

# INTERVIEWS



Yuri in the Gym, Ukraine 2005

## TC BOYLE

Thomas John Coraghessan Boyle is a novelist and short story writer. Among numerous honors, he has received the PEN/Faulkner award for his novel *World's End* and six O. Henry Awards for short fiction. He is published regularly in the major American magazines, and is a mainstay of the annual Best American Short Stories collections. He corresponded with Wag's Revue fiction editor Will Litton by email.

***Will Litton, Wag's Revue: In the jealous eyes of many writers, you're a figure not unlike Joyce Carol Oates or the late great John Updike, in that you're unreasonably prolific—20 books and counting. Updike had his Protestant work ethic, demanding of himself a certain quota of pages each day, and rumor has it Oates made a pact with the devil; but what Muse keeps you moving at such an incredible clip? Tell us about your writing and revision process, and any anecdotes about strange sources of inspiration.***

**TC Boyle:** As I've said elsewhere, the creation of art is an obsessive/compulsive disorder. Everybody needs to find distraction from the grimness of life and I've found my distraction in art. Of course, it's all utterly meaningless, as Beckett pointed out joyfully, over and over again. If it weren't for the sexual impulse, I expect everybody on earth would have killed him- or herself during adolescence. So, what I guess I'm saying is that I write in order to have something to do so I don't have to go out and hang myself. So far, so good. But stay tuned.

**WL:** *Before you made it as a writer, you fronted a small-time rock band, 'The Ventilators.' Now, against the standard caricature of the awkward, hermitic, misanthropic literary figure, you're a writer who loves to perform for and interact*

*with his fans. With your reputation for delivering incredibly dynamic readings and interviews, and your distinctive badass fashion sense, is it fair to say you've tried to carry something of the rock star aura with you into the literary world? How has your interest in music and musical performance informed how you approach writing and reading?*

**TCB:** I wanted to be a musician as a kid. I wanted to go to music school as an undergrad--at SUNY Potsdam--but flunked my audition. Thankfully. Because that flunking allowed me to explore other things, like history, literature and creative writing. After I graduated, rock and roll lit me up, but I was already hooked on writing. Thankfully. I had fun with the Ventilators and other jams I did with other people and certainly there's no rush like making music, but my efforts were those of an amateur. Again, thankfully. As for bringing a little rock and roll to literature, why not? I don't know any other way.

**WL:** *Music seems a particularly strong influence on your short fiction. You quote song lyrics in the epigraphs to some of your most famous stories. 'Greasy Lake,' probably your most widely anthologized piece, references the Bruce Springsteen song, 'Spirits in the Night.' Springsteen is a true poet, with his incredible raconteurial American vernacular. Were his songs—and the tradition of American songwriting he draws on—a source of inspiration when you were trying to 'find your voice' for that story, and more generally as an American writer? Do you empathize with the pseudo-bad-boy characters in 'Greasy Lake'—are the characters somewhat autobiographical?*

**TCB:** Springsteen uniquely captured what it was like to be a teenager in the era in which I was growing up across the river

in New York. Everybody's been to Greasy Lake, in one way or another. And yes, while the story is entirely fiction, I've been to Greasy Lake many times looking for the very same ineffable things my characters were looking for. As for bad boys, I suppose somebody could do a whole thesis on the like in my work, my favorite being Ronnie/Pan from Drop City.

*WL: In your enormous 1998 anthology of stories, the epigraph to the entire collection is the Bob Marley quote from 'I Shot the Sheriff': "Reflexes got the better of me." I've always puzzled over this choice. Why this particular quote to preface over 20 years of your work? Does it reflect, in some way, your approach to writing, your style, or the postmodern American subject matter you tackle?*

**TCB:** Yes, indeedy, I will say that that is an enormous fat book of stories and I do hope people enjoy it. Volume II of T.C. Boyle Stories, equally enormous, will be making its appearance in just a couple wee little years hence. I have to say that I don't think it's my place to interpret anything in my work because my interpretation kills the joy for anybody turning the pages, but I do believe that the last line of your question answers itself. Let's let that marvelous quote from one of the great musicians of all time speak for itself. What rhetoric, huh? I shot the sheriff, but I didn't shoot no deputy. And yeah, sure, reflexes got the better of me. Don't they always?

*WL: You have an interest in writing semi-biographical novels about important cultural/historical figures—John Harvey Kellogg, Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, and most recently Frank Lloyd Wright. In each case, you pierce the public hero/guru façade to uncover the private eclecticisms and maelstroms beneath. Why the interest in this type of historical writing? What is it about these three figures in particular that has intrigued you?*

**TCB:** These three figures I nominate as among the crowning egomaniacs of the twentieth century. I am attracted to them because all novelists feel very much the way they do. That is, that all the world is subsumed in their vision, and nothing--and no one else--exists. Do I explore them in a cautionary way? Maybe so.

*WL: If someone were to attempt a similar biographical novel about you, what are a few tidbits they might discover about the enigmatic TC Boyle?*

**TCB:** It would, of necessity, be a fairly short work. I like your use of the term “enigmatic.” I do not reveal much of myself, either publicly or in the work. I may have no problem wearing an intergalactically challenging jacket on TV and cracking jokes with the best of them or investing everything I have in a performance of a story, either live or recorded, but all of that is simply a way of rubbing up against the public world while all the while keeping the private world private. In my private world, I experience love and support and I dwell in my work. Not much conflict there. Not much soap opera. Not enough horror to fill half a paragraph of that would-be novel.

*WL: You're a bit of a connoisseur of the blues. One of my absolute favorite stories of yours, 'Stones in my Passway, Hellhound on my Trail,' embodies both of your aforementioned proclivities—it draws inspiration (and its epigraph) from blues legend Robert Johnson, and it's written as a fictive-biographical piece about the foible-ridden man behind the music. I'm wondering what kind of research you did for this piece. If I'm not mistaken, it's fairly faithful to Johnson's actual life story—a biography that seems almost too perfect for a bluesman, ripe as it is with hardship, sorrow, booze, rambling, unrequited love, and the strange sweetness*

*derived from a bitter life. Is this, perhaps, what makes the blues so potent as an American art form—it's ability to take sorrow as its form, but joy as its content? Do you ever find yourself taking this 'blues-like' approach to your writing, perhaps as in a piece like 'If the River Was Whiskey'?*

**TCB:** I love this question and your involvement with the stories and the musical form that inspired them. As B.B. King says (or hollers, rather): "Everybody's got the blues." I was a student at Iowa when I wrote "Stones in my Passway, Hellhound on my Trail." The entirety of the research consisted of listening to the album twelve million times, reading the liner notes twice, and deciding--seeing, knowing--the true version of Robert Johnson's death. For period detail I went down to Gabe & Walker's where my friend Blue Phil Ajioka was taking a break between sets and asked, "Phil, what kind of guitar did Robert Johnson play?" Phil said, in his bluesman's basso, "That'd be a Harmony Sovereign." Story over. Oh--and for the final part of your excellent question, the answer is yes.

**WL:** *While you attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop, you became acquainted with short story legend Raymond Carver. You wrote in a 1999 essay: "Ray [Carver] was the apotheosis of what I wanted to become." Tell us about your relationship with him, as a writer, teacher and friend.*

**TCB:** I knew Ray in two phases. The first was when he was hanging around town prior to the publication (and apotheosis) of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" and the second when he came to the Workshop to teach after I'd got my MFA and was working toward completing my Ph.D. He was easy to hang with. Self-effacing, slyly witty, utterly devoted to what he was doing. In that, and in his work, he was a role model. But of course, I'd had my problems with drugs and alcohol and I was wary of that path. (I had John Cheever as a teacher at the

Workshop a year or two earlier and he was pretty far gone. What did you learn from Cheever, a professor once asked me at a job interview, an unanswerable question--what I learned from him was his work, of course. But quite simply, if we want to get reductive, the answer is: "Not to drink gin in the morning.")

*WL: A bit of a bloviated follow-up; bear with me: While you are both masters of the short story in your own right, critics often place your and Carver's work in stark contrast—Carver with his calculated, devastating restraint, and you with your boisterous exuberance, your knack for irony and levity. Still, I often see subtle but intriguing resonances between your and his work. Take, as just one example, Carver's "Cathedral" (1984) and your "Sorry Fugu" (1986)—they are radically different stories in tone, but both reach strikingly similar, ambiguously epiphanic endings. Though stylistically disparate, do you think, through form and craft, you and Carver are more similar than most imagine? Were you both mining for similar 'human truths'? And, if so, were you ever consciously striving for these similarities as you composed stories, or did they arise unconsciously?*

**TCB:** "Cathedral," along with "A Small, Good Thing" and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," are among my favorites of Ray's stories. Certainly he influenced me. Here I was, this absurdist, surrealist, a ragtag hippie experimentalist, and I saw another way into a story through what Ray was doing (and what John was doing and Flannery O'Connor too). I hadn't thought of similarities between "Cathedral" and "Sorry Fugu," but both are--I hope you'll forgive me--well-crafted stories that end on a transcendent note. But again, isn't this what stories are supposed to do in the first place? Burn a hole right through you? You could cite any number

of my stories, before and since, that try to go there. And, of course, I have no qualms about writing in any mode on any theme.

*WL: As I mentioned above, you're well known for your irony, wit, and humor. The extent to which you embrace levity is a rare quality among Canonized writers. Often it seems as if there is a certain unwritten rule that 'true literature' may be peppered with humor, but it must have as its kernel something more 'serious.' However, in many of your finest stories—'The Champ,' 'Zapatos,' 'I Dated Jane Austen'—humor occupies an absolutely central role. Throughout your career, have you found it difficult to have your humor 'taken seriously'? Do you think the literary world tends to restrict itself too firmly to gloom and angst? Is there such a thing as humor for its own sake, and is it valuable?*

*TCB: As I mentioned above, I am willing to try on anything, and I hope that willingness prevents me from becoming stale. There are many modes of humor to explore, from the slapstick of "The Champ" to the grimmer stuff of "Greasy Lake," and all are equally valid. We are telling stories, that's all. Composing stories. Letting the voices speak. "I Dated Jane Austen" has fun with the notion of hagiography and the tell-all (as does "Ike and Nina"); "The Champ" comments on conspicuous consumption, on greed, on the have-alls; "Zapatos" has similar fun with the literature of Latin America we've received in translation and tells, I hope, a hell of a compelling, and, as you say, funny, story in the process.*

*WL: You were inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters last month. I'm going to ask the question that everyone wants to know: did you actually ditch the leather jacket and don a suit during the induction ceremony?*

**TCB:** I wore a very chic suit. I needed to demonstrate to my fellow members of the Academy that I was well-suited to join them. Pictures are forthcoming, methinks, though I never thought to take any.

**WL:** *Entertainment Weekly* once called you, “A waggish gazetteer of the postmodern American landscape.” If you had to choose one person, who would be your favorite waggish figure and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character, or just a personal friend of yours.

**TCB:** Wags seem to me an earlier version of what I and my circle of disaffected childhood friends would label wise guys. We were wise guys. We lived on verbal gymnastics--still do--and love nothing better than the self-reflexive conversation that spins to heights, drops to nothing, and does it all over again. In this regard, I'll nominate two: Griff Stevens, former lead singer of Russia, and Alan Arkway, my oldest friend (i.e., mi amigo de mas largo tiempo). I've known Alan since we were both three and a half. Griff is of more recent vintage. Thirty or so years. But there is nothing like the merriment the three of us can get up to in the course of an evening's discussion. Wit rules!