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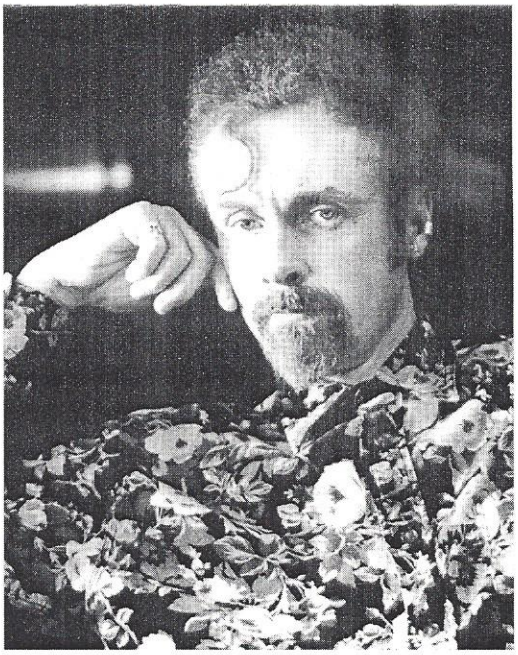

T. Coraghessan Boyle discusses his fat — and fascinating — collection of short fiction, *The Collected Stories*

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE STROLLS THROUGH THE BAR OF THE RITZ-CARLTON HOTEL AND EXTENDS HIS HAND. "CALL ME TOM," HE SAYS.

It's an unpretentious opening for a writer known for studied flamboyance, both in his writing and his personal style. Boyle's pyrotechnic novels such as *The Road to Wellville*, *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Riven Rock* have graced bestseller lists and wowed critics, and Boyle himself frequently appears at readings and promotional appearances dressed like a peacock, with flashy clothes, several earrings and a lock of his ginger hair draped rakishly over his forehead. Today his toggery is unusually subdued — a gray silk shirt over a long-sleeve black T-shirt and dark slacks. If it weren't for the flames shooting off the toes of his Doc Martens, Boyle would look pretty much like anyone else meeting here for business or pleasure.

The reason for the interview is Boyle's latest book, *T.C. Boyle Stories: The Collected Stories of T. Coraghessan Boyle*, which gathers together the short fiction previously published in four story collections — *Descent of Man*, *Greasy Lake*, *If the River Was Whiskey* and *Without a Hero* — over the past quarter-century. The book also features seven new stories never before published in book form. It's a weighty tome, almost thick enough to stand on and change a lightbulb, and if it has any shortcomings, it's the everything-and-the-kitchen-sink approach it takes to amassing Boyle's short fiction for the public's reconsideration. Not all of the 70 stories here are necessarily for the ages. Many of them are, though, and to his credit Boyle decided to mix things up a bit: Rather than simply slap them together in chronological order, he reconfigures them under three loose and somewhat humorous categorizations — "Love," "Death" and "Everything in Between."

Boyle has been a hot literary commodity since attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the early '70s, where he studied under the tutelage of Vance Bourjaily, John Irving and John Cheever. He received his doctorate in 19th-century literature from the University of Iowa in 1977. Since then he's published seven novels, including *World's End*, which won the 1988 Pen/Faulkner Award for Best American Fiction. *Descent of Man* earned him the 1980 St. Lawrence Award for Short Fiction. *Wellville*, his novel about eccentric cornflake inventor and health nut John Harvey Kellogg, was made into a film directed by Alan Parker that was widely panned, though Boyle himself enjoyed it.

A tenured professor who teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California, Boyle commutes to his job from Montecito, near Santa Barbara, where he lives with his wife and three children in a 1909 Frank Lloyd Wright house. "I'm very much a Californian now, having lived there for so many years," Boyle says between bites of crab cakes and corn chowder. Then, as if to prove it, he adds disappointedly, "Oh, look. They're setting up a sushi bar. We could have had that instead."

Boyle spoke at length with the *RFT* about his work, both historical and contemporary, the experience of seeing some of it transferred to the big screen, and the value of tooting your own horn.

***RFT**: So, you're T.C. Boyle now, not T. Coraghessan Boyle? That's what it says on the cover of* The Collected Stories.

Boyle: I haven't changed my name at all. I still go by T. Coraghessan Boyle, which is still on the title page. But we have a new art director at Viking, and he asked me — he pleaded with me — to abbreviate my name so he could fit it on the cover. He said, "I can make it bigger," so I said OK. The Brits have been doing it for years, so why not?

Coraghessan is a distinctive name — is that a family name?

Yeah, it's from my mother's side of the family. I adopted it when I was 17 or so, because I wanted to be special. I didn't want to be like everybody else, just Tom Boyle.

You just turned 50. Has that affected your thinking about your life or your work?

Well, I'm glad to have made it. Coming on the heels of *The Collected Stories*, I feel like I'm a thousand years old. You look back on that stuff and it seems so fresh and contemporary, and the stories still work because they don't depend on references to the times, but the witty contemporary references you need an almanac and an encyclopedia to get.

I do have some perceptions about your 50s, though. And they're not good. Your 50s are exactly like your teenage years in that your body and mind are going through enormous changes, but only for the worse. Unlike your teenage years, where they're getting better.

More than most writers, you've realized the importance of doing publicity and readings, and radio and television. Some writers shun all that — they expect to be able to write their books and have the world come to them.

Some feel that way. And they think that all the extracurricular stuff — going before the public and entertaining them — is sort of demeaning to writing. I don't agree. I think literature is not something that should be in the university and only professors can mediate between the audience and the writer — that's a bunch of crap. It's entertainment. Fiction, if it's not entertaining at root, then you can do nothing else with it, because no one will read it. I think probably there are more good writers around now than ever. But because we have such a cluttered culture and there's just so much going on from so many different venues, there are fewer readers for those serious writers. It's crazy. I feel like the hunger artist in the Kafka story — here we are creating these great feats of art, and no one's paying attention, no one cares.

As for publicity, I would never compromise what I write or what my vision is. I do my books as an artist, but once it's done, I have no problem with going out before the public and wearing a funny jacket on the Letterman show and telling jokes. I enjoy it. I *want* to do it.

You're still in the thick of your career. Why put out The Collected Stories *now?*

This was the idea of my editor, who had wanted to do it for a couple of years. He wanted to do a selected stories and then a collected stories, because he felt that there's a

lot of rich work that I've done there that most of my audience doesn't know about. Most people became aware of me with the last three novels — *The Road to Wellville, The Tortilla Curtain* and *Riven Rock*. At first I resisted the idea. I thought that's the kind of thing you do at the end of your career. So it makes me a little nervous, you know (laughs)?

Has your approach to writing stories changed over the years?

No, but the stories themselves have changed a bit in that, if you look at the earlier ones, a lot of them are conceptual stories. I was much more interested in the design of a story and the aesthetics of it, what it looked like, than I was in character. Character was just incidental to me. Since I've written seven novels now, I think I've learned to work with character and to develop characters. So the new stories, especially the ones that will be in the next collection, are generally fuller, longer stories that use all the elements that the early ones do but also play with this new toy that I have of character. You can see in *The Collected Stories* a kind of movement toward that.

Was your tendency toward a more stylized type of story in your early work a function of having come out of a writers' program? Was that the sort of thing that was taught there?

No, I think the writing program didn't have that much to do with that. Everyone goes his own way in there. I don't know that I was even influenced that much by my teachers. I think it was mainly that I was just turned on by what was happening then. This was the early '70s, so I was reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Flannery O'Connor, the absurdist playwrights, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme — a lot of stuff that's kind of funny, absurd, maybe that has a larger worldview than some of the stuff that came in the '80s, when it kind of shrank down and everybody was writing trailer-court stories. I parallel it to the '70s music getting kind of bloated and then punk coming in to strip it back down to the basics, and then it grows back up again. I think the same thing happened in our literature.

Because you're the product of a writing program and now teaching in one yourself, I'm guessing that means you believe writing, to a certain degree, can be taught?

Well, you can't teach someone to be good at an art if they don't have a gift for it. But — I used to explain this to the Europeans all the time; they can't understand how you teach creative writing at a university. Well, it hasn't been done that long here, either. I'm the first writer they had at USC, and I started their undergraduate program. And I'm not that old. Flannery O'Connor was one of the first graduates of Iowa, so Iowa doesn't go back that far, either. But you know, if you have a music department where you have musicians teaching composing and violin and everything else, and you have an art department where people go in and learn to study sculpture and get coached by the masters there, well, why not another art like writing? So I don't think it's that strange a thing.

A lot of your stories, and especially the novels, use historical characters. What's the advantage of doing it that way rather than making everything up?

With *Wellville*, which has a couple of real characters from history, and *Water Music* and then *Riven Rock*, I guess I'm fascinated by the details of the original characters' story. There's much more invention of characters and situations in *Wellville* than in *Riven Rock*. *Riven Rock* is an anomaly, and it's good that it is, because I don't want to repeat myself. But the story is essentially true. No one knows what really happened behind closed doors, but I did a lot of research into this particular man, Stanley McCormick, and his problems, and it's accurate. And the most absurd things, as in *Wellville*, are the true things. The fun for me is in blending the two and making it seem credible to you. So then you don't know what I invented and what is ridiculous. In *Riven Rock*, the story is almost like a novel in itself. It's such a bizarre story that all I really needed to do was to tell it.

Is it difficult to start at a particular point in history, explore the arc of your invention, and then at some point have to bring the story back to reality?

Yes, but it depends on the novel. With *Water Music*, I just let it ride. The essential facts are true — of Mungo Park's two expeditions and how he died, etc. But everything else is just fantasy. Another one we haven't mentioned is *World's End*, which is entirely invented, just from circumstances of a given area. *Wellville* is centered around Dr. Kellogg and his bizarre personality, but the foods and the treatments are all true, but everything else is invented. In *Riven Rock*, Eddie O'Kane is an invented character, but Katherine and Stanley and their parents and relatives all existed. I'm trying to turn the screw a little differently each time around to see what'll happen.

Riven Rock *takes place in the area where you live. How did you happen on the story?*

I moved up from LA in the middle of writing *The Tortilla Curtain*, and I found a newspaper article about Riven Rock around the same time I read a book by David Myrick about Stanley and Katherine. There were many — all the estates had great, crazy stories associated with them. All those rich industrialists who settled there were perverted lunatics in one way or another. Riven Rock is only a mile from my house, or less. What fascinated me about Stanley was that for 20 years he wasn't allowed to see any women or be in their company. What would that be

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like? And worse — what would it be like to be married to him? That's what got me going on the story.

Was it difficult doing a novel on a hot-button topic like illegal immigration, as you did in The Tortilla Curtain*?*

No, because it was the same thing as with *East Is East.* They just grow out of the feeling of the culture, particularly the culture in LA at that moment. I'm just expressing what I feel. I read the *LA Times* every day, and during the '80s, everybody was obsessed with the Japanese taking our culture over, so I thought, let's explore that. And the same in the '90s: Since the Immigration Reform Act was revised in '86, we've had this huge influx, particularly from Latin America, and people were pretty crazy because of it. And I guess I'm part of that. I mean, I live there, and I wanted to sort out my own feelings about it. I don't consider it a political novel in that I don't have a platform. I'm not beginning with a party line and I want you to join my party. I'm just exploring the issue to see how I feel. That's why I write stories to begin with. That's why I don't write essays or histories or biographies. There's no fun in that for me. The fun is in discovering something that you didn't know before. All my stories are like that. I never know what it will be or what I'm going to say or where it will go.

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The great thing about writing historical pieces is that you can use them to discuss what's going on now. In *Riven Rock* I get to talk about sexuality and marriage and morals, what's right, what's wrong, who decides. Morals, fidelity — all those issues that are current. And, obviously, with Kellogg, I could talk about all the newest fancy health treatments — you know, plug in the enema machine (laughs) — that stuff has been going on for a while.

Your writing is often very flamboyant. Who instilled in you a love of language?

Language is absolutely integral to the work — that's the building blocks of the work, and I'm very conscious of it, and I've always loved it and the rhythm of it. Some writers are very flatfooted. You can't read their prose aloud. They don't have a sense of rhythm, they don't write beautiful language — that's the key. That's one reason I don't like genre writers. There are many reasons, but one of them is it's always so flatfooted and poorly written.

I can't really say where it comes from, though I suppose some of it is genetic. The Irish — you know, we hate the ethnic stereotypes, because they're all true (laughs). But the Irish are known for it. Plus, I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood. Most of my lifelong friends are Jewish or half-Jewish, and there's a kind of Jewish gift of gab and sense of humor — a mordant, black sense of humor — which our whole group of wise guys all shared. That relies on language, on wit. I guess it's a combination of all those things.

What was it like to see your novel The Road to Wellville *turned into a movie? Is that the first work of yours that has been filmed?*

There've been two short stories made into very excellent short films: "Greasy Lake" and "The Big Garage." A former student of mine did "The Big Garage." It's brilliant. And "Greasy Lake" had Eric Stoltz and James Spader in it and it was done by Damian Harris in the late '80s. It's a great little half-hour film, really well done.

I really loved the film of *Wellville,* although most people didn't. I really thought Alan Parker did a great job. It's just seeing your characters and your vision done by somebody else. It's like, you wrote the song, and somebody's doing another version of it. It's thrilling in some ways.

Generally, you hear the thing to do regarding movies is to go ahead and sell it — take the money — and then run away as fast as you can.

I guess that's my philosophy — take the money and run. But you don't have to sell the rights, you know. You can have your widow throw the manuscript on your casket as they lower you into the earth. I wanted to sell the rights, I wanted to see a good movie. I believed the movie would help publicize the work, and it did.

Are there any other films of your work in the offing?

They're going to make a movie of *Budding Prospects.* They've assigned a director, Peter Cattaneo, the guy who directed *The Full Monty,* and they've hired the writers of *Grosse Pointe Blank* to do it. I think that could be quite extraordinary, because it's a very strong story, and neither of those movies had a strong story. So it could all work really nicely.

I don't want to get involved, and have never gotten involved in any film projects, because it's too frustrating for the writer. You have no control over the final product, whereas you have ultimate control over every word you write. And secondly, they jerk you around — it goes on forever.

The only film project I'm participating in is a TV show. In the works, although it's not green-lighted yet, is a show that will initially be 13 half-hour episodes with filmed versions of my short stories, and I would be the host of the show. But my only participation is to be the host — write up a short intro, pick the music for the show, if we can get it. It's hard to sell an anthology show to TV, though, because it doesn't have continuing characters. But there are precedents — there's *Twilight Zone,* there's *Masterpiece Theatre,* there's *Alfred Hitchcock Presents,* and so on. This could be a contemporary and hip version of that. It's unusual because I'm the guy who wrote the stories as well as the guy introducing them. And I would really like to do that, because it would get my stories out to a much bigger audience. So hopefully it'll go. ■