

INTRODUCTION

T. Coraghessan Boyle



(1948-)

T. Coraghessan Boyle combines an affection for the surreal with a sure sense of comic voice and timing to produce fiction that is often bizarre but entertaining. He was born in Peekskill, New York, in 1948. He holds master of fine arts and doctorate degrees from the University of Iowa and teaches English at the University of Southern California. He has won a Pushcart Prize (1977), the St. Lawrence Prize (1980), and the Aga Kahn Prize (1981). Along with contemporaries such as Max Apple, he is a leader in the reaction against minimalist fiction. His characters, sometimes based on caricatures of figures from popular culture, may be unusual in appearance or behavior but manage to think and talk as human beings. On balance, his work presents a humorous if not always optimistic view of modern times and of American culture.

Boyle's first collection, *The Descent of Man*, begins with an epigraph from Tarzan: "Ungowa." The animal energy of that human utterance is an apt prelude to stories which examine, among other things, what it means to be human. In the title story, a researcher finds herself in love with a brilliant chimpanzee who translates abstract philosophical works such as Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871) into the symbol language called Yerkish. The sureness of Boyle's ear for comedy is apparent in the opening paragraph of "We Are Norsemen," a story about Vikings that shows that even those who rape and plunder may have their times of depression. The often subtle differences between masculine and feminine are the subject in "A Women's Restaurant," in which the protagonist is led by his obsession with feminine behavior to renounce his own sex. There is much graphic violence in the stories in *The Descent of Man*, but it is handled with wit and ironic intelligence, so that it generally enlightens rather than frightens.

Water Music is a long, picaresque novel that manages to be many things at once. On the first level, it is a strong, fast-paced account of the Scottish explorer Mungo Park and his hairbreadth escapes from torture and death in Africa. It is also the story of Ned Rise, a small-time London thief who seeks to elevate himself. *Water Music* is told, as often as not, in a jazzy twentieth century American slang that mocks solemn nineteenth century sentimentalism. The presence of an intrusive narrator who is always ready to point out ironies or make jokes at the expense of the characters and capable of inserting chapter titles such as "Oh, Mama, Can This Really Be the End?" is reminiscent of eighteenth century satires.

Budding Prospects is both a novel and a kind of handbook for the growing of marijuana--or rather a cautionary account of how not to grow it. At the same time, it is a wry commentary on the passing of the hippie generation and the introduction of business tactics into the distribution of controlled substances. Vogelgesang (German for "birdsong"), an ephemeral confidence man, hires a team of ambitious former

hippies to raise a crop of marijuana; the enterprise is doomed from the beginning, but Felix, the narrator, survives the experience with his dignity and sense of humor intact. The conflict between marijuana growers and society, exemplified by the cop Jerpbak, is as melodramatic as Jerpbak's mirrored sunglasses. There is both comic relief and philosophical content in this novel, and the effect is to make *Budding Prospects* seem less than serious fiction.

In the stories contained in *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*, Boyle recaptures the strangeness of his earliest work but adds a seasoned, patient acceptance of the weaknesses of human nature that was missing in stories such as "The Descent of Man." The title story, with its epigraph from rock singer Bruce Springsteen, relates a night out for some young suburban males who "wheeled our parents' whining station wagon out on the street [and] left a patch of rubber half a block long." The rest of their adventure is an equally strange interplay of the romantic and the real, with the ultimate reality of death coinciding with the destruction of the station wagon. The implicit satire on the shallowness of rock culture is carried over into "All Shook Up," in which a bad Elvis Presley impersonator flashes across the paths of a couple with troubles of their own. Other stories in the collection deal with themes such as surrogate motherhood ("Caviar") and pie-in-the-sky politics ("The New Moon Party") with varying degrees of surrealism. The most effective piece in the collection is a somber reminiscence of the final days of Robert Johnson, a blues guitarist of the 1930's.

In *World's End*, Boyle creates another sprawling novel with multiple layers and strands of plot and a large, often bizarre, cast of characters. In the largest sense, the novel is about the Hudson River landscape and the character of its citizens; it spans more than three hundred years of history and an equally wide range of socioeconomic classes. Its twin poles are the Peckskill Riots of 1949, in which a group of neo-Nazis assaulted Jews and blacks, and the events surrounding the establishment of Dutch family dynasties in the seventeenth century. The Van Brunt family begins life in America as indentured servants in the wealthy Van Warts, and the descendants of the two families are intertwined in the twentieth century events. Many of the story's incidental details, and something of the character of the protagonists, Walter Van Brunt, are autobiographical, based on Boyle's adolescence in Peckskill (called "Peterskill" in the novel). *World's End* is an effective combination of history and comedy that reinforces Boyle's significant place in contemporary fiction.

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