

# TC Boyle

Thomas Coraghessan Boyle has been writing, for a couple of decades, unique stories, in a wild and crazed language. From "Water Music" to "T.C. Boyle Stories", to "Riven Rock" and "Road to Wellville", he created a host of eccentric, alienated characters, with a cruelly realistic view of the world and life itself. TC Boyle came to Paris to present his new collection of short love stories, which are much more about madness, anomalies and deviances than pretty flowers and little birds.



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- You have this new collection of short stories out in France now, called "25 histoires d'amour", is it a good reflection of your work and your favourite themes?
- Yes and no. This book is unique to France. Two years ago, in America, I did a collection of short stories of 700 pages. For fun, I divided into 3 sections: love, death and everything in between. For Grasset, we decided to do 3 volumes. Next year, I have a new novel coming here, which Robert Pépin is translating now, called "Un ami de la terre" about the environmental movement and set in 2025. The following year, we have the second volume of this, "Histoires de la mort". Two years after that will be the final volume, which we're gonna call "Histoires bizarres". There'll be 75 stories or more by the time we're done and this book is unique to France because I've only taken some of the love stories from the collected stories and then added a number of new stories that will appear in a new volume in America next year. So it's fun for me, I get to do a whole new book rather than a translation of a book that already exists. That's why there are older and newer stories. The same will be true of the death stories
- How do you see the old stories today?
- They're very wild! (laughs) They're mostly idea stories, in which I take an idea and run crazy with it. I don't really care about characters. They're also very baroque and thick with language. The first two stories in this volume are brand new. I think their characters are richer. But I'm still working with the language and the kind of absurd, disgusting sort of reality. I'm not abandoning that! (laughs)
- There are many animals in your first short stories...
- Yes, my very first book in English was called "Descent of man", which is the exact title of the Darwin book. I'm always interested in the fact of human beings as animals. We try to deny it, but it is undeniable! So there are lots of apes and beasts in all my stories, including the new novel, "A friend of the earth".
- It's not your first short story collection. Do you find it more enjoyable to write short stories or long novels?
- It's all the same to me. It's all just a story, whether it's 5 pages or 500 pages long. Obviously, with a novel, it's a much more complex story and it takes a lot longer to develop it. I've just finished a period of writing stories and delivered my 14th book to the publisher, which is this collection I was telling you about. It's called "After the plague". It appears next year in America, but it will never appear in France, because we're going to incorporate these stories into these 3 volumes.
- Women often have bad roles in your books: how does your wife react when she reads them?
- My wife? As I've said on TV last night, I'm her sexual slave. So, she takes me for granted. She's happy that I'm selling books, making money and paying the bills, but she doesn't pay that much attention. The last story of the new book, which I should have included in the love stories but it's too late, is the only story I've read her that didn't make her fall asleep, the reason being it's called "My widow". It takes place 30 years from now, she's the star of this story and it's very evil. But I figure since love and death are exactly the same, I will put this story into the death volume. She likes my work, she realizes that I'm an artist, I've always been interested in powerful, commanding women. I guess that's what you see of these women in the stories.
- Isn't it difficult to live in couple when you write such horrible things about it?
- No, I think that the fact I'm the slave of a woman makes it easier, because I have no other chance. I clean the house, I pay the bills, I make love to her and that's it. I think it gives me the stability to write these stories and imagine all the scenarios, some of it is from personal experience, but a lot of it is invented or from the experience of my friends. Most of my friends are bachelors and I write about their love lives and experiences. This is the real test of friendship, because it's not always a very favourable story to them. (laughs)
- In a story like "Water music", you reconsider the actual history and add your own story to it, mixing reality and fiction. Is it what you're interested in as a writer?
- Yes, not only in "Water music", but in several other books. It's good to have a story that actually happened. The Kellogg book is based on true events, as far as bizarre treatments, the enemas, the foods, etc. are concerned, but what did those facts mean, they're dead! I make them come to life by inventing characters to go into it. Dr. Kellogg, as I represent him here, as a figure of satire, was actually very much like this. I exaggerated of course, for my own purposes, I invented characters to come into collision with

him. The closest to real fact is "Riven rock". This is all true, but of course I invented what people say to one another, etc. With "Water music", I was basing it on Mungo Park's travels. I read his book and followed it, but I invented Johnson from a character who really appeared and all the other characters.

- Could you tell me more about this novel, because it's really my favourite?

- It was my first novel. I didn't know if I could write a novel, I had written probably 40 stories and published a book of stories before I started this novel. You just have to write one and find out. It wound up having 104 chapters and each one was a little story and I realized that writing a novel is exactly the same as writing a short story, only it's larger. I got to the point where I couldn't shut it off, it was so huge what I wanted to say with this book.

- What attracted you at first in the main character, Mungo Park?

- I was doing my PhD in English and I was studying for my exams. I was reading John Ruskin, who wrote about Mungo Park a little bit. I'd never heard of Mungo Park before. He said he was that great explorer and hero of the British empire, but look what he did to his wife and children... I said well, what did he do to his wife and children? Very little had been written about him, but the great thing was his travels. Once I'd read about them, I was fascinated, I've also always been interested in the idea of cultural imperialism, which is what the book is about, on one level. Just the idea of the literary and cinematic Africa that we know is also great. The new novel that I'm researching now is Alaska. I'm sure there'll be plenty of Jack London references and shit, death and misery and freezing as well. But I've got no idea what the story will be yet. I'm thinking of setting it 30 years ago, in the hippie times, when people wanted to get back to the land and I'd like to confront that naive way of living to this last frontier of true nature. But these are just vague ideas.

- If the couple often equals confinement in your novels, true confinement is also present in "Riven rock" and "Welcome to Wellville", is it a subject that makes you react and what do you think about medicine and doctors in general?

- That's a good question. You're never aware of what your themes are or what you want to say until you write about it, especially when you write a number of books, you can see how they're linked. I've been very interested in the last several books about a small, isolated community. It's a kind of microcosm of the world at large. So we have, as you point out, the sanatorium or the McCormick estate with Stanley locked inside. In this new one, "A friend of the earth", the hero is now a baby-boomer, he's 75 and his job is to work on the estate of a rock'n'roll star in California to maintain the animals in his menagerie. That's a very small, isolated community too. I guess I'm just trying to take this huge, crazy world and bring it down to a smaller sphere, so that I can study them.

- In "Water music", it's quite the contrary, he's travelling, he's a freer character, I guess...

- Yes, I hadn't thought of that either, but it's true. Then, we go to "Budding prospects", they're outside, it's true, yet they are confined to their house because of the paranoia of the police, etc.

- For characters such as Stanley McCormick or Will Lightbody, is confinement more of a cure or a protection from the outside world?

- I think it's both. But I'm very suspicious of people like Dr. Kellogg, or the psychiatrist on the McCormick book. People who are experts and want to tell us how to live. My favourite take on this was Don DeLillo's "White noise", in which the wife teaches classes in walking and breathing. (roars of laughter) Come on, it's the height of absurdity! We need an expert to tell us how to have sex, how to be happy, how to dress...

Enough with experts! I'm also always suspicious of people who want to take control of somebody else's life. In many of the stories too, there are "experts", there's a story called "Filthy with things", which I guess will be in the bizarre stories, in which this guy lives with his wife who's a collector and her house is so full of crap that they can't even get through the door, so they hire a professional organizer. This exists, by the way. She comes in and throws it all away... and charges thousands of dollars. You have to take control of your own life.

- Many stories are about control...

- Yes, I'm very interested in the idea of control, of free will vs. determinism, like in "World's end". Again, I think these themes keep circulating through all the stories and all the novels in a way that I wasn't aware of. And they're all connected.

- Many American writers complain that people in the US don't read much, compared to Europeans...

- That's true. But to this extent, I think in France and Germany, for instance, there's a higher percentage of intellectuals, but America's a bigger country populationwise, so I have a huge and enthusiastic audience. But I think in general, it's probably true. The reason why I go on tour so much and go on TV shows and tell jokes is to attract that part of the audience that doesn't read much. Of course, my fellow writers resent me for this... They would love to kill me and eat me. Only because I get so much attention and I feel comfortable being on TV and doing interviews... and they don't. So they see me in the newspapers and think "Oh no, not that son of a bitch again. Let's kill him." (laughs) When "America" was published in the US, I had to take a shitstorm of abuse. But it sold more copies than any of my books, and it still does.

- What do you think of the "Welcome to Wellville" screen adaptation?

- I'm the only man in the history of Hollywood who liked the movie made of his book. I loved it. I know the critics weren't that happy with it, but I thought it was great. I know Alan Parker, I like him very much, I wished him the best when he bought it. I think the critics didn't get the humour, it's much more of a European film, he's a Brit, after all. I think it was almost like a Fellini film, bizarre and hilarious. I think it should have been a bit longer, I think the studio made him cut it down so it's too frenetic, there's no breathing point.

- What did you think of the casting? Was it close to your idea of the characters?

- No, not at all, but it's very thrilling to see someone do a version of your work. Actors often read my work in public and it's very exciting to hear somebody else's intonation. I've had 3 movies made and only 1 major one. Another one is in the works also from Columbia pictures, Peter Cattaneo, who did "Full Monty", is doing "Budding Prospects". But I've also had 2 short movies made, "The Big Garage" and "Greasy Leg". They were both superb. I've been pretty happy with the movies so far.

- Have you had other propositions for screen adaptations?

- No one has bought the rights to "Riven Rock", which disappoints me. I expect that somebody will eventually. I would really like to see "Riven Rock" as a movie, it could be really great.

- Do you have an idea for a director?

- No, I live in the film community, but I try to stay away from it as far as I can. My job is to write books, not movies. I don't want to write a movie script. I have no desire to work in the movies, it's a matter of control. I have great respect for directors, I don't know how they keep their sanity, because of all the crap they have to take and all the people they depend upon. This is my work, I don't have to argue with anybody, I don't compromise and every word is mine.

- What does teaching bring you personally and artistically?

- I've always been a teacher and I want to continue, even though I don't have to do it for financial reasons. I love the fact that there's a huge pool of talent. I had a lot of mentors who helped me and inspired me, I want to do the same. I'm trying to help the next generation of writers and readers emerge.

- What is your rhythm, do you work every day?

- Yes, I work 7 days a week, though of course not today. (laughs) When I'm not working, I do physical things.

- Was writing a kind a salvation for you when you started?

- Absolutely. I'd be dead now if it weren't for writing. I was living in NY, I'd never been West of New Jersey, I was shooting heroin, I was crazy, hanging out with complete degenerates. But, unlike my fellow degenerates, I also knew how to read and I began to write stories, because I love literature. I began to publish them and that gave me the confidence to apply to the Iowa writer's workshop. I put my girlfriend and my dog in the car and went to Iowa. It was great, I became a good student and met great people. It saved my life.

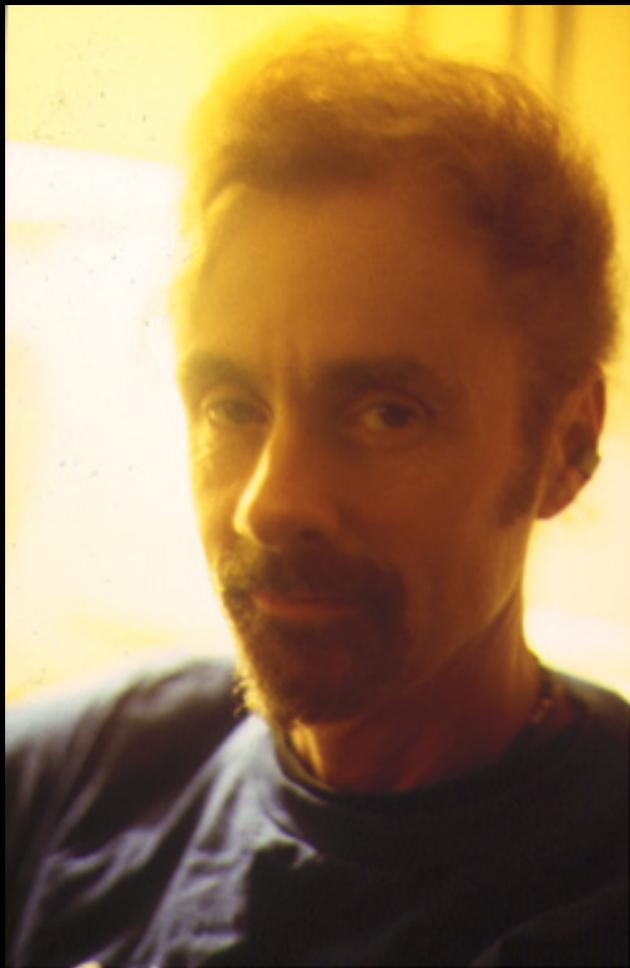
- You have a past of musician?

- Yes, I wanted to be a musician at first and I played saxophone and the clarinet and I played jazz as a kid. Then I discovered rock'n'roll and I played drums in my girlfriend's band. Then I realized the only thing I could do well was to sing. So I became a singer in a couple of bands. It was fun, but I knew I was going to be a writer, I really don't believe you can do 2 things. Now, I don't do music at all, although I listen to music all the time. I don't want to do anything halfway. I don't play any sports because I don't want to lose. I only want to compete in one arena: writing.

- Do you have projects for a TV show?

- Yes, I do. I've been offered by Fox TV to have my own TV show for next fall. It will be a 1 hour-show, with films from my stories and 2 films per week. I will host the show and say a few words. Fox bought it, but nothing is ever sure with TV and I have no control over that.
- What are your musical tastes?
- When I'm working, I listen to classical and jazz. Otherwise, I listen to rock'n'roll. I like the Smashing Pumpkins, Rage Against the Machine, Rancid, etc.
- What do you like to read?
- Right now, I'm reading "Going to Extremes" by Joe McGuinniss, it's a wonderful journalistic account of going to Alaska in 1980. The last book of fiction I read was Annie Proulx, called "Close Range". It's exquisite. I've read Denis Johnson's "Jesus' son" about ten times, it's one of the best books ever.
- Are you falsely cynical or a true love seeker?
- I think I'm cynical in quite a lot of ways, but I don't think the stories will work unless they also have an optimistic heart underneath somewhere. Some of the stories are cynical, some are nightmares of what love could be or is, but some of them are genuine love stories, like "Ike and Nina". But that would be too simple for me to write only one sort of love story, there are many disturbing and unusual ones too. I'm trying to give almost anti-love stories or to turn the conventions of love stories on their heads, just to see what will come out of it. They're also about other things than love.
- It'll be Valentine's day pretty soon. Is this book a perfect gift for a lover or rather for happy singles?
- (laughs) Well, the intention was for me to be here on Valentine's day, but I couldn't because of my schedules. Every year, for an intimate gift, I give my wife several books I'm dying to read. Is this a romantic gift or what? I think this makes a great gift. And for people who are cynical and embittered, they can laugh and cry over this book. It's sexy, there are all kinds of love in it and it's fun. I think at its root, literature is entertainment and fun...

Jean-Paul Coillard



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