



This Side of Brightness: A Novel

By Colum McCann

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This Side of Brightness: A Novel By Colum McCann

From the author of *Songdogs*, a magnificent work of imagination and history set in the tunnels of New York City.

In the early years of the century, Nathan Walker leaves his native Georgia for New York City and the most dangerous job in America. A sandhog, he burrows beneath the East River, digging the tunnel that will carry trains from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Above ground, the sandhogs--black, white, Irish, Italian--keep their distance from each other until a spectacular accident welds a bond between Walker and his fellow diggers--a bond that will bless and curse the next three generations. Years later, Treefrog, a homeless man driven below by a shameful secret, endures a punishing winter in his subway nest. In tones ranging from bleak to disturbingly funny, Treefrog recounts his strategies of survival--killing rats, scavenging for discarded soda cans, washing in the snow. Between Nathan Walker and Treefrog stretch seventy years of ill-fated loves and unintended crimes. In a triumph of plotting, the two stories fuse to form a tale of family, race, and redemption that is as bold and fabulous as New York City itself. In *This Side of Brightness*, Colum McCann confirms his place in the front ranks of modern writers.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

This Side of Brightness weaves historical fact with fictional truth, creating a remarkable tale of death, racism, homelessness--and yes, love--spanning four generations. Two characters dominate Colum McCann's narrative: Treefrog, a homeless man with a dark and shameful secret, and Nathan Walker, a black man who came north in the early years of the century to work as a "sandhog," digging the subway tunnels beneath Manhattan. Tunneling is perhaps the most dangerous occupation a man could have; in the close, dark, and dangerous pits far beneath the city streets, differences such as color or ethnic background cease to matter, and Walker soon becomes friends with his crewmates: two Irishmen and an Italian. Then an explosion in one of the tunnels literally blows Walker and three other men up through the earth and into the East River. Walker survives, but his best friend Con O'Leary is never found. Leary leaves behind a wife and young daughter whom Walker marries many years later.

Walker's tale is told in alternating chapters with Treefrog's, who, before his slide into homelessness, chose a hazardous profession--this one high up in the bright sunlight--as a construction worker building skyscrapers. But madness has brought Treefrog out of the light and back to the tunnels that Walker helped dig as he scrapes out a meager existence among the drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, and petty criminals that make up the homeless community. But the grimness of McCann's tale is leavened by the beauty of his prose and the intimations all through the book that, even on this side of darkness, redemption is possible.

From Library Journal

Called "New York's most visible up-and-coming Irish writer" by the New York Times, McCann skillfully evokes early 20th-century New York, where Irish mixed with African Americans and Italians to dig the tunnel under the East River.

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From [Booklist](#)

It is 1916, and somewhere under the East River in New York, the sandhogs and other workers labor through mud and muck and darkness to build a transit system for a fledgling metropolis. The sandhogs, the men out front who burrow through the earth, are the physically strong and mentally tenacious among the working poor; many of them once labored in mines. The earth is close in life and death; but they take pride in their work, which allows them a livable wage at the cost of their health. On this side of brightness, it is anathema to play the petty game of race that sports itself on earth's surface. Nathan Walker, a young black from Georgia, handsome, well formed, and generous, who reminds one of Melville's lovely Billy Budd, comes to New York with love in his heart for his home near the Okefenokee swamp and will build a bond with his fellow sandhogs--two Irishmen, Conn O'Leary and Sean Power, and an Italian, Rudy "Rhubard" Vanucci. Their bond is cemented in a way they could not have dreamed of when a small hole in the tunnel wall results in a spectacular river blowout. The tragedy shapes Walker's life in a story that spans generations. McCann is a fine and bold writer, as his previous books prove (*Songdogs*, 1995, and *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, 1996). So it's not surprising to find him tackling the peculiar, unexplored, and violent nexus between the downtrodden and persecuted Irish and African American in a flawed promise land; but one is jolted by the level of understanding he conveys about the needs and compunctions of human existence. *Bonnie Smothers*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alberto Benson:

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