

# Amnesty International Group 22 Pasadena/Caltech News

Volume XXII Number 9, September 2014

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Thursday, September 25, 7:30 PM.** Monthly Meeting. We meet at the Caltech Y, Tyson House, 505 S. Wilson Ave., Pasadena. (This is just south of the corner with San Pasqual. Signs will be posted.) We will be planning our activities for the coming months. Please join us! Refreshments provided.

**Tuesday, October 14, 7:30 PM.** Letter writing meeting at Caltech Athenaeum, corner of Hill and California in Pasadena. This informal gathering is a great way for newcomers to get acquainted with Amnesty.

**Sunday, October 19, 6:30 PM.** Rights Readers Human Rights Book Discussion group. This month we read "TransAtlantic: A Novel" by Colum McCann.

## COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Hi All

Did you all survive the recent heat wave?! Thank God it is cooling down as we enter my favorite time of year, the fall. I look forward to seeing the liquid amber tree leaves, taking walks, wearing sweaters, and cooking lots of soups and stews.

Our POC has been released but he is still under scrutiny from the Chinese authorities. Let's hope that soon he will be able to join his family in the US. Thanks to Joyce and others for all their efforts on his behalf.

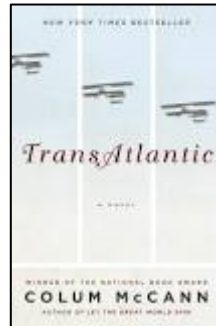
Con Cariño,  
Kathy

## RIGHTS READERS

Human Rights Book Discussion Group

Keep up with Rights Readers at  
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>

Next Rights Readers meeting:  
Sunday, October 19, 6:30 PM  
Vroman's Bookstore  
695 E. Colorado, Pasadena



## BOOK REVIEW

**Cross Over**  
*TransAtlantic*  
by Colum McCann

By ERICA WAGNER  
Published: June 20, 2013  
The New York Times

Colum McCann's new novel, "TransAtlantic," lifts off with a roar. The year is 1919, just after the end of the First World War: "It was that time of the century when the idea of a gentleman had almost become myth." The war, McCann writes, had "concussed the world." And yet here are two gentlemen, Jack Alcock and Arthur Brown, ready to set off in a modified bomber, a Vickers Vimy — "It looked as if it had borrowed its design from a form of dragonfly" — to fly the Atlantic, from St. John's in Newfoundland all the way to Ireland. If they succeed, they'll make history. They will make a brand-new world.

The novelist who takes on not just history but famous historical events has a hard row to hoe. Even if a reader doesn't know that Alcock and Brown did indeed make it across the ocean, these days it takes only 10 seconds to Google their names, and the story's spoiled. Except that in the hands of a novelist as skilled as McCann, it's not: the wonder of this opening chapter is that his language, his close observation, his sense of the lives behind the history, will make even an aviation buff hold his breath. It's not a talent unique to McCann, of course. Hilary Mantel managed the same trick at the end of "Bring Up the Bodies" — Henry wouldn't really kill Anne Boleyn, would he? Beryl Bainbridge was a dab hand at this too, in novels like "The Birthday Boys," about Captain Scott and his fateful journey to the South Pole, or "Every Man for Himself," set aboard the Titanic. Making an oft-told tale seem newly minted is a rare and wondrous gift, and McCann locks the reader into "TransAtlantic" with this bold and bravura opening.

But "TransAtlantic" isn't a novel about Alcock and Brown. It isn't, strictly speaking, even a historical novel at all. Weaving invented characters' lives into the events of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, it is very much a companion piece to McCann's last novel, "Let the Great

World Spin," which won the National Book Award in 2009. As in that book, the narrative here doesn't run clean from start to finish, like the pilots' flight across the sea; rather, it's a series of linked stories joined over time by a common thread. In "Let the Great World Spin," that thread was a wire, a crossing made between the two towers of the World Trade Center one August morning in 1974. Here the bond is also a crossing, but one that's broader and deeper through history and time. Over the course of seven chapters, each quite distinct yet integrated with the rest, McCann takes on the lives of men and women who have chosen to leap across the ocean from Ireland to the New World or back again. It's a journey that the Dublin-born McCann — who now teaches creative writing at Hunter College in New York — knows well, and he uses that knowledge and sympathy to create real voyages of the imagination.

Each narrative inhabits the point of view of its central character. So after Alcock and Brown nose-dive into the Irish turf the novel jumps back to Dublin in the 1840s, and the visit to that city by Frederick Douglass — only seven years escaped from the bonds of slavery. After that, it's forward to 1998, when Senator George Mitchell is in the midst of brokering the Good Friday Accords for peace in Northern Ireland; then back again, to 1863, as Lily Duggan tends the wounded of the American Civil War, hoping for a sight of her soldier son. Lily is the matriarch of the clan of women who are the other common thread of this novel; daughters and granddaughters cross and recross the water, their destinies bound by their times — but only rarely by men. Lily was, in 1845, a maid in the home where Douglass stayed in Dublin. The vision of freedom, of another life, is what inspires her to emigrate to America. This section of the book — which covers 26 years, and Lily's complex journey into American life — feels like the heart of this novel; it would be wrong to give too much away about Lily's adventures, for they are moving and startling in equal measure. McCann captures Lily's clear, simple intelligence in plain words and direct storytelling. "She knew she was going with Jon Ehrlich," he writes of her eventual marriage to the man who would again alter the course of her life. "He didn't even question her when she sat up on the wagon and straightened out the folds in her dress. She looked straight ahead." Lily's gesture alone allows the reader into her heart.

McCann sets up a subtle parallel, or comparison, between Lily and Douglass — the early section that weaves their two stories together, however loosely, is one of the most powerful in the book. (And if you doubt the continuity between this novel and "Let the Great World Spin," note how Douglass thinks of his life as a free man: "It was an exercise in balance. He would need to find the correct tension. A funambulist.") Douglass, however extraordinary his own life may now seem to him, is celebrated and admired in Ireland, while Lily — who in Douglass's own country would be seen as his superior simply because of her race — barely merits notice. Indeed, when she encounters Douglass again in Cork, on her way to America, he fails to recognize her: "She seemed so very different out of her uniform." All servants look the same, don't they? The tightrope on which both Douglass and Lily must find their balance is that of identity: can they remake themselves, cross to the other side and begin anew, without falling? Because if you fall, it's a very long way down.

Lily's daughter is Emily, who becomes, against the odds, a journalist — you'll realize you've met her before, when she was a local reporter in Newfoundland covering Alcock and Brown's flight. But it's in the section set in 1929 that Emily's tale is truly told. Then we are taken to a lough just outside Belfast in 1978, the midst of the Troubles, and to Emily's daughter, Lottie. The final section takes us forward, to 2011, into the straitened circumstances of Hannah, Lottie's daughter, heading toward old age herself and struggling to cope now that the Celtic Tiger has tucked its tail between its legs and fled.

It's only here, in the final chapter, that the novel shifts into the first person, and it's hard to see exactly why it does. This section and that belonging to George Mitchell are the novel's weakest. In the case of Mitchell (who is thanked in the acknowledgments) one senses, perhaps, too much caution in writing about a man still living; McCann's portrait of exhaustion brought about by endless airport lounges and endless cups of tea doesn't add to the reader's understanding of the peace process. "There are times he wishes he could knock an absolute simplicity into the process. Take it or leave it," an exhausted Mitchell thinks. After centuries of conflict — no kidding. And while McCann is skilled at creating convincing female characters, Hannah isn't one of them, in part because she seems insufficiently shaped by the sorrow that has afflicted her life. What these sections have in

common is a sense that they are fulfilling a political or structural void, rather than an emotional or narrative need.

But a book as ambitious and wide-ranging as this is bound to be a little inconsistent, and its strengths far outweigh its weaknesses. Over and over, McCann allows the reader to see through his characters' eyes: description serves instead of judgment. Douglass, who has known the misery of slavery, sees the approach of the potato famine in the Irish countryside: "The children looked like remnants of themselves. Spectral. Some were naked to the waist. Many of them had sores on their faces. None had shoes. He could see the structures of them through their skin. The bony residue of their lives." Ireland's past haunts and shapes this novel, yet McCann's stories offer us hope. When Arthur Brown first spies the Irish coast "rising up out of the sea, nonchalant as you like: wet rock, dark grass, stone tree light," he knows he'll remember this simple sight forever. "The miracle of the actual," he thinks. No small wonder, that.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/books/review/transatlantic-by-colum-mccann.html>

*Erica Wagner is the literary editor of The Times of London and the author, most recently, of the novel "Seizure."*



## AUTHOR BIO

Colum McCann was born in Ireland in 1965. He is the author of six novels and two collections of stories. He has been the recipient of many international honours,

including the National Book Award, the International Dublin Impac Prize, a Chevalier des Arts et Lettres from the French government, election to the Irish arts academy, several European awards, the 2010 Best Foreign Novel Award in China, and an Oscar nomination. His work has been published in over 35 languages. He lives in New York with his wife, Allison, and their three children. He teaches at the MFA program in Hunter College.

<http://colummccann.com/about-colum/>

## DEATH PENALTY NEWS

By Stevi Carroll

### We Humans Are Fallible

If any of us had doubts about confessions obtained from suspects in custody prior to reading this month's Rights Readers book (*Devil in the Grove*), those doubts have been supported. After the 'interrogation' scene of 16-year-old Charles Greenlee, the extent to which officers of the law would go to get the confession they wanted was clear. But that situation was a long time ago, the late 1940s and early 1950s, and in Florida.

September 2, 2014, became Freedom Day for Henry McCollum and Leon Brown. In 1984 in North Carolina, both men found themselves convicted of murder and sentenced to death; although, Mr. Brown's sentence was later changed to life. Their confessions sealed this deal.

At the time of the crime, Henry McCollum was 19 years old, Leon Brown 15. Both were interrogated and confessed while implicating three other men. The other men were not arrested because of alibis or lack of evidence. Mr. McCollum's IQ test showed an IQ of 51. Mr. Brown's IQ scored at 49. Not only were Mr. McCollum and Mr. Brown chronologically young but mentally they were very young. An IQ of 49 equals a mental age of about a seven year old. According to an article at The National Registry of Exonerations website, "...for over four hours, police fed information to McCollum until he confessed to participating in the crime." A witness in this case, L. P. Sinclair, testified that both Mr. McCollum and Mr. Brown told him they'd raped and murdered the victim, Sabrina Buie; however, under cross-examination, he admitted that in his three prior interviews with the police, he had not mentioned this information. Although no physical evidence was found to link the two defendants to the crime, they were, nonetheless, tried, convicted, and sentenced to die. That all changed early in September. Through the work of lawyers from the Center For Death Penalty Litigation, both men were exonerated, and not just because of some legal technicality, but because they both

could not have committed the crime. Another man's DNA was found at the crime scene.

Along with Henry McCollum and Leon Brown, we send our heartfelt thanks to the legal team at the Center For Death Penalty Litigation.

To read about Mr. McCollum's re-introduction to life outside prison, go to [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/04/henry-mccollum\\_n\\_5764354.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=politics&ir=Politics](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/04/henry-mccollum_n_5764354.html?utm_hp_ref=politics&ir=Politics)

From that article:

*Upon his release, McCollum expressed his belief that there are still other innocent men on the inside. He is at least the seventh death row inmate freed in North Carolina since 1976, the year the death penalty was reinstated by the U.S. Supreme Court.*

*"It's very painful when you are attached to somebody like a brother or family, and you see that person on his last days," McCollum said. "A lot of them don't really want to die. ... And it hurt me the most to see the state take somebody's life, when they are committing murder their own self. But they don't see it that way."*

## **Support for the Death Penalty Lessens in California**

A recent Field Poll shows 56 percent of Californians support the death penalty. For those of us who work for death penalty abolition, this could be disheartening, but that 56 percent is down from 68 percent just three years ago. That's cause for hope. And apparently, nationwide support for the death penalty continues to slide downward.

When the Field Poll asked voters if they supported speeding up the trip to the gurney for the condemned, 52% responded yes. Unfortunately, we continue to have the pesky problem of exonerations. Henry McCollum is the 145th and Leon Brown is the 146th. How are Americans going to square their desires for justice and the rule of law with their desires for the ultimate punishment?

Austin Sarat is a capital punishment scholar at Amherst College. His most recent book is *Gruesome Spectacles: Botched Executions and America's Death Penalty*. In an interview with the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, he discusses the dilemma in which we Americans find ourselves. The "botched" execution is not new. It is in fact one of the

reasons we have moved from the hangman's noose and firing squad to the electric chair to the gas chamber to the gurney and the needle. In the 20th century, he found that botched executions were excused as unfortunate and isolated "misfortunes": "oh the executioner was drunk" or "the electrode wasn't screwed on tight enough." These "misfortunes" occurred 3% of the time in the 20th century. For lethal injections, he found these foul-ups happened 7%. When he looked state-by-state from 1980 to 2010, he found states like Ohio or North Carolina had an 18% rate of "botching".

While the inefficiencies of our means for State-sanctioned murder have been what has motivated us to use different methods, Mr. Sarat suggests some questions for us to consider.

Do we want to be a society that risks executing the innocent?

Do we want to be a society that risks executing people because of the race of their victim?

Do we want to be a society that keeps people on death row endlessly?

Do we want to be a society in which 3%-7% is an acceptable error rate?

When we look at the execution table at the end of this article, we see Texas executed a woman this month. Lisa Coleman's crime is horrific. Ms Coleman and her girlfriend tortured and starved to death her girlfriend's nine year old son. The article I read said the child may have had special needs, and the women did not know what to do to care for him. Of course, my question is "Where were the other people who may have intervened to help that child?" This family lived in an apartment, not in an isolated fortress surrounded by razor wire. Also just as an aside, following Ms Coleman's conviction and sentencing to death, the boy's mother, Marcella Williams, took a plea bargain and now serves a life sentence with a possible 2044 parole date. The only reason I bring this case up is because of the comment thread following this article. In our righteous indignation at this crime, some of us believe, and believe enough to post for all to see, to post the following.

"I'm so glad she's dead. My fondest dream - that she suffer horribly - was not realized, but good riddance to nasty-ass trash."

"Too bad Illinois lawmakers don't have the stones to re-instate the death penalty here.

Could use a house cleaning."

"If you've been given the death sentence, you should be executed no more than a week after

your conviction, why waste the tax payer's money on keeping someone alive and comfortable for 10 years when they were always going to be executed?"

I am pretty sure the authors of those thoughts believe they are on the right track to justice and righteousness. Recently as I was reading *Nature's God* about our Founding Fathers, I was reminded of the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards. I think the antecedent for the kind of thinking found in the comment thread can be found in his work.

*"The view of the misery of the damned will double the ardour of the love and gratitude of the saints of heaven...The sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever. . .Can the believing father in Heaven be happy with his unbelieving children in Hell. . . I tell you, yea! Such will be his sense of justice that it will increase rather than diminish his bliss."* [Source: Jonathan Edwards "The Eternity of Hell Torments" (Sermon), April 1739 & Discourses on Various Important Subjects, 1738]

Or to put it another way, "I'm in Heaven. You're in Hellfire. Ha Ha Ha." Now of course that was 276 years ago, so our attitudes do change. But as I was looking for the source of the Edwards quote, I found from the Catholic Truth Society: *What will it be like for a mother in heaven who sees her son burning in hell? She will glorify the justice of God.* - Pamphlet from the late 1960s, part of a catechismal teaching

And "...love and pity for hell's occupants will not enter our hearts." [Source: J.I. Packer in article "Hell's Final Enigma" in "Christianity Today Magazine, April 22,2002]

Edwards' righteous thoughts are with us today. Our change of attitude precedes our change of law. When we Americans think deeply about the questions Mr. Sarat poses, our hearts may be touched, and we may arrive at different, more humane, conclusions.

### And Now For Some Action

For those of us so moved, we have two petitions for the abolition of the death penalty.

National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty  
<http://www.ncadp.org/page/s/demand-a-nationwide-halt-to-all-executions>

ACLU

No government should experiment with human life  
[https://www.aclu.org/secure/lethal-injection?ms=oth\\_140725\\_deathpenalty\\_lethalinjection\\_aff](https://www.aclu.org/secure/lethal-injection?ms=oth_140725_deathpenalty_lethalinjection_aff)

Also these are not death penalty actions, but they are online actions available from Amnesty:  
<https://campaigns.amnesty.org/actions>

### Executions stayed

September

10	Leon Taylor	Missouri
18	Ronald Phillips	Ohio

### Executions

September

10	Earl Ringo, Jr.	Missouri	Lethal injection - pentobarbital
10	Willie Trottie	Texas	Lethal injection - pentobarbital
17	Lisa Coleman	Texas	Lethal injection - pentobarbital

**PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE**  
**Gao Zhisheng**  
by Joyce Wolf

Group 22's adopted prisoner of conscience, human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, needs our support now as much as ever, even after China released him from Shaya Prison on August 7.

Gao is now living with relatives in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Police harass the family with long visits morning and afternoon every day. In Urumqi Gao cannot obtain the medical and dental care that he so urgently needs after more than 5 years of torture and ill-treatment, and the authorities refuse to permit him to travel.

Gao's plight has not gone unnoticed. In the Washington Post on September 7, Teng Biao wrote:

"A month ago, the human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng — my friend and colleague — limped out of Shaya Prison in northwestern China. According to relatives, Gao was pale as a ghost. He had spent the past five years — his sentence was for three — in solitary confinement, underfed and with no access to sunlight." Teng

Biao continued, "We are happy to see Gao come out of jail alive. But he is not yet free." He appealed to China's leaders, "Give back Gao Zhisheng's freedom to seek treatment and allow him to reunite with his family."

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/chinese-leaders-should-give-gao-zhisheng-his-freedom/2014/09/07/3fabba16-353d-11e4-9e92-0899b306bbea\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/chinese-leaders-should-give-gao-zhisheng-his-freedom/2014/09/07/3fabba16-353d-11e4-9e92-0899b306bbea_story.html)

In separate press conferences during the month of September, Gao's wife Geng He and his daughter Grace Geng asked for President Obama's help.

"[Grace Geng] spoke of her father's physical and mental condition upon his release in August after five years of isolation and imprisonment. The picture she painted of her father is a far cry from the articulate, establishment lawyer, who pro bono represented persecuted groups such as Falun Gong practitioners and peasants who were robbed of their land.

[...] She begs the President and Secretary of State John Kerry to help her father reunite with the family in the United States, where he can get his illnesses treated."

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/970961-daughters-of-chinese-dissidents-call-for-meeting-with-president-obama/>

In their report on Geng He's press conference, the Epoch Times quoted U.S. lawyer Jared Genser: "My hope is that with greater and more intense public pressure, other governments, human rights groups, the media, will shine a bright light on what's happened to Gao... and enable the family suffering to come to an end."

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/945582-wife-of-tormented-chinese-lawyer-gao-zhisheng-seeks-us-help/>

Shine a bright light – that's what Amnesty does, right?

President Obama will meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing November 10-12. I suggest that we stand with Geng He and Grace Geng and appeal to President Obama to urge China to allow Gao Zhisheng to seek medical treatment and to be reunited with his wife and daughter and 11-year-old son.

Submit comments to the White House at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/submit-questions-and-comments>

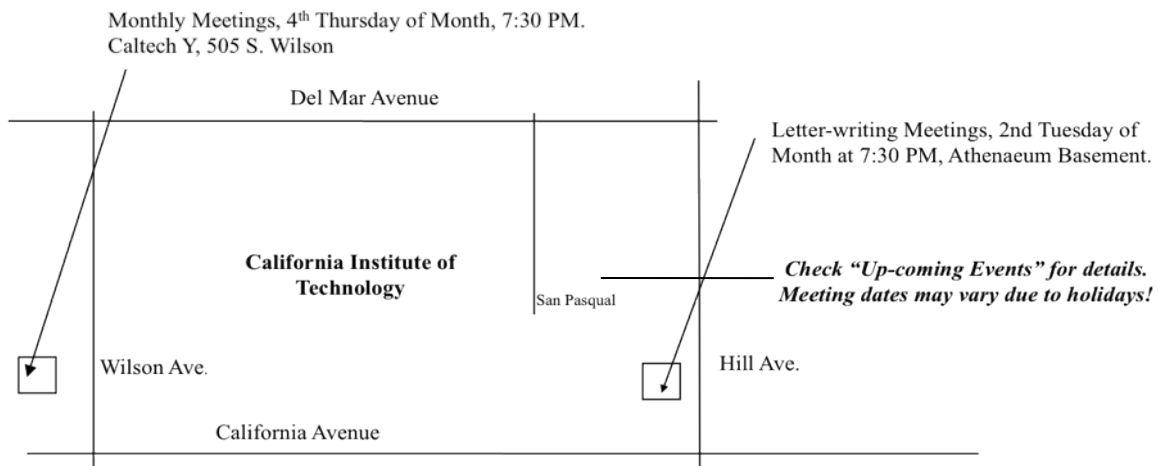
You can also use these phone numbers for President Obama:  
Comments: 202-456-1111  
Switchboard: 202-456-1414

Letters to President Obama can be addressed to  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Of course, we can continue writing to China government officials about Gao Zhisheng, urging that he be allowed to seek necessary medical treatment and that he longer faces harassment and restrictions on his freedom of movement, speech and association. For addresses and salutations, see [http://www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/GaoPOC/Gao\\_Zhisheng\\_appeals.pdf](http://www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/GaoPOC/Gao_Zhisheng_appeals.pdf)

I apologize for not having a Gao Zhisheng action prepared for our September Letter-writing. However, at our Amnesty table at the Pasadena Farmers Market on September 13, we got 35 signatures on petitions to Xi Jinping for Gao, thanks to Group 22 member Vince DeStefano. Copies of the petitions were mailed to three other Chinese officials and to Ambassador Cui Tiankai.

GROUP 22 MONTHLY LETTER COUNT	
UAs	10
Total	10
To add your letters to the total contact <a href="mailto:aigp22@caltech.edu">aigp22@caltech.edu</a>	



From the 210 exit on Lake Avenue, head south, turn left on Del Mar  
From the 110 continue on Arroyo Parkway north, turn right on California  
Street parking is generally available.

Amnesty International Group 22  
The Caltech Y  
Mail Code C1-128  
Pasadena, CA 91125  
[www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/](http://www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/)  
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.