

Colum McCann on the Profound Power of a Story

National Book Award–winning novelist and [Narrative 4](#) cofounder [Colum McCann](#) on the profound power of story.

By Colum McCann



Illustration: Cate Andrews

Imagine this: It's August 1950. He is Irish. He is in London. He is engaged to be married to a dark-haired, blue-eyed farm girl from Northern Ireland. Shortly before the wedding she gets cold feet and cancels the service. In his grief he joins the air force and is sent to Egypt as an intelligence officer.

Six months pass. He writes to her every day. She takes a seven-day boat journey to Port Said, where he meets her on the docks, takes her hand, spins her in the air. They defy curfew so she can find a place to get her wedding dress ironed.

They marry the next day. It is 106 degrees in the reception tent. A light wind blows, and the torn flap of the tent applauds.

This story will bind them together for the next 64 years.

Our stories are the glue of what we are. They stitch together what we become. Our ability to tell them is fundamental to how we celebrate and examine our lives.

After we have satisfied the need for water, food, a roof, companionship, storytelling is where we turn for encouragement in how to live. Through it we look to affirm our joy and, at times, our despair. Sharing our stories reminds us what we believe in, and helps us make sense of a fickle world. They are common, yet we tell them because our experiences are so uncommon. No two stories are ever the same, even when told by the same person using the same words. They are our fingerprints.

That embarrassing memory—when you went on a short-term hunger strike—your brother resurrects every Christmas. That school yard incident—when you were caught smoking in the shed—your old classmate insists on recalling. That slice of hilarity—when a pigeon left droppings on your early bald spot—your son tells whenever family gatherings roll around. In the process of remembering, we memorialize, delight, instruct, and connect. Our stories can also be dangerous when manipulated or twisted. Whether grand or trivial, stories and the ways we tell them shape us and the world.

It is 1965. They've returned to Dublin. In his job as a newspaper features editor, he's been given a half-dozen rosebushes he has no use for. At home, he shoves them haphazardly into the ground.

The following year they take their four children for a stroll near the sea. They happen upon a flower show in Dún Laoghaire. It is an hour until the last entry can be made. On a whim he speeds home, clips his own roses, puts them in a vase, drives back, and enrolls in the competition, winning second prize.

He builds a greenhouse and begins to breed roses. Miniatures, hybrid teas, floribundas. It becomes his passion. He writes: "A man who wears a rose in his hat owns the whole world."

One of the first roses he creates is named for her: He calls it Sally Mac. He will later describe it as a "Cairo red."

The brain turns into a carnival when we tell our stories. According to neurobiologists, lights switch on in our heads. Neurons fire more rapidly. Synapses make shotgun connections. Oxytocin, a natural feel-good hormone, can be released in floods, whether the story is happy or sad. Through the simple act of telling, we are reimagining ourselves. This doesn't occur only when we share our own stories. It happens even more spectacularly when we hear the stories of others. Through listening, we can have as many lives as we want. We can be the child riding her first

bicycle, or who's just learned to throw a baseball. The miner trapped down the shaft.
The woman who survives breast cancer.

We tell each other what's happened to us not only because we want to know we're worthwhile, but also because we want others to feel worthwhile. Stories are almost inevitably reciprocated. We speak, we are attentive, and our lungs begin to fill with the breath of life.

We are captivated by the music of what might happen next.

When all is said and done, when the last sound goes off in the darkness, everything can be taken from us—our houses, our identities, our health, our loved ones—but our stories remain.

Through our stories, we survive.

My father died in February of this year. He was 85. He went gently, no tubes, no oxygen masks, no screeching late-night ambulance. Earlier, my mother sat by his bed and sang him "The Last Rose of Summer." Cairo. Red. He had sometimes worn that rose in his hatband.

Somewhere far away in time, but not in memory, a tent door was flapping.