Mr. Lenrow: Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Alumni Virtual Book Club.

I’m Jay Lenrow, graduate of the Class of 1973 and a Vice President of the Alumni Council.

We are here, in the Milton S. Eisenhower Library, on the Homewood Campus, on a sunny fall afternoon, where it is a pleasure to introduce our faculty host, Winston Tabb, Sheridan Dean of University Libraries and Museums. He will discuss this month’s selection, *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann.

As a reminder, today’s talk will be available to you on the Alumni website as both as a podcast and in transcription form as well.

Mr. Tabb was named Dean in September 2002. Prior to his arrival at Johns Hopkins University, he served at the Library of Congress for 30 years, the last 10 of which he was Associate Librarian, overseeing cataloging, circulation, the reading rooms, special collections, archives, preservation, and the presentation of digital materials online. As Dean of the Libraries, Dean Tabb directs the integration of new information technologies throughout the University’s Libraries, and as head of the University Library Council, leads and coordinates Johns Hopkins’s entire system of libraries, which includes the world famous Welsh Medical Library and its satellites, the Mason Library at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., the Fredheim Library at the Peabody Conservatory, and the libraries at the Johns Hopkins regional campuses and centers for part-time study in Washington, D.C.; Rockville, Maryland; Columbia, Maryland; and downtown Baltimore. He is also director of the Sheridan Libraries, which include the Milton S. Eisenhower Library at the Homewood Campus, the George Peabody Library at Mount Vernon Place in Baltimore, the John Work Garret Library at Evergreen Museum and Library, and the Hutzler Reading Room in Gilman Hall, which was recently totally renovated. As Dean of University Museums, Mr. Tabb is responsible for the Homewood Museum and the Evergreen Museum and Library.

The book we will be discussing is a wide-ranging look at the lives of 11 different characters, using the famous August 7, 1974 tight rope walk by Frenchman Philippe Petit, between the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers in Manhattan as a jumping off point.

Colum McCann, the author, is a native Dubliner, who weaves the lives of the eleven characters together in ways that show almost every facet of life in New York in the mid 1970s.

Please welcome Dean Winston Tabb.

Dean Tabb, could you please share with our listeners two passages that you believe are representative of the author’s writing and discuss why you chose them?

Dean Tabb: Well, thank you very much, Jay. I’m very happy to be able to talk about this incredible book. You’ve just asked, I think, probably the most difficult possible question, which is to suggest only two passages. I’d really be tempted to start at page one and just read all the way through because it’s one of the...
Mr. Lenrow: I probably should have asked for 11 passages – one for each of the main characters…

Dean Tabb: (laughs) No. No. Well, I don’t have that much time, but it’s really one of the most beautifully written books I’ve seen in a long time. So, I’ve just picked two, not exactly at random, but from two different parts of the book that I really like. Would you like me to read from them?

Mr. Lenrow: Sure.

Dean Tabb: Alright. Well, the first is from the very beginning. We’ll take this as our jumping off point of view, let us say. I’m looking through my book… On page five. (Reads from book)

“A charge entered the air all around the watchers -- and now that the day had been made official by sirens -- there was a chatter among them, their balance set on edge, their calm fading, and they turned to one another and began to speculate, would he jump, would he fall, would he tip-toe along the ledge, did he work there, was he solitary, was he a decoy, was he wearing a uniform, did anyone have binoculars? Perfect strangers touched one another on the elbows. Swearwords went between them and whispers that there’d been a botched robbery, that he was some sort of cat burglar, That he’d taken hostages, he was an Arab, a Jew, a Cypriot, an I.R.A. man, that he was really just a publicity stunt, a corporate scam, Drink more Coca Cola, Eat more Fritos, Smoke more Parliaments, Spray more Lysol, Love more Jesus. Or that he was a protestor and was going to hang a slogan, he would slide it from the tower ledge, leave it there to flutter in the breeze, like some giant piece of sky laundry -- NIXON OUT NOW! REMEMBER ‘NAM, SAM!” … and so on....

I’ll stop at that point. It’s a fairly long paragraph, but it’s one that I really love because I thought it set so well the tone for the whole rest of the book. Not only the style, which I think is extremely important, it just draws you in, in such a way because of the immediacy and liveliness of the language, the sharpness of the language, but really in a way substantively presaging here, this notion of people who are of very different sorts, mingling together, which is, of course, what the whole book is going to be about. You have no idea about, that’s the way it’s going to happen at [page] number five, but for multiple people looking at one image and coming up with all these different possible explanations of what they might be seeing. That’s so true of the human condition in general, but certainly true, of course, of the way this book plays out. So, that’s the reason I chose that passage. Number one, because I love the language and what it told me that I didn’t know was going to be happening, but seemed to be so true after the fact. So that’s one. Should I read another one?

Mr. Lenrow: Surely.
Dean Tabb: If I can... Let's see if I can find it...

Mr. Lenrow: While you’re looking, I’m reminded, when I’m reading the book, of the movie, Crash, that won the Academy Award...

Dean Tabb: Yes.

Mr. Lenrow: ...a number of years ago, which conceptually had the same concept of strangers with very different lives touching each other, and then having that touchpoint lead, allow you to lead to the next character, and I wonder if the movie was perhaps influenced by the book, with the structure of the film, which seems to have come later than Mr. McCann’s work...

Dean Tabb: Well, that is possibly so, though I think this approach is not all that unusual. I’ll talk about that, actually, in a minute.

I’m going to read from the chapter. I love the chapter title, “Miro, Miro, On the Wall”. Also, that I thought was so provocative, and I wondered what was coming next. But on my paperback, I’m reading from that chapter on page 104.

“She steps into the living room and stops, frozen. They are gone, all of them, gone. She almost drops the tray. The rattle of the spoons as they slide against the edge. Not a single one there, not even Gloria. How can it be? How did they disappear so suddenly? Like a bad childhood joke, as if they might spring out of the closets any moment, or pop up from behind a sofa, a row of carnival faces to throw water balloons at.”

What I really loved about this is that it just was so arresting when you’re reading this again not knowing what’s going to happen. You really do have that sense that you’re in that room and you’ve invited this odd array of people to come together in your home for the first time. You’re feeling somewhat anxious about it because you’re of a different class, and you don’t know what’s really going to happen. She’s gone in to make this very fancy kind of afternoon tea, and she comes up, and they’re gone. And it seems so plausible that they really would be gone, that I almost wanted to stop reading right then. But then I also wanted to know what has happened. I was so relieved when I read on a few more paragraphs and realized that they had just gone upstairs, on the roof to look and see what was happening. So, this sense of kind of palpable relief made you feel that you were really in that character. This is so true of... in so many of us I guess that, like I said earlier, I could have picked probably eleven or more chapters, or more passages, to read. But that’s what really struck me about the ability of this
author to get you into the characters so much, that you really have this visceral sense that you’re in that place. And your whole heart stops just as you can imagine hers does.

Mr. Lenrow: What struck me from McCann’s writing is his ability to draw a verbal portrait. He is very descriptive of his surroundings...

Dean Tabb: Yes.

Mr. Lenrow: ...in his work, so he really allows you to use your imagination...

Dean Tabb: Yup.

Mr. Lenrow: ... to create a portrait of the characters...

Dean Tabb: Yes.

Mr. Lenrow: ... and their surroundings.

Dean Tabb: Yes. And of everything you’re directly seeing. I think I’ll never be able again to see smoke coming out of a chimney without remembering how he described those as looking like a scarf. And thinking, “Oh yes! That’s often what it is!” Never heard that, never heard anyone else say that before, but I’ll never see that again without thinking, “Oh there’s the scarf! It’s smoke!”

Mr. Lenrow: Where there any issues that you could single out to readers that they would find interesting to discuss?

Dean Tabb: Well, I think one of the issues that is particularly interesting to discuss here is not just what it’s like to be in a city of course, but this whole idea of what it means to be alike and to be different. And, wouldn’t... so many different characters are brought together, you really begin to focus on this, that we all are so alike in one sense in being human, but also so different in the particulars. And what a miracle it is that cities actually can exist and that people coexist there, given that we are so different.
So, is it the likeness that really makes it possible for people to live in cities or is it appreciation of the differences or both? To really kind of see them, to value how we are different, but also to appreciate how we are alike. That’s one of the things that I thought was particularly interesting about this and the way that the book was structured so you had to focus on different people. But quite often, you were thinking as you were reading how it was like what you just read.

Mr. Lenrow: It’s also interesting to note how the characters were shaped by the way New York City was at the, in the mid ‘70s. Having known New York in the ‘50s and ‘60s...

Dean Tabb: Ahh..

Mr. Lenrow: ... it was a different place than it was in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

Dean Tabb: Uh-huh. So, you really know that from direct experience?

Mr. Lenrow: Yup. And now it’s back to more what I remember from my childhood. But this was a little bit of a darker time for New York...

Dean Tabb: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Mr. Lenrow: ... And perhaps, this is more the time of Kitty Genovese, the neighbors not calling the police when they heard screams, where people kind of kept to themselves. Which is all the more interesting to see how, as you pointed out in the first passage you read, the strangers touching elbows and interacting in a way that they really didn’t do at that time in New York.

Dean Tabb: I don’t know that ...really know New York historically that way. But it’d be interesting to see if we had a conversation like this 30 years from now if we would consider New York not to be light or dark, or really, really grim.

Mr. Lenrow: Are there any other issues that you think would be good topics for conversation?
Dean Tabb: Well, I don’t know if it’s so much an issue. But one of the strangest things seems to be about this. I was reading this book, and I kept thinking, “What is this reminding me of?” And I finally realized it reminded me in astonishing ways of *Canterbury Tales*, which I never really would have thought about. But this idea of kind of a framed tale almost, and having all these different people. Not that they were traveling together exactly in the same way. But this kind of a setting, and then all these different stories brought together in one place made me think, “Oh, this is like what *Canterbury Tales* might have been 500 years later or so.”

I don’t know if anyone else would ever think of it quite like that. I’m not a medievalist. But I used to be an English major and did a lot of reading. And that’s why I was reminded of [*Canterbury Tales*] probably more than any book in reading this.

Also, the crispness of the language and the very vivid but different kind of characters who are pointed out by Chaucer and then by this author.

Mr. Lenrow: That goes back to what you… your comment earlier, how this book structurally deals with almost a hand-off from life to life of the different characters. And you said, “I hadn’t considered *The Canterbury Tales* before, but I can understand the similarities.” Are there any other works of literature or movies or things that have a similar structure?

Dean Tabb: Well that’s the one that really… that it just strikes me so much that I think, personally, because that it was just so unexpected and so different in so many ways too. But it was the likeness that, really, I kept focusing on.

Mr. Lenrow: What might the readers be interested in knowing about this book. Something that, perhaps at first blush, reading it, they would not consider?

Dean Tabb: Well, they certainly should be interested in knowing about the actual event that is at the beginning. I mean, a lot of people may have completely forgotten about what prompted this. And it wasn’t actually… I couldn’t remember it myself. I was reading it thinking, “I was alive, obviously, at that time, reading the paper every day,” which… something kind of faded from memory. And you think, “Well, how could you really forget something like that. That was such a miracle.” Because if you’d seen it you wouldn’t forget, but if it’s just something you read about then it’s not something that really stuck in my mind.
The immigrant experience is another aspect of the distance. It was really a part of something but was still very real as well. This idea that, not a melting pot, but really an aggregation of people all in one place that continues now. I think that has a lot of ramifications for... affects our consideration about what’s happening now at the controversy of the so-called mosque that’s to be built near the World Trade Center. We are a country that invites so many different kinds of people to come in and we need to be able to appreciate them. And to think about what is it like to actually have to live among people who have rather different backgrounds and experiences. This makes it a very real situation for 2010. It’s not just about the period that he was writing them in.

Mr. Lenrow: So there are those things where, apparently, we don’t necessarily always do a good thing at that assimilation... with their acceptance. But then again, if you look around, perhaps we do it better than anyone else.

Dean Tabb: Oh, absolutely. That’s a very good point. We absolutely do.

Mr. Lenrow: What types of questions should the readers be asking themselves or each other as they spar online about the book?

Dean Tabb: Well I think that with a book like this you should always want to be asking yourself about where you see yourself. This is really a book that makes you think about our life as we are living it now in a country that is like this. So, I think one of the things that I was doing when reading through this... was thinking through each the chapters... was about what that the person that I was reading about was the main focus... was like myself and how it’s different. This whole idea of reading, and particularly reading fiction, is really all about making one place yourself into another person’s life. But it’s also reading back into how it seems how other people live affects the way you not only live yourself but think about the way you live and live with others.

Mr. Lenrow: It’s interesting, in some of the background reading I found out that the title of the book came from an 1835 poem by Alfred Lloyd Tennyson. And the name of the poem was Locksley Hall. So I was kind of... tried to wonder why that was chosen. Now I’m not familiar with the particular work. But that something I’m going to-
Dean Tabb: Yes, I should too. It’s been a long time since I’ve read that. I took a course on Tennyson once, but it’s been a long time. I can’t remember either. Poems have to do a lot with reminiscence though.

Mr. Lenrow: We’ve talked a lot about the fact that this is, this took place in New York City...

Dean Tabb: It couldn’t have taken place anywhere else, I don’t think.

Mr. Lenrow: That was my que-, you anticipated my question.

Dean Tabb: No, I really don’t see how it’s possible. Maybe London, but I don’t really think so. This particular array of characters, of people, is really, I think, New York. The way... not only who they are, but the way they interact with each other. That’s a very small compass of geography.

Mr. Lenrow: I went back and forth between looking at the tight rope walk as a placeholder. And then, I tried to look at it as something more significant. What were your thoughts? I mean, did you see that as just something that framed a point in time for the reader or something that was much more integral?

Dean Tabb: No, I thought it certainly did that... frame the point in time. But what I kept thinking about was in my own life. Have I had an experience that’s anything like that? That I said earlier, that I had not even remembered the walk. But what I do think about quite often is what it was like when we heard about the assassination of John Kennedy. And this is kind of... people of my age and younger, as a graduate student... know exactly where I was, who the people are who I was with, and what happened for that next hour, or so was something that is alive as if it happened yesterday. And it was 1963. So, I think that one of the things that people might want to think about is if they’ve also had pivotal moments like this. It might not be something like that, that truly, you couldn’t forget. But all of us surely have had moments like this that kind of just divide the world in two in a sense.

Mr. Lenrow: I think I’ve heard it said that for those of us of a certain age, there’s not a single person who doesn’t remember exactly where they were, and what they were doing, when they heard about Kennedy’s assassination.
Dean Tabb: I was walking across Harvard Yard and the bells of church began to ring. Of course that was a very special place to be, given that Kennedy had gone there. But everybody had that same experience, no matter where they were.

Mr. Lenrow: I was in my 7th grade science class and somebody knocked on the door and my teacher went out and she walked back into the room with tears coming down. And she announced it to the class. It’s a very vivid memory. More years ago than I care to remember.

Dean Tabb: (laughs) Well I obviously just told you that it was much longer ago for me. (shared laughs)

Mr. Lenrow: Is there anything else you’d like to convey to the readers?

Dean Tabb: Read it! (laughs) You really will enjoy it.

Mr. Lenrow: Well, thank you, Dean Tabb. To our participants, please note than Dean Tabb will be posting approximately 6 questions on the website for online discussion, during the months of November and December. We invite your participation and I know there’s a lot more that Dean Tabb can get into based on the questions you pose or the discussions you have, to integrate into our online book club. So thank you, Dean.

Dean Tabb: Well, thank you for inviting me. This has been very enjoyable.