A Teacher Toolbox

for

Let the Great World Spin

by Colum McCann

The KCC Reads Selection

for the

Academic Year 2011 - 2012

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~Materials & Resources~
~some materials you might want to consider using or looking at:

- Screening all or clips from *Man on Wire*, dir. James Marsh (2008), a documentary about Philippe Petit’s tightrope walk between the Twin Towers on August 7th, 1974.

- **Interviews, conversations and Q&A sessions** with the author about the novel, as well as **book reviews, articles** and other related material. You can search the **literature databases** available through the KCC library webpage:

  http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu/kcclibrary/Pages/dbsubject.aspx

  You may access the Colum McCann page in the **MLA (Gale) Literature Resource Center database** which has lots of helpful info:

  http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRG&u=cuny_main&authCount=1

  Or you can simply do a search through the **MLA International Bibliography** for articles on the novel:

  http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=MLA&u=cuny_kingsboro&authCount=1

- See youtube.com link and info below.

- Also see the article (**copy included, see next page**) by Colum McCann called “Dessert,” published in *The New Yorker*, Sept. 2011.

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~Websites & Links~
~some helpful links for teachers and students of this novel:

- The new KCC Reads webpage – look for links here for the up-to-date version of the Teacher Toolbox for the novel as well as information about possible KCC Reads book choices for future years. Here’s the link:

  [http://kccreads.wordpress.com/](http://kccreads.wordpress.com/)

- On my youtube.com channel, I have uploaded a whole bunch of videos related to this novel: interviews and conversations with the author, readings of the novel by him, performances of readings by others, etc. Here’s the link:

  [http://www.youtube.com/user/meruprecht#p/f](http://www.youtube.com/user/meruprecht#p/f)

  Click the link to “Playlists.” There are two of interest: the second one called “colum mccann and _let the great world spin_” and the third playlist titled “colum mccann @ EGS.”

  In addition, if you click on “Favorites,” there may be more there (that I wasn’t using in my class and so didn’t put in a playlist).

  There is a large collection of relevant videos on my channel. So, you can “favorite” whichever ones you may want to use and set up your own playlists and youtube.com channel, if you find it helpful.

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Informal Writing / Activities
In-Class or as Homework
~some informal assignments, worked on in class or as homework:

“Miró, Miró, on the Wall”

One of the things we recognize about Let the Great World Spin is the way the chapters are chockfull of images and pictures, moments in which the story is being told mostly through visuals that are described, commented on or positioned in a certain way...

- Find a memorable image—a picture or figure drawn with words or verbally described—and try to explain the meaning of the image in your own words. What does it seem to symbolize? Why do you think McCann placed that image in that place? How does it relate to or resonate with themes, characters, incidents and issues in the book?

“Part of the Parts”:

One of the most essential aspects of covering lengthy, dense material—such as the content of a novel—is to “break it down” into manageable parts. This novel permits that in ways other novels resist, in the sense that it is already a fragmented narrative or, we might say, a narrative of fragments: episodes are not continuous or chronological; other than the Philippe Petit chapters, they are all told from a different, often new character’s perspectives and shift in terms of location, both geographical location and “political” or cultural location. Beyond that, we may consider pieces of the whole in a variety of ways...

- Locate and mark three passages (a sentence, a paragraph, a scene) in Chapter ______ that you remember or feel are important either because they are meaningful, or because they are beautiful, or because they confused you, or because you simply liked them for some reason. / Go around the room having students take us to a passage, read it aloud, explicate and discuss. / Repeat this exercise for as many chapters as there is time.

- Choose your favorite chapter and write a paragraph or page of reflections on it. Why do you think it’s your favorite episode? What
do you think drew you to it and what does it mean to you? How does this segment connect with the others? And so on... / Repeat this exercise as many times as seems necessary or helpful.

- Choose your favorite character in the novel and write a paragraph or page about them. Why do you suspect this character, in particular, stood out to you? What is it about them that you like? Do you relate to the character in some way? How does this character, and whatever you like about them, relate to major themes and issues in this novel?

- Choose your least favorite character in the novel and write a page on them. Why do you suspect that this character stood out to you in the way they do? What is it about them that you dislike? Do you relate to the character in some way? How does this character, and whatever you dislike about them, relate to major themes and issues in this novel?

**Making “Centavos”:**

- Fill in the blank: “Having read the entire novel, I now realize that the moral of the story, *Let the Great World Spin*, is __________________________.” Then, explain more about what you mean and why. Give examples.

- Fill in the blank, “Having completed my reading of Chapter ____ _____, it is my sense that its central meaning is __________________________.” Then, explain, explain, explain including examples.

- What are your thoughts about the structure of this novel – the fact that episodes (from chapter to chapter) are not continuous, that each one introduces a new primary character, situation and perspective? Do you think there is a meaning we can derive simply from the style by which the author chose to present this story?

- What do you think about the connections across and between the disconnected chapters of this novel? Once we arrive at Lara’s long,
guilt-ridden chapter, we begin making connections back to the first long chapter that focuses on Fr. Corrigan and is narrated by his brother Ciaran, a recent immigrant from Ireland. As we continue to read, the connections continue to hit us: that between the chapter “Tag” and the photograph on page 237; the many that surface in Gloria and Jaslyn’s chapters at the end. (This is similar, one remembers, to the structure of the film *Crash*, which we also study in my classes.) As in the last question, do you think there is a meaning to this and what are your thoughts about what that might be?

• We know, from having listened to the author speak on the novel, that, for him, *Let the Great World Spin* is a response to the September 11th, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. This is an unusual claim since that event is nowhere to be found between the covers of this book, at least not in any obvious way; the World Trade Center is there, however, and perhaps that is in some way the point. Or one of them. ...What are your thoughts about this? If we accept the author’s assertion as true, how would we interpret *Let the Great World Spin* through the lens of an event which occurred 27 years later? Is there a way of reading this novel as a response to 9/11, and if so, how so?

• How does the beauty of the language of this novel change, or not change, how we respond to it, how we regard it, or how well we understand it? Did this matter to you in any way as you read this novel?

• Which character would you say is most important to you, as a reader of this novel, and why?

• Also useful is to ask students to write monologues in the voice of a character ~or~ write a letter to one of the characters in their own voice.

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~Additional Classroom Activities~
~some suggestions for additional work we might do in the classroom:

• It is probably quite helpful to have students work in groups brainstorming themes of the novel: at the level of the chapter, the character, and/or the narrative as a whole. / Have groups locate examples of a number of the themes they uncovered through discussion.

• Groups can also work on discussion questions for the novel, the critical questions and important concerns urged by that text. / Have other groups work on questions devised by each.

• With the large cast of characters populating *Let the Great World Spin*, it may be helpful to have students work on a particular character in small groups, ascertaining the meanings or lessons associated with the character, the themes and issues attached to them, the journey the character is taken through across the novel, and/or what is the particular role they play within it.

• It is useful to have students dramatically perform sections of the novel – as we see in some of the youtube.com videos.

• I also like, once the novel is fully read, and depending on the particular dynamics of the class, to sometimes toss out my plan for the day and simply let students take over the discussion and run the class. This is something I have often taken the opportunity to do on days when I enter the classroom and realize that students have already begun the discussion, of the text, before I arrived. Sometimes I think it’s good to just let that continue and allow students to take that day’s class wherever they want to take it. These have, at times, been some of our most productive classroom sessions.
~Formal Assignments,
~Worksheets,
~Scaffolding.
~assignments, worksheets and thoughts on scaffolding:

These are some of the materials I used in my first semester teaching *Let the Great World Spin*. I will modify all of these this term and add assignments other faculty members have used in the next update to the toolbox. For now, here are a few things which may be helpful.

Note: The idea, in terms of doing so much informal writing while studying a novel such as this one (as suggested in the two previous sections, above), is for students to create a “bank” of analysis, insight and reflection that they can draw from in putting together a final formal paper – arriving at a topic or general focus for it as well as figuring out their thesis.

included below are:

- a handout I use for in-class **journal writing** on the novel, one for each “Book” where students choose which chapter to focus on or which character, etc. *(3 pages)*

  we complete many more informal writings on the novel, but these are three which, at some point, I always use. with other novels I have broken it down by chapters (rather than the “Book” structure of this one) – giving students an option of writing on any of the first four or the second four chapters, etc.

- handouts I use for **in-class group work** on the novel – one in which students read a journal they wrote about the novel and discuss the book based on each other’s written and shared reflections; another in which they draw comparisons between this novel and previous readings for the class; and finally, one where they work in groups for the purpose of ascertaining either the overall meaning they have derived from the text or the meaning of one chapter *(3 pages)*

  …note: there are of course many other group assignments we might do – these are just some of the ones I did last semester in my classes.
• an "outlining / drafting" handout I often use when students are writing a paper on a novel – this is to be used as a way of either starting to draft the essay by hand or creating an outline or as a place where they simply make notes toward the essay – I do not usually require that the outline be completed as homework but I do often use this in class and many students do use it to outline or make notes toward the essay. (3 pages)

• the guidelines sheet I used last term for the final paper on Let the Great World Spin (1 page).

the scaffolding for this paper would involve the accumulation of in-class and at-home work we would have completed on the novel: a large number of informal writing assignments will have been written; several small group sessions will have been completed (which may be helpful in bringing students to their topics); we would also have done one or two sessions in class where students focus on figuring out their paper topics and thesis statements, involving for example: free-writing discovery pieces, worksheets, working together to share ideas and hone thesis statements, and/or class periods devoted to individual-work where I meet briefly with each student to talk through their topic and thesis idea, and so on.

I often devote a class to pulling out all the informal writing we’ve done, and re-reading it, looking for fragments that are useable in the paper and/or entire journal entries that may be appropriate to build into it, or where they might actually find their thesis idea expressed someplace.

• a take-home midterm exam assignment on Let the Great World Spin – for the midterm, there were five options given to students, each of which required using one text to “read” and interpret another – in this case, students had the opportunity to use McCann’s brilliant characterization of New York City (that opens the chapter called “Part of the Parts”) to interpret one of four other texts: either one of two films or one of two poems, all of which we had already studied as a class.

• and finally, the final exam I gave in English 12 last semester in which students wrote another essay on the novel and chose one of six questions (see handout) as the basis for it. (2 pages)