Eóin Flannery has written a strong book on Colum McCann, working his way from a full-dress justification for a single author study, through McCann’s entire output, in the order in which it was published. Flannery insists (and he is very insistent) on seeing in McCann’s writing a redemption for his characters, a utopian motive unfolding across his work.

Flannery is thorough and up-to-date. He coordinates his reading of McCann with all the relevant primary and secondary material (usefully catalogued at the end of the book); his references to other writings on McCann in general (with the perhaps understandable exception of John Cusatis’s book Understanding Colum McCann, University of South Carolina Press, 2010) are right up to the moment, and his ideas of utopia are integral with new voices, other emerging scholars. I like that. On the new model, Utopia is not a well-constructed other world necessary because this world is not assailable, impregnable, lost to us in our lifetime; utopia can be seen in hope for a better world not so far away, recoverable through rites of redemption. Flannery’s emphasis on the redemptive is strong, even inexorable.

Flannery taps McCann’s website collection of interviews and other websites to carefully convey the rhetoric which McCann shares with many contemporary writers, the responsibility to give voice to the voiceless. McCann’s formula, slightly different, no doubt because he is restive with the patness of the formula, is that he talks “with” these liminal characters, not for them. Of course it is not that simple, even on McCann’s improvement; writers conjure the audience these voices can never win for themselves, they draw listeners otherwise disinclined to hear.

The first chapter “Arrival and Departure” on McCann’s short story collection Fishing the Sloe-Black River (1993) nicely sets it in the context of other contemporaneous early 1990s publications such as Dermot Bolger’s anthology Ireland in Exile, but also The Irish Diaspora Project, retuning our ears to the specific historical resonances of emigration, globalisation, postcoloniality near the end of the last century. Flannery detaches McCann from Bolger’s custody by insisting that McCann is not an émigré who resents his country, thus lumbering the reader unnecessarily with a mistaken idea about Bolger, (the lifelong resident of Finglas), and divesting McCann as well of Bolger’s sturdy 1993 defense of Irish writing against the term postcolonial literature as a “decomposing chicken in search of its head.”

Flannery invokes Joyce’s Dubliners to model the community that can be indicated even by stories of characters who feel alone. When they are gathered together in a short story collection, we read (or redeem, in one of Flannery’s persistent terms) that community across the stories, across the heads of these characters Flannery pays extended attention to McCann’s first story “Sisters” which begins “I have come to think of our lives as the colours of that place—hers a piece of bog cotton, mine as black as the water found when men slash too deep in the soil with a shovel.” Flannery says this language “overtly” invokes Heaney’s volume North (1975). Does it? “Overt” may be too strong but this is an engaging idea to consider,
Sheona and Brigid as bog queen sisters, an example of Flannery’s strength as a reader and critic. When Flannery says that the story “Stolen Child” echoes Yeats, he has the authority of McCann’s copyright credits, but Brooklyn as a setting does not necessarily invoke (without any referential or stylistic nudge from McCann) Whitman any more than Hart Crane (or Woody Allen or Duke Snyder) to triangulate Yeats as Flannery also insists. And when he says that the title “Sisters” “is a precise literary historical intertextual allusion to the first story of Joyce’s Dubliners” (26), I can’t see anything in Joyce’s story to connect to McCann’s. Flannery’s strength is sometimes his weakness.

Each chapter insists on the constant theme of redemption, utopian hope for those who live in liminal spaces, but each chapter is set in a different theoretical ground. Flannery’s chapter on Songdogs (1995) widens out to work up as context to Moretti’s idea of the European Bildungsroman, in fact a double take, as Flannery suggests, since we get the growth of the father as well as the son. When Flannery lets his prose stand too close to McCann’s, we see ourselves:

McCann’s panoramic description accentuates the defamiliarising physicality of the transitional experience, as Conor traverses the nocturnal Mexican desert-scape aboard a bus that ‘rattles along in darkness, through desert and small towns on the edge of spectacular canyons, and into vast city suburbs” (78).

As critics we must sometimes face up to literature’s superior swerving immediacy; if we have to write “defamilarising” and “traversing” to urge a reader to keep up with McCann’s more attractive prose, so be it. We serve as best we can. Occasionally Flannery, perhaps in envy, cracks out a rare verb, using “flense” and “brachiating” twice each.

Because he follows McCann’s interests, Flannery discusses emigration, the Troubles in the North, Roma culture, and 9/11, but (for a single author study) we get a surprisingly full ensemble of critical theory in this book as well: orality, the body, Ernst Bloch on hope, Victor Turner on liminality, Theodor Adorno on music, interesting and usefully referenced reflections on dance and photography theory and performance.  

Dancer (2003) which Flannery identifies as McCann’s “most sustained interrogation of the interior workings of memory, historical record and literary representation” (134) to date, is a powerful test case for Flannery and Flannery’s McCann. In his chapter “Representation and Performance,” Flannery surveys the postmodern case against historical and especially biographical narrative. Marshalling Linda Hutcheon’s The Politics of Postmodernism (1989) and Richard Jenkins’ Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline (2003) (although he censures Jenkins’ “feverish deployment of theoretical rhetoric”) Flannery insists on McCann’s subscription to the postmodern unreliability of narrative position.

Postmodernism creaks in Flannery’s usage: Flannery commiserates with McCann’s task before “the disabling distance of time and place in approaching those past personalities, places and events.” (139) What narrative ability allowable by postmodernism is disabled by distance and time, or enabled by proximity?

In Dancer, Rudi writes to his sister to explain why he did not cancel his performance in Italy after hearing of his father’s death. Rudi writes resolutely that dance is everything to him, sorrow as well as joy: “So I danced him alive.” Here is how Flannery sees it:

The past, his father, their life together are resurrected through Rudi’s balletic dance, through his body’s dynamic and transcendent performance, which obliterates the staid uniformity of linear history. The dancing body, and Rudi’s life, interrogate the boundaries of both historical time and historical narration (151).

Postmodernism wore itself out romantically interrogating, puncturing the certainty of others. Doubt is “wounding doubt” (Joyce’s Richard Rowan) only at the initial loss of certainty. In the end, one doesn’t know for certain whether one knows or not (maybe one does know), one doesn’t know whether it has always been (knowing or unknowing), or will always be this way. That’s it.

Flannery’s own “high-temperatured prose” is inspired by the emphatic quality of McCann’s prose which makes it attractive, even compelling to think that Rudi in some way defiantly dances against his father’s death. Flannery is trying to
respond to, to match McCann’s intensity, the drive behind his prose. McCann’s emphasis must mean more than just resonant description. Here is the critic’s most dangerous liability, swayed by the passion of novelistic description to find an equally emphatic significance: are all repeated behaviors in McCann (such as fishing) inevitably rituals or even ritualistic, are all hopes utopian, are all recoveries or provisional improvements in a human life redemptions, even in fiction?

One of McCann’s most remarkable gestures is to begin *Dancer* with a horrific five pages of description of what Russian soldiers suffered from elements and armaments in the war. Flannery helps us see McCann showing us that Rudi’s extreme physicality, the way his performance at once obeys and disobeys the rules, originates, comes out of such terrain. When the young Rudi dances for the surviving soldiers,

The dance troupe represents the endurance of art, but equally the contrary actuation of the body in history as a site of redemption and as an instrument of aesthetic beauty. In this anonymous sight of Rudi the boy-performer, we begin to appreciate the affective agency that Rudi will wield over so many in the ensuing years of his career. At this juncture, however, the dystopian terrains that assail the bodies of the Russian soldiers, that dismember them as sacrifices to politics, are countered by the utopian energies of Rudi’s boyish grace in dance (155).

I sympathise with Flannery’s hope, but you must pay for hope to give hope weight. I cannot believe in the equality Flannery gives to dance against the horror of battle, against the death of the father. Only in a weightless postmodern equation (or in a truly religious dimension) can they be counter, can dance (or narrative) redeem war and death.

**William A Johnsen** is Professor of English at Michigan State University. He is the author of *Violence and Modernism, Ibsen, Joyce, and Woolf* (2003) as well as many articles in the area of modern British, Irish, European literature and critical theory. Professor Johnsen is the Editor of *Contagion*, the journal of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, as well as two book series at Michigan State University Press.