

Thirteen Ways of Looking by Colum McCann review - a moving exploration of empathy

A remarkable tale about a mother and son adrift on the west coast of Ireland proves the highlight in this novella and short stories

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In the summer of 2014, Colum McCann was [assaulted outside a hotel in Connecticut](#) after going to the aid of a woman he believed to be involved in a domestic dispute. The woman's husband knocked him to the ground; he suffered concussion, a fractured cheekbone and broken teeth. Ironically, the bestselling author of [Let the Great World Spin](#) – which won a National Book award in 2009 – had been in New Haven to attend a conference on empathy. You couldn't make it up, as the saying goes. Now that attack has fuelled his latest book, which further explores, and tests, the limits of empathy.



Thirteen Ways of Looking is composed of a novella and three substantial stories. In the title novella 82-year-old Peter Mendelssohn, a retired judge, ventures forth from his Upper East Side apartment in New York to meet his son, Elliot, for lunch. It doesn't sound like much of a premise for a tale – but this is the writer's secret, that anything is the premise for a tale. Mendelssohn, born in Vilnius, a child in Ireland and then an adult in New York, rising through the legal profession to the prestige of the judge's bench, is first discovered as “a blanket-shape” in a bed, in the enforced second-babyhood of the elderly, its humiliations only somewhat moderated by wealth. “He shifts sideways on the bed and he can tell right away. Lock me up, your honour. Throw away the key. Oh, Lord, you pissed and shat yourself Mendelssohn. Who owns this body, this foul little wreckhouse, this meshuggeneh mansion?”

Mendelssohn's third-person voice is vivid, angry, racked with blurred memory and regret. Twenty pages in, McCann introduces a classic hook, stepping away from his protagonist: “Later, the homicide detectives will be surprised by the presence of the cameras.” More threads are woven into the story, one of them seemingly connected to McCann's own assault, although he assures us in an afterword that he'd devised the plot long before he was attacked.

Perhaps the ending of this tale is a little too neat. But each character is cleanly drawn, each description rings true – as it does in the next story, “What time is it now, where you are?”, which plays in postmodern manner with the construction of narrative itself. It begins with an author commissioned to write a piece, searching for a subject, and finding a young woman, Sandi, a 26-year-old Marine, out in Afghanistan on New Year's Eve, a lookout on a high, dark ridge. The story pushes forward while constantly pulling back into the writer's mind, and then questioning not only the writer's choices but every choice and every action: “How is it that a particle of a voice gets transmitted down a telephone line? How is it that Sandi summons up a simple phrase, and the muscles in her throat contract?”

This pulling the rug out from under us makes the transition to the next story, “Sh’khol”, even more powerful. This is the strongest in the collection: a strange and remarkable tale about a woman adrift on the west coast of Ireland with her 13-year-old son, a deaf boy adopted from Russia when he was six; the intervening years have brought redress and damage in equal measure. Here is what McCann calls “radical empathy” – an ability to fully and truly tell another’s tales. One of the strengths of McCann’s writing is his ability to place himself, and so his reader, in another’s body; here, as Rebecca moves through the wild landscape, this gift is powerfully displayed. The end is surprising and moving. Perhaps it is the accomplishment of “Sh’khol” that makes the final story, “Treaty”, feel like a coda, its connections – like the connections in the title story – just a little contrived.

But the strength of “Sh’khol” builds its own connections, strengthening the other tales in this collection where they seem lacking, extending our own empathy for the writer’s task, the human task. The story wonderfully captures the exacting, awful mystery of love and the danger of loss. “The cold pierced her,” McCann writes of Rebecca, diving into the freezing sea. “Her arms rose and rose again. She stopped, glanced back, forced herself onward.” She searches for what she cannot find, as we all do. “Out past the seastack, she moved along the coast, the sound of the waves in her ears, another deafness, the blood receding from her fingers, her toes, her mind.”