

THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS

by Colum McCann

(Metropolitan Books, \$23.00)

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If we're stuck in the middle of a memoir craze --- as many critics like to grumble --- then we're also in something of a golden age for historical fiction. In the past year alone, several serious novels with historical settings have won big audiences, big prizes, or both. Charles Frazier, David Guterson, Steven Millhauser, Carol Shields and Russell Banks are just some of the better-known writers who've recently rummaged around in our collective attic.

Why this trend? It may be that we like our fiction to be validated by historical fact. Or it may be that our writers prefer to have a safety net of historical research when they perform on the high wire of fiction. Whatever the reason, this boom has produced some unlikely wonders --- books that not only entertain but which move us with their depth of understanding and relevance to our own lives.

One such triumph of imagination is Colum McCann's *THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS*. McCann's compulsively readable novel is the story of the people who created the tunnels and skyscrapers on New York City.

At nineteen, Nathan Walker comes north to work as a "sandhog." This is what the many Irish, Polish, Italians and African Americans who dug out the city's subway tunnels were called. One bitterly cold day in 1916, while working under the East River, a weakness in the riverbed creates a hole that sucks the men from a tunnel and into the water above. Walker survives, and this blowout sets the tone for much of rest of his story. *THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS* traces Walker's story --- his marriage to a white woman (Walker is African-American), the birth of his children and grandchild, and the tragedies that surround him in mid-life. Like the tunnel blowout, which is at once deeply personal and yet larger-than-life, many of the events in Walker's life have the same powerful, relentless, inevitable quality as history itself.

Woven throughout Walker's story is the present day story of Treefrog, a homeless man who lives in the tunnels deep under Manhattan. Alternating chapters of the novel describe Treefrog's daily life, a curious mix of routines, memories and petty adventures. Treefrog's story gains momentum as we learn the secret that first drove him underground into the tunnels, as the two narratives slowly and elegantly, begin to merge.

The novel is not without its problems. Treefrog's story, while occasionally horrific or sad, is rarely as compelling as Walker's. And occasionally, as in the novel's conclusion, McCann's lyrical writing begins to swell and threatens to become precious. Nevertheless, McCann's descriptions of physical events, of violence or movement, are extremely well done, and his ear for speech is superb --- much of the dialogue manages to sound both contemporary and also historically accurate.

Nathan Walker says of another character, "He's the sort of man who knows the only things worth doing are the things that might break your heart," and the same can be said of Colum McCann. But *THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS* is by no means only tragic. McCann doesn't let us wallow in his characters' suffering. Rather, *THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS* tells their story with great intensity and with a keen eye for the small, private joys --- the quick kisses, the funny exchanges, the frivolous afternoons --- that bless their daily lives.

Reviewed by Paul Zakrzewski

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