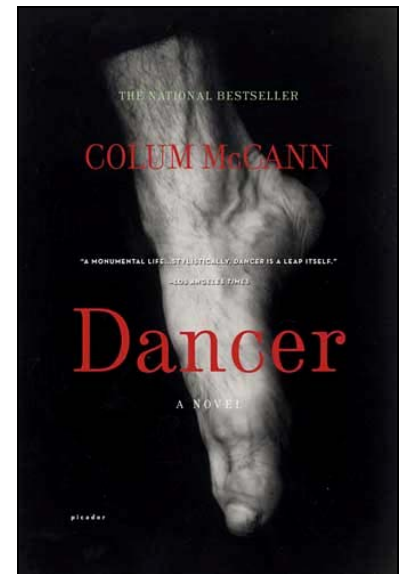


READING GROUP GUIDE

Dancer

by Colum McCann



Introduction to *Dancer*

A Russian peasant who became an international legend, a Cold War exile who inspired millions, an artist whose name stood for genius, sex, and excess—the magnificence of Rudolf Nureyev's life and work are known, but now Colum McCann, in his most daring novel yet, reinvents this erotically charged figure through the light he cast on those who knew him.

Taking his inspiration from the biographical facts, McCann tells the story through a chorus of voices: there is Anna Vasileva, Rudi's first ballet teacher, who rescues her protégé from the stunted life of his town; Yulia, whose sexual and artistic ambitions are thwarted by her Soviet-sanctioned marriage; and Victor, the Venezuelan hustler, who reveals the lurid underside of the gay celebrity set. Spanning four decades and many worlds, from the horrors of Stalingrad to the wild abandon of New York in the eighties, *Dancer* is peopled by a large cast of characters, obscure and famous: doormen and shoemakers, Margot Fonteyn and John Lennon. And at the heart of the spectacle stands the artist himself, willful, lustful, and driven by a never-to-be-met need for perfection.

In ecstatic prose, McCann evokes the distinct consciousness of the man and the glittering reflection of the myth. The result is a monumental story of love, art, and exile.

Praise for *Dancer*

"A monumental life...Stylistically, *Dancer* is a leap itself."
— *Los Angeles Times*

"Exuberant and exhilarating.... A brilliant leap of imagination."

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

"The goal of a book like this is to catch the spirit of the person and his age. It's a tall order, and one that *Dancer* pulls off brilliantly."

— *The Seattle Times*

A beautiful, floating novel about Nureyev's life and art."

— *The New York Times Book Review*

"Fascinating...A triumph of voice.... McCann's fluid lyricism brilliantly conveys Nureyev's towering professional achievement and the wasteland of his personal life."

— *Newsday*

"Breathtaking...Every sentence sounds new and beautiful, no matter how often it's read."

— *USA Today*

"*Dancer* is the most breathtaking tribute to Nureyev since Jamie Wyeth's famous paintings."

— *Esquire*

"Dazzling...an intimate portrait...*Dancer* is bigger than the dance, bigger than biography, too.... Relish McCann's dizzy, fascinating glimpse."

— *Miami Herald*

"*Dancer* has the wingspan of a great Russian novel.... This is the book you'll want to take on a long plane ride; you'll be so seduced you'll sip the wine and eschew the dinner."

— Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes*

"An engrossing portrait of a man so complex that no mere biography could possibly convey more than a sliver of his personality.... The Nureyev who strides impatiently through its pages seems entirely convincing."

— *The Baltimore Sun*

"The melancholy, sparkle, sinew and temperament of *Dancer* are as great as its hero's. Colum McCann's lyrically powerful prose creates, expands, and reveals life upon life, making truth out of myth and heart out of history."

— Amy Bloom, author of *A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You*

"McCann is a consummate stylist who nonetheless imbues his fiction with the cold stamp of reality."

— *Boston Globe*

"Colum McCann has written a most generous book. Compassionate and at the same time restrained in all the best ways, *Dancer* is suffused with both energy and grief, liberation and loss."

— Anne Michaels, author of *Fugitive Pieces*

"A chorus of voices breathe new life into the story of Rudolf Nureyev...in this vibrant, imaginative patchwork of a novel.... A kaliedoscopic effect...the novel is a showcase for [McCann's] fluid prose and storytelling skill."

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"McCann writes as if the fate of the world depends on it. Worry not, the world is saved. *Dancer* is a masterpiece."

— Aleksandar Hemon, author of *Nowhere Man*

"The reader follows, entering lives lived at the opposite poles of human experience and feeling...Colum McCann is a precise and uncanny listener. And so an unforgettable storyteller."

— John Berger, author of *The Shape of a Pocket*

“This is a beautiful book, layered with all the nuance and sweat and discipline that accompanied Nureyev’s genius. In the purity of the storytelling, in its flawless narrative construction, this is prose that is itself a dance.”

— Jeffrey Lent, author of *In the Fall*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The novel is told from a variety of viewpoints, from close first-person testimony to diary entries, from the documentary-like lens of the opening pages to the second-person imprecations of Nureyev’s time in Leningrad to the intimate third-person tales of street hustler Victor Pareci or cobbler Tom Ashworth. Why do you think the story of Rudolph Nureyev is told by so many people *other than* Rudolph Nureyev? Which voices feel more fully-realized to you than others, and why?
2. The objects thrown on stage following Nureyev’s performance; the details of the Russian soldiers marching in the snow; Nureyev’s various purchases; the gifts he brings back to his family and friends in the U.S.S.R.; the items of his life being auctioned off. What is the significance of lists in the novel?
3. What is the use and larger implications of the term “former history” at the bottom of page 75.
4. Discuss the novel’s intermittent use of the second-person voice. What is implicit in its direction and command? What sort of commentary does it indirectly offer on the ideas of Celebrity or History?
5. The physicality of dance is often scrupulously, even tenaciously rendered throughout the novel. In addition, great care is given to the wording invoked in describing dance, from precise craft and medical terminology to the sound of turning joints or the rendered power of eye-contact. On page 91, a narrator turns intentionally vague when she says that Nureyev “was using something beyond his body.” What does such a phrase say about Nureyev as an artist? What does it say about Yulia as an observer?
6. For a book so concerned with the movement of history and personal history, there are also intense moments of stop-time. Think of Rudi pausing in mid-air. Think of the phrase uttered on the top of page 149: “It’s our function in life to make moments durable.” Is this preservation of beauty, this preservation of the immediate the purpose of Art? What exactly is preserved by creating beauty, and furthermore, is history then a record of such preservation?
7. “Poverty lust sickness envy and hope, he said again. It has survived them all.” This is said of the last remaining piece of family china, a saucer dish, given to Yulia by her dying father. How is the saucer a symbol for other things in *Dancer*?
8. The only portions of the novel narrated by Nureyev are told in diary-like entries, and while the entries can be fairly lengthy and/or specific, none of them express how the man thinks or feels. Why do you think we are held at a remove from Nureyev, both in his own portion and by dint through all the other portions of the novel?
9. Explain the role of Victor Pareci’s section in the larger scheme of the book; also, in Nureyev’s life. Think of the comparison made between Victor and Rudi on page 235, the two men being the edge of the coin.
10. How is violence a form of affection in the novel? Are the motivations to harm the same as those to love?

11. *Dancer* is a novel of communication. The communication of art, performance, feeling. Likewise, it's a novel of communication *communicated* to the reader by voices. What does one learn from Nureyev's life by looking at it through the lens of the communicated? How does it alter or expand one's notion of novel-writing. What does it say about the art of storytelling? Think back to the story of the maimed soldier told in the middle of page 135, or the brief metaphor of the chess game used in the middle of page 327.

About the Author

Colum McCann is the author of the novels *This Side of Brightness* and *Songdogs*, as well as the story collections *Everything in This Country Must* and *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*. A contributor to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *GQ*, he has been awarded a Pushcart Prize, the Rooney Prize, the Hennessy Award, the 2002 Princess Grace Memorial Literary Award, as well as being nominated as finalist to the IMPAC Prize. Born in Dublin, Ireland, he currently lives with his wife and children in New York City.

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