going outside of myself. The questions become, what is biography? What is autobiography? Can you write beyond what you know? Is it philosophically possible to write what you don't know?

I think my main argument for young writers, in particular, is not to write what you know, but to write what you *want* to know, or to write towards what you seemingly don't know. And in doing that, you will write what you *knew*, but you weren't entirely *aware* of. It's a process of leaping through your consciousness and finding the story that really speaks to you. Sometimes, we don't

even know what that story happens to be. It's about excavating your imagination and coming up with that little piece of ice, that Márquez piece of ice. It's like discovering ice in a very warm climate. For me, the liberation comes from being free to go into other people. So, even if you're writing about *a* mother, like I wrote about, my *own* mother is inevitably going to come into that equation, or certainly the thoughts about my own mother. So why just be limited to that? Why doesn't it become something that you can expand outwards?

Like I said, I really do like the world. I know it's a tough, dark place right now, and we're living in really dark times, but I'm reminded of Bertolt Brecht, who said, "Will there be singing in the dark times?" And he said, "Yes, we will be singing *of* the dark times." So, it's the job of the writer to get in there, or the artist in general, to get in there and figure out what's going on.

It makes me imagine the character as a kind of pitcher, and you (as the writer) are pouring yourself like water into this pitcher and taking its shape. Do you find your thoughts shaped in different directions than they otherwise would be if you were writing about a character who was more fully just a mirror for yourself?

I don't know. I mean, did I change because I wrote about Rami and Bassam? I certainly learned a lot about the world. Did I *personally* change? Did I change my viewpoints about humanity? I have certainly shifted somewhat, but I don't think it was a complete, fundamental change. I try not to write too much about really bad characters. I suppose that scares me a little bit. If you look at *Apeirogon*, there's a lot of evil that is going on there, but I tried to just get in there and be as honest as possible.

How was it different when you were working with Diane Foley — in the moments when Diane's beliefs or politics might have been different from your own?

Diane's son was kidnapped, tortured, and killed. He was in a cell with Spanish people, French people, Danish people, British people, and other Americans. The French paid to get their people out. The Spanish paid to get their people out. The Danish allowed the families to pay to get people out. Diane was told that she would be prosecuted if she tried to pay the hostage money for her son.

Can you imagine that? Just think about that for a moment. You are a mother, your son is in Syria, and the government tells you that you will be prosecuted if you try to give them money. And she's saying, "Well, what are you doing to get him out?" And they're saying, "No, we don't negotiate with terrorists." Can you imagine?

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Later, she sat with President Obama in the White House. Obama had a cup of tea, and she didn't. He said, "Your son was my absolute priority." And she said, "With all due respect, sir, my son was not your absolute priority." She told me that story, and I said, "Diane, please don't tell me that story, because I'm going to have to write it, and I really like Obama." As it turned out, she shifted him somewhat, and his policies *did* eventually change.

That is the wonderful thing about Diane Foley and what she has done in the world. She's an *ordinary* woman in her 60s when her son is kidnapped. In her 70s, she starts changing the whole landscape of hostage taking and wrongfully detained people. She is a nurse practitioner; she lives in a little house in New Hampshire with a white picket fence; and yet, she has the power of her conviction to change things. She has faith, yes, but she also has courage—a moral courage that she inherited from her son. I want the reader to be able to understand everything about her.

Now, Diane originally didn't want anybody to write the book; she wanted to write the book herself. But just because you have a story doesn't mean you have a book. When you get there, and you try to put language down on the page, everything that was in your mind and your heart doesn't necessarily translate through your fingers. You know the feeling when you get frustrated because you know what it is you want to say, but you're just not able to say it. It is about stamina, desire, and perseverance on the part of the writer to get readers to understand the moral courage of the characters at hand, and to let them know that it's hard work. Sometimes, people will say, "I wish I could write a book," or, "I wish I had the time to write a book." Well, "I wish I had the time to be a brain surgeon." Imagine saying something like that to a brain surgeon. It's tough to write a book. You have to put all of yourself into it and you have to be present for the actual moment, even when it's going badly. You have to keep your arse in the chair. When it's going well, you can get up and go down to the park, and walk the dog, and wash the dishes, and do whatever else you want to do. But when it's going badly, you stay there and you fight. I used to think that there's no such thing as writer's block, but now I do. But, it doesn't matter; you sit and you face it, and you tear your hair out. I've obviously done that!

Thank you, Colum. This was a wonderful and heart-warming conversation.

Siân Griffiths lives in Ogden, Utah, where she serves as a professor of English and creative writing at Weber State University. Her work has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner, American Short Fiction*, and *Booth,* among many other publications. She is the author of the novels *Borrowed Horses* and *Scrapple,* and the short fiction chapbook, *The Heart Keeps Faulty Time*. Her essay collection, T*he Sum of Her Parts,* appeared from University of Georgia Press. Currently, she reads fiction as part of the editorial team at *Barrelhouse*. For more information, please visit sbgriffiths.com