

T.C. BOYLE

ON SATIRE, MORTALITY, AND WHY WE MAKE ART

Talia Adry



Talia Adry is an American essayist and poet whose essay, "Hospital Dreams," won the 2012 Howard Hirt Award for Nonfiction Prose. Adry earned a BA in Journalism and Creative Writing from Framingham State University in Massachusetts, where she served as features editor for *The Gatepost*. She has an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from San José State University. She was the senior copyeditor for *Reed Magazine: Issue 151, California Edition*.

Award-winning novelist T.C. Boyle spent much of his childhood in Westchester County, New York, appreciating the dense woods and deep snowfalls of living upstate. While beautiful, the East Coast in wintertime, he says, lasted "eleven months, and everything was terrible." Much of his teenage years he spent driving around darkened, icy streets in his mother's car, searching for friends.

"I grew up with a bunch of degenerate but very bright wise guys," Boyle says. "We all saw things in a kind of sarcastic way because of course, not only were we mortal, but we were vastly superior to everyone alive."

Looking at Boyle's impressive oeuvre, which includes *Drop City*, *The Women*, and *The Tortilla Curtain*, one can see the origination of the "degenerate wise guy" he and his friends cultivated. Boyle's many novels and short stories have been categorized as dark comedy and satire: critic Bill Seligman once described Boyle as "a satirist cut off from the oxygen of morality."

Literature and a "black and absurdist sense of humor" get the PEN Faulkner-winning writer through the trials of life.

"Laughing is the antidote to everything, all of our worries, and so we have to have a good time on our way to the grave," he says, adding that the "distraction" of literature also helps. "All literature, no matter what it is, is entertainment on some level. It's a distraction from the world. ... [I]t is meditation. Both in the writing of it, and in the receiving of it. And it's really quite magical. It's the only thing we have—aside from drugs and alcohol, of course— to get out of our own consciousness, which can be oppressive at times."

This past winter, the Santa Ana fires near Santa Barbara, California, forced Boyle and his family to evacuate their early twentieth-century Frank Lloyd Wright house. Luckily, their home suffered no damage, but the close call still weighs on the writer. Many people in the area lost not only homes but loved ones in the flooding and mudslides that killed twenty of his neighbors.

In a January essay for *The New Yorker*, "The Absence in Montecito," Boyle reflected on the disaster: "We each inhabit a consciousness, and that consciousness gives us the world, and the universe, and what we can grasp through the apprehension of our five senses. But the universe has no consciousness. It just is."

While Boyle's fiction and essays often provide a surrealist, satiric worldview, his work also tackles the existential—the uncertainty of nature and humanity. These challenging subjects require a sensitivity and willingness to discuss mankind's fragility in the world-at-large.

"Everything is alarming. Everything is terrible. Everything always gets worse," the writer says. "The world is out of control. And one of the ways to think about that, and make it under your own personal control, is to make art of any kind."

Boyle credits newspaper articles with inspiring most of his story ideas. He reads the paper in the morning and listens to NPR after breakfast, but limits himself to these two things, choosing not to follow the "news of the minute," which he says would drive him insane.

Plagued by concerns about environmental destruction, invasive species, mass extinctions, and global warming, Boyle values addressing these themes in his work, especially now.

"We are in deep, deep trouble with regard to our environment," he says. "What Bush did, and what Trump is actively doing, will push us back a hundred years. We don't have a hundred years."

Boyle makes his antipathy to the current administration abundantly clear, asserting that the Trump administration is the closest to fascist he's seen in this country. After the 2016 election, he proclaimed himself "part of the problem," unable to find common ground with the right-wing agenda.

"I am completely intransigent in my views," he says. "I can't imagine agreeing with the Republican right-wingers. I believe in women's rights, equality and democracy, the environment, and education. What do they believe in? They believe in shilling for the corporations who bought them into office."

Although he's been a member of the English Department at USC for forty years, the author insists he doesn't work well with other people. He'd much prefer to be walking his dog in the Sierra, where he lives a few months a year and "embraces this thing that's grander than us all." When in the mountains, he goes straight for the woods. "I never see anybody," he says. "I bring the dog with me and I go someplace for a couple of hours—sometimes to my favorite waterfalls—and just read a book, hang out, and come back."

This need for tranquility might come from his younger years in New York, when he was "pretty wild, rebellious, and drug-addled." Before earning a B.A. in English and History from SUNY Potsdam, Boyle had wanted to be a musician. He considers John Coltrane to be his first artistic influence. "He remains one of my heroes to this day. I play him almost every day. When I'm at work, it's on in the background. I've heard the songs a thousand times and they never get old."

While completing his M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, Boyle came to understand the dedication required to produce award-winning work. "I realized at some point that if I was going to see where my talent would lead me, then I would have to have the stability and rigidity of working seven days a week. And I do it because I want to see where it's going to go."

Today, part of Boyle's interest in writing lies in polishing his stories. "If I have something down on paper, then I go over it and over it and over it, until something else starts to happen," he says. "Some days I go backwards, some days I go forwards. Some days I get in a trance and maybe write a couple of pages, who knows? It's all a question of trying to put it together."

After much national praise and numerous book tours, Boyle recalls important advice given to him, but not heeded—or so he claims. During the book tour of *World's End*, his fifth critically-acclaimed novel, his editor reminded him to remain humble.

"And of course, I've never been humble," he says, with a laugh. "So basically, I just told them all how wonderful I am, which is, by the way, the main thing I like to discuss with my wife when we're going out to dinner," he quips. "Why talk about politics? Let's just talk about how wonderful I am!"

"So that didn't really work out for me. I ignored the advice. In fact, I ignored everything everyone ever told me."

Boyle, who married his college sweetheart, Karen, says he depends on the stability of his family, friends, and career as his life's foundation. He's had the same close friends since elementary school. He's worked with the same agent since college. He enjoys the quiet moments when he can have a good glass of pinot noir. Red wine, he maintains, is good for him. It stimulates his brain cells. "But I don't want to make everyone think they should go out and drink red wine," he says, mock-serious. "You gotta keep it under a gallon a day."

When asked how he'd like to be remembered, Boyle quoted the famous American writer Woody Allen. "I don't want to be immortal through my works. I want to be immortal for not dying."

