



APEIROGON

A NOVEL

COLUM

MCCANN

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD—WINNING
AUTHOR OF *LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN*

A book filled with beauty and courage

— By Olga Yoldi

Apeirogen is the latest book by Irish novelist Colum McCann, winner of the 2020 Booker Prize. It was published the same year by Bloomsbury. An apeirogon is a geometric figure with an infinite but countable number of sides.

The book is based on real-life stories that took place in Israel. It is the story of the friendship between two men: Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose daughter, Smadar, was killed in Jerusalem by a suicide bombing, and Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian man whose daughter, Abir, was shot by an Israeli soldier. Rami is an Israeli against the occupation while Bassam is an academic Palestinian and former political prisoner who studied the Holocaust. Both men knew each other as they met regularly at The Combatants for Peace meetings, a grass root movement committed to non violent action against the Israeli occupation and all forms of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The circumstances in which both girls die is described in detail. Abir was only 10 years old when, in 2007, she was shot in the back of the head by an 18-year-old Israeli soldier, in Anata, central West Bank, one morning while walking from the candy store back to her school. She was taken to a hospital that didn't have the equipment to treat her, so doctors decided to transfer her to Jerusalem – but her ambulance was delayed at a border checkpoint and Abir died soon after at Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem, the hospital where Smadar was born.

Smadar, who was 14, was walking in a busy shopping area with friends to buy stationery for the new school year when two suicide bombers blew themselves up, killing her and three other people, in 1997. When Smadar's parents heard about the bombing they desperately searched for their daughter, visiting every hospital and police station in Jerusalem until there was nowhere else to search but the morgue.

Following their daughters' senseless deaths, both men join the Parents Circle, a group of bereaved Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost children to war and who advocate for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. United in their grief, Rami and Bassam embark on a mission to travel the world to tell their story of loss and to plead for peace.

The book focuses on how their tragedy has affected them, shaped their lives and impelled them to make an attempt to solve a seemingly intractable conflict. McCann puts the reader in the position of the father losing a child. Because both protagonists are real people, telling their stories of loss so vividly and describing the devastating events with such impressive detail enables the reader to experience their loss: losing a child is undoubtedly the worst thing a parent can experience. After the traumatic event, Bassam and Rami decide to change their lives to keep the memories of their daughters alive.

It is clear McCann has spent much time in Israel, interviewing the protagonists at length and has had access to their families, lives, experiences and intimate personal reflections. McCann says they not only shared their stories, but also in time became friends.

Apeirogen is difficult to classify. The author calls it “a hybrid novel”, with most of it describing real-life events, but there are also elements of fiction. Life events are told from a multitude of angles and perspectives. *Apeirogen*'s multiple forms are used as a metaphor for a new form of thinking, a new way of conceptualising a conflict often defined in simplistic terms as two opposing sides.

I wouldn't say this is a political book, rather one that speaks directly to the political situation in Israel and Palestine. In its 480 pages, the author describes the historical, political and social factors that underlie Abir and Smadar's deaths, the cruelty and injustice of Israel's occupation of Palestine, the intense grief their deaths and the transformation of the parents' lives, their difficult journey, how they fought the desire for revenge and how they reach the conclusion that their only possible “revenge” is making peace.

Yet the book is about more than that. McCann moves freely through time, history, geography, nature and art. Some of the stories he tells are unrelated to the main story while enriching it. It is also a book about a story-telling: it is divided into 1001 chapters, some just one line, others are several pages long. It's possible the author was influenced by *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, the famous collection of Middle Eastern stories about averting death and other insights about life.

Apeirogen starts with stories about birds – the flight paths of the 36 migratory species that traverse Israel each year. The history of the slingshots used by Bedouin boys



Apeirogon follows two characters based on real people, Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan

to bring down these birds. Birds are symbols of freedom and eternity, natural migration and new horizons. Birds are unconcerned about the geography, conflicts or walls that divide the people, cities and nations below.

Below Israel has a fractured and complicated geography. We learn that the 1995 Oslo II Accord established the administrative division of the West Bank into areas A, B and C. Area A is under the Palestinian Authority and police control. In Area B the Palestinian Authority exercises administrative control but shares security control with Israeli authorities. The majority of Palestinians in the West Bank live in areas A and B. In area C, which Israel administers and covers 60 per cent of the West Bank, an estimated 300,000 Palestinians live in 532 residential areas, along with 400,000 Israeli settlers residing in approximately 230 settlements. There is also Area H1 and H2 in Hebron, not to mention the separation wall.

McCann describes the restrictions on movement placed by this system. The difficulties involved in travelling to different places, stopping at multiple checkpoints, often having to travel long routes to get to nearby destinations.

The author said the idea for the book originated in a trip to Israel and Palestine with Narrative 4, a global story exchange organisation. “One evening at the end of my trip I happened to walk into this room and listened to these men that had lost their daughters,” he said in an interview. “They were talking about how they used the force of their grief as a weapon for peace and my heart was blown open. I came back to the US and couldn’t get these guys out of my head. Now they have become among my best friends. They are extraordinary human beings: to stand up and use the force of their principles is extraordinarily gracious and brave.

“I knew I wanted to disrupt people – and the

conventional monolithic idea of what is a Palestinian and an Israeli. I knew these people were more nuanced than they are allowed to be.”

A celebrated author, former journalist and distinguished professor of creative writing at Hunter College, New York, McCann was born and raised in Dublin and now lives in New York. He has travelled extensively. This is his seventh book. *Let the World Spin* published in 2009, won the US National Book Award for Fiction and the 2011 International Dublin Literary Award, *TransAtlantic* was published in 2013.

Apeirogon has already been defined as a masterpiece. *The New York Times* writer Julie Orringer called it a brilliant act of novel-making. “It does far more than make an argument for peace, it is itself an agent of change,” she wrote. Alex Preston of *The Guardian* writes that “it is a novel that will change the world ... the kind of book that comes along only once in a generation”.

Rami and Bassam will continue travelling the world to tell their stories of pain and healing, to denounce the occupation and the urgency of finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “Peace will come,” Rami said in an interview. “In the end there will be a peace agreement, this is absolutely clear. It will happen at the moment when the price of not having peace exceeds the price of having peace.” Often when they tour the US, people in the audience asks them what America can do about the conflict.

Rami tells them the international community must intervene to mediate peace, “because doing nothing when a crime is committed is also a crime”.

For me, *Apeirogon* is undoubtedly one of the best books I have ever read, and I was delighted to learn that Steven Spielberg has bought the movie rights. ♠