

Interview with T.C. Boyle

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<<http://www.tcboyle.net/scott.html>>

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T.C. Boyle is one of America's most prolific contemporary authors, with seven novels and five short story collections to his credit, written over the course of his twenty-five year career. Boyle's oeuvre runs all over the map, from historical novels, including *Riven Rock* and *The Road to Wellville*, to the zany story of a marijuana farm in *Budding Prospects*, to politically relevant satire like *The Tortilla Curtain*. I talked with Boyle one afternoon at the Whitehall Hotel in Chicago. He was in Chicago to read at Harold Washington Library from his new collection, *T.C. Boyle Stories*. The volume is a thick tome of sixty-eight stories, including the complete contents of Boyle's first four short story collections, and seven stories which have never before been published in book form. Boyle said that he was enjoying his visit to Chicago, and noted that the church right down the street from his hotel was the same one that Stanley McCormick, the subject of Boyle's novel *Riven Rock*, attended with his mother a hundred years ago. Boyle was reading David Quammen's *The Flight of the Iguana*, and he mentioned that Quammen's long non-fiction work, *The Song of the Dodo*, had been an inspiration for him to work on the novel he's currently writing, *A Friend of the Earth*. Chicago was Boyle's last stop on a three-week book tour. While you'd expect most writers to be exhausted after such a long haul, Boyle, the consummate raconteur, proved to be a buoyant, energetic conversationalist.

SR: This collection spans twenty-five years of your career as a writer. As you put the collection together and as you go on this tour, have you yourself noticed ways in which you have changed or grown as a writer over that period?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, it spans twenty-five years of my career, which is the entire career, from the beginning till now. The earliest story in there was composed

before I went to Iowa, it was one of the stories that got me in there, and got me published. Now I also have probably thirty or forty stories I published in that period that I have never collected, and never will. And again, this collection wasn't my idea, it was my editor's idea, to kind of show the audience that's come to me over the last three novels that there's also a lot of work in the short story. I liked the idea after a while, they talked me into it, but I do like it, because I see it as Volume I, you know? I have a lot of work, this is Volume I. Volume II, give me twenty more years, we'll have Volume II.

I can see that I've changed in this way: I had never written any novels when I wrote the first stories. In fact, I probably published forty stories before I began a novel, *Water Music*. In the early stories, I'm very much interested in the design of the story itself, and the idea, and characters are truly secondary to the concept of these stories. They're very wild, and funny, and bizarre stories, in which the characters function with the same valence as some of the other things, or maybe even less, maybe they are sort of in the background. Language and other things take over. Since I've written novels in the interim, the very latest stories in there, like "Mexico" for instance, are more character-oriented. Everything else is there, but the characters are—richer maybe, because I've learned how to develop them through writing novels.

SR: The collection is divided into three sections: "Love," "Death," and "Everything in Between." Why did you choose to organize the book along those lines, as opposed to say a chronological order?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, I think you probably already know the answer to this: for fun, purely for fun. I didn't change any of these stories, really. I don't think that's my purpose. My purpose is to present this

work that I've done for whoever's interested. And you can see the development, I've put the dates of composition in there. But that's where it ends. I didn't want to an academic thing, I didn't want to put it into chronological order for many reasons. One of which is that the reader, you know, might not make it to the later stories if only the beginning stories are there. So I think it makes it into an entirely new book, and it interests me, I can have fun with it. They're sort of random categories, but it was a lot of fun to arrange the stories to balance one another, and make a new book. If I just stuck them together as the English—when the English did a collected stories with my first three volumes a few years ago, they just took the three volumes and stuck on a new cover, that's it. This makes it into a real book, something that's different.

What the French are doing really intrigues me. They are going to do three or four separate volumes, one per year, and they'll use *Love, Death, Le Disastre*, and *Le Bizarre*. So you get four books and it's great, and they all have a uniform cover.

SR: That's great—*Le Bizarre*. Just out of curiosity, you said that some of the stories that were written before you went to Iowa. Which one got you in there?

T.C. BOYLE: "Drowning" is the earliest story in there. You know if I were doing a selected stories or a "best of" I probably would eliminate many of the stories from the first collection and a couple from the second collection. But I didn't want to do a selected stories—I could have done fifty stories, that would have been an enormous book, and would have no stories that I think are weaker, but again, that's not the purpose of a collected stories—the purpose of a collected stories is to show your development. To show it all. All the stuff that I want to keep that has been published in book form before, and a couple of older ones that hadn't been published, and then some new work to bring it up to the present time. Although I'm holding off some of the new work too, for the next collection—I didn't want to publish a 1,000 page book.

SR: You studied at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop in the early seventies and stayed on to complete your Ph.D. How important of a period was that for you as a writer? And also, was Robert Coover was there at the time?

T.C. BOYLE: No, he wasn't actually.

SR: Oh, never mind that then—

T.C. BOYLE: But I'll address it nonetheless. The time when I was at Iowa was a time when I became serious about writing—as my life. Before that, as you probably know, I was pretty much of a degenerate, writing sporadically, and listening to a lot of bad habits and so on in New York. I'd never been west of New Jersey at that point, and I kind of grew up, because now I knew what I wanted to do, and I pursued it vigorously. I'm very proud of the fact that I made a perfect 4.0 in all of my graduate work, that I was a good student. Prior to that—I'd been in school since I was four years old, and I didn't want to do it, you know? It was like punishment to go to undergraduate school. So in that way, yeah, it started a whole new phase of my life. Iowa bailed me out, really.

SR: It's a good place to write.

T.C. BOYLE: Yes it is. You're in a place where everybody is a writer, including the waiter and the bartender and the pizza delivery guy, everybody's a writer. And writing is the chief art, and writers are revered. I got to see all my heroes coming through town and give a reading in the five and a half years I lived there. Whether they're nice people or not, or whether they're idiots, who cares? There they are, they're living and breathing, you know?

Coover is my mentor, in many ways. When I first started to write stories, I was writing these very fragmented pieces that wouldn't quite stick together, and then I found *Pricksongs and Descants* and realized that he'd done what I'd been groping for, perfectly and brilliantly, and I really loved the book. A few years later—one of the reasons I went to Iowa was that Coover had been there, and all the other writers of that time that I admire—

I won a fellowship there and the job I had was to work on the Iowa Review as Assistant Fiction Editor. Coover was the Fiction Editor, but he was living in London. So I would screen the stuff, and send him ten manuscripts, and he would pick three or four or whatever, so we corresponded for a couple years. When I finished my Ph.D. I did the whole Eurail thing as a ragtag hippie with my wife, trotting around Europe. When we got to London, Coover gave a party for us. He was just great. He introduced me to my agent, as well. And I've heard him read many times. He is a brilliant, brilliant reader, one of the best that there is. I never read with him until last Monday night, a week ago, at the 92nd St. Y. So that was really a special occasion. That was fun, tremendous fun.

SR: As I'm making my way through your collection, I'm amazed at how often animals appear as metaphors, plot devices, and even characters. You have to be the most versatile author of animal stories in the history of American Lit.

T.C. BOYLE: My favorite is the point of view of the elephant in "Big Game," where I'm actually in the elephant's head for a while. That was fun.

SR: Is there something about storytelling that makes you gravitate towards animals?

T.C. BOYLE: No. It's just that everybody has his own territory, and own interests. My stories come from anything that interests me, or that I discover. And I've always been very fascinated by biology and ichthyology. And always very fascinated with the idea of us as just another animal species, and not separate from the animals. So my first book was called *Descent of Man*, for instance. I think that's why the animals appear so often, throughout the work.

SR: Do you have any favorite stories in the collection?

T.C. BOYLE: Yeah, I do. But there are lots of them. The stories that I think are the ones that are my contribution to our literature are the ones that the critics don't usually single out. They single out the more conventional stories, and say

how mature I've become because I wrote "If the River Was Whiskey." Well, fine, I'm glad. But I think the stories that distinguish me from other writers are the wild ones, the really nutball stories, like "Bloodfall," or "The Miracle at Ballinspittle," or "Ike and Nina," or "Sorry Fugu," stories that other people wouldn't conceive of or write in that way. Because the idea is to be individual, right? These are individual stories. Nobody else is going to write them, maybe nobody else would want to.

I like those stories because I think they're unique, more than the more realistic stories. I don't rule out writing any kind of story. I'll try anything: literary parodies, or a story like "Sitting on Top of the World," where you get kind of tense, just to see how it will go. What I love best is just the crazy, crazy stuff: "56-0," the football story or "Respect," the story about the Italian doctor and the mafia guys. I mean, I'll try anything. Why not? Why limit yourself?

SR: "Heart of a Champion" is one of my favorite stories. I've taught that a few times. It's a good story for an Intro. to Lit class, because it helps get people over the bridge from watching TV to seeing what can be done with literature.

T.C. BOYLE: Right, and also discussing the ramifications of it, and what TV feeds you, and the sentimentality, and other notions that we're fed and how it forms our society and our view of society, and how the author subverts all of that. You start at ground zero again.

SR: Your 1993 novel *The Road to Wellville* was made into a film, directed by Alan Parker. How much of a role did you play in its production? Did you enjoy the process, and would you look forward to seeing more of your work translated to film?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, point A, the answer is simple. Zero. Point B, I love the movie that Alan made, and I like Alan very much. I consider him a good friend, and I consider him a very fine artist. I love the film he made of *Road to Wellville*. But he knows that I would have nothing to do with writing it. He wrote the script

himself. I don't want to work for anybody else, I don't want to write scripts, I don't want to write histories, biographies, book reviews, I just want to write fiction. That's what gives satisfaction; it's my life's work. And what was the third part of the question?

SR: Would you look forward to—

T.C. BOYLE: Yes, yes I do. I look forward to more films coming out. I think next will be *Budding Prospects*. Columbia Pictures has stepped in. It's been under option forever, since it came out, and they just signed a director, Peter Cattaneo of *The Full Monty*, and writers, the writers of *Grosse Pointe Blank*. So that sounds like a good combination to me, because what both of those movies lacked was a strong plot-line, and I think here they have a strong story to tell, and the writers of *Grosse Pointe Blank* are hilarious, that's some hilarious stuff, and then Cattaneo did a great job with his characters and his cinematography. So I'm hoping that it will be a great combination.

SR: Sounds great.

T.C. BOYLE: But more to the point, there's my TV show that may materialize, I think, for next fall. Probably for HBO. It would be a given number of episodes of my stories dramatized. It would be—I think thirteen, they were talking about, but you know, don't quote me on that. When you turn it on, and it's on the screen, then you know.

I think it will be great, if they will spring for it. Tony Bill is producing, he's an old friend of mine, I've known him since I moved to LA, the writers are people I met in the Writer's Workshop, Mitch Burgess and Robin Green, who used to write *Northern Exposure*, and my job is to be the host. Which doesn't involve a lot of time, and I don't have to write anything except brief intros to each one, and appear on the screen for a minute.

SR: Wearing a smoking jacket?

T.C. BOYLE: Yeah, yeah, of course—we're going to take off the Rod Serling thing. I want to do it because it would get the word out on the stories, to a huge

audience, whereas, no matter how many books you publish, you still fight against the tide. I mean I might read to five hundred people tonight, but one minute on the screen and you got thirty million, you know? So I'd really like to do it, especially because it doesn't involve any participation on my part, except two days, at most.

SR: Of course while you're in town, you could always stop by Harpo Studios, pitch it to Oprah, and shoot right to the top of the best seller list.

T.C. BOYLE: Oh yeah, that's my other plan. If the TV show doesn't pan out, I intend to marry Oprah. Because of my deep physical attraction to her. After about two weeks, we'll be in bed, and I'll turn to her and say, "Hey Ope, how 'bout the TV show?"

I've never watched her show and I wouldn't, it's not my kind of thing, but I do love what she's done for books, and I would love it if she picked one of mine. It would be great; it's an instant large audience. Barring that eventuality, though, I would love to do my own show. I think it could be very popular, and it could be good for everybody. I'm really hot on the idea, but again, with the film industry, until you turn on the tube and there it is, nothing is a go.

SR: You write long novels and short stories, and write the short stories in between the novels. Do you ever work out ideas in your short stories that then make their way into your novels? Is there a kind of rhythm?

T.C. BOYLE: No. It never happens. When I'm locked away with a novel, as I am now, anything that occurs to me as a short story, I just jot it down: a brief, one-sentence description of the idea. When the novel is done, and my head clears a little bit, I turn to a period of writing short stories, which could last anywhere from 8 months to a year. I wait until the ideas kind of peter out, and then it's time to write another novel. I really love to be in that rhythm. And even further than that, I have a rhythm of a long, more complex novel, a book of stories, and then usually a shorter, contemporary novel,

which is the pattern I'm working on right now.

SR: That's a great pattern to get in.

T.C. BOYLE: I don't want to mess with it, either.

SR: You're a lot like Flannery O'Connor in that many of your stories are "without a hero"—without any one character who necessarily elicits readers' sympathies. This is very hard to pull off successfully, and you get away with it very well. Generally, how much do you identify with your characters? Do you feel that you need to?

T.C. BOYLE: I guess I stand back from them. I love the comparison with Flannery O'Connor, who is one of my all-time heroes. I stand back from them as the god of my characters' universe. I don't usually identify much with them. They're all an amalgam of people I might know, or that I've invented. The closest characters to me are somebody like the kid in "If the River Was Whiskey," or the narrator of "Greasy Lake," the narrator of "Back in the Eocene," but those are all fictions too. They didn't happen. Some autobiographical elements are put into this framework, and I do identify with those characters, maybe more so than when I'm standing back and narrating in the third person, for instance, like in "Big Game," where it's a kind of Evelyn Waugh type of satire of a kind of person, and a kind of mentality in our society.

I feel equally happy about both sorts of stories. I don't have to identify with the characters. Some idiot criticized Tortilla Curtain, as I recall, some very jealous, kind of second-string writer said that I'm "disdainful of my characters" or something like that. Well, the guy should read a little satire, he should read a little Evelyn Waugh, a little Kingsley Amis. That's what satire does, it makes fun of certain behaviors in order to change them. A lot of people don't quite get sophisticated humor anymore. It seems that we're in this kind of grimly realistic phase, where if it's not straightforward naturalism, people don't think it's any good, or don't get it, and I'm trying to work with all different types of humor. You know, the kind of

slapstick of "The Champ," which has a kind of serious undertone to it, to a much more horrifying kind of humor, a Flannery O'Connor kind of thing, where you're caught off guard, as in "King Bee," where you're horrified by it, and the same in Tortilla Curtain, and other books that I've done, *Riven Rock* even.

SR: Your Ph.D. from Iowa was in Nineteenth Century British literature, and your first novel *Water Music* was a satire of Victorian fiction. *The Road to Wellville* and *Riven Rock* are both set around the turn of the century. What is it about this period that makes you gravitate towards it?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, the period has always fascinated me. I thought in the original conception of *World's End* that there would be a period around the turn of the century too, but there wasn't. With the two books you mentioned, *Riven Rock* and *Wellville*, they both have to do with things that are happening in our society now, and I think that the beginnings of them are what interests me. I don't just write a conventional historical narrative, because they never work. The historical impulse overwhelms the aesthetic impulse, and you wind up with a rather dull read that seeks to replicate the way people lived in the past, or the way they spoke, or what they ate, and all that kind of information, which isn't necessarily germane to a novel.

I'm interested in writing novels that reflect on how we are now, how we got to be what we are now, which is one of the things that attracted me to the *Riven Rock* story. This kind of skirmish between men and women, the alliance between men and women, human sexuality, what's normal, what's not, who decides, what is marriage all about. I look at Katherine McCormick, and a woman in her condition today would just probably get a good divorce lawyer, take half the estate, and move on to Aruba.

So things that point to who we are today fascinate me, and I think that's why I've twice tackled the beginning of the century. I don't think I will again, because now we have the new beginning of a new

century. And actually, part of my new novel is set in 2025.

SR: Oh really? Do you have a title yet?

T.C. BOYLE: It's called *A Friend of the Earth*. It's about the environmental movement, from 1950 to 2025. It begins when the narrator is one, and he's now seventy-five, when he's telling the story. It's a comedy, but it's grim. It has to do with ecotage, and global warming, and the extinction of species, all that kind of stuff.

SR: *Riven Rock* was based on the true story of industrialist Cyrus McCormick's son Stanley McCormick. How important is research to you as a writer, in this and in previous works?

T.C. BOYLE: I agree with E.L. Doctorow, who said in response to this question that the research, for a novelist, is really a spur to the imagination. So that when you're doing the research, you begin to formulate what the story might be. You begin the story. If your research is incomplete, or the story takes you in an unforeseen direction, you can always go back and find supporting material. I think many writers get bogged down in their research, because they enjoy the research for its own sake. I don't, necessarily. I need the research to spur my imagination, so I know what the story's going to be, and I don't feel good unless I'm actually doing a story, and making a story, and involved in it. So research is important, but it's not all-consuming. I'm not trying to reproduce information; I'm trying to figure out what the information means. I can't figure that out unless I write a fiction.

SR: As a subject for a novel, sexual deviant Stanley McCormick seemed to me to be a particularly challenging character, a kind of emotional minefield. Yet, in terms of character-writing, it seems like you invested more in developing a human understanding of his psyche than you had with previous protagonists. Do you think this novel marks a kind of shift in approach for you in terms of writing character?

T.C. BOYLE: Boy, I don't know how to answer that. I feel that I've been working hard to improve my concept of character

from the beginning. Character in satires often isn't as relevant as it is in a more conventional narrative, because what's more important is the overview. But it's in my books, in *East is East*, for instance, I feel that I created a very solid character in Ruth Dershowitz. I think in this book Eddie O'Kane is a good character portrait, so is Katherine Dexter McCormick. I think the characters in *Tortilla Curtain* hopefully rise above satiric portraits, and become affecting, and more fully fleshed, characters. So I've been aware of this, and trying to work with it. In fact character for me, in some of the new stories, like "Mexico," for instance, is something that's a kind of a new toy for me to play with.

Stanley—I don't think anybody else would have written a story about Stanley McCormick. But I've got my own territory, it's my own thing. I don't want to be like all the other novelists. Even though the critics can't quite—I shouldn't complain about them, they've supported me from the beginning, the reviews of *Riven Rock* were overwhelmingly favorable—but there were still some that aggravated me, and that are kind of niggling. I want to be different, I want to stand apart from the other writers, and pursue my own territory, and go where I have to go, on my own, as an individual. That doesn't necessarily conform to what more conventional critics think literature should be. Well, I piss on them from a great height, and I've said many times: I know what I'm doing, and I don't know where they're coming from. I guess they're getting \$500 to review a book, you know?

Yeah—who's going to build a book around a sexual maniac who assaults women and has to be locked up? Unless it's some stupid thriller or horror crap, you know? I don't know, it intrigues me. What does it mean? Why would a man have to be locked away for twenty years without seeing a woman? What does it mean? Why should it interest me? Why should it interest readers? And yes, I did want to explore his mind, and his psychology, as a way of getting at the relations between men and women.

I invented Eddie O'Kane as a character to stand as Stanley's alter ego. Many men are deeply misogynistic, as you know, being a

man, and talking with other men, and sitting around the sports bar and all of that. I think they're misogynistic because they're afraid of women. To be in love with somebody, and to declare your love for them, really puts your heart and soul on the line in the most naked way, because women might reject you, and often they do, and then you become bitter about it. Eddie O'Kane is a womanizer, he's misogynistic. He's even very casual about it. He's, in his own way, very little different from Stanley. But there are degrees. And I wanted to explore those degrees.

SR: What kinds of music do you listen to?

T.C. BOYLE: When I'm working I always listen to music. Almost exclusively classical music, string quartets, trios, sometimes vocal music. And also, sometimes, John Coltrane. Jazz. When I'm not working, I listen to rock 'n' roll.

Riven Rock, it was strange, it was set around the turn of the century, you'd think I'd listen to classical music, but I got into a Coltrane phase again, and made tapes of all my favorite cuts from his albums, so a lot of *Riven Rock* was written to 60s jazz rather than turn of the century classical music. I just need the rhythm.

SR: When you start out writing a novel or short story, do you pretty much know where you're going to end up? Do you work with outlines, or do you just sort of jump in with both feet?

T.C. BOYLE: I have no idea where any story or novel is going to go. I have to follow the opening lines, and I find out where they go. It's a puzzle, and that's why it's so magical and interesting for me to write fiction, and why I'm not interested in writing anything else. With novels, I generally do research, and as we said, helps to suggest what the story might be. And I might jot some notes down then. Usually those notes aren't really relevant though, as to what evolves. But just the process of thinking about it in that strict way is helpful. I also like to have a title for a novel before I begin. It's been that way with everything but *Budding Prospects*. And some kind of sense of how

big it will be, and what division of sections there might be in the book. Because that also helps as an organizing principle. Beyond that, I have no idea. There are no outlines. It's too abstract to make an outline. I will, at some point, leap ahead and think, "Oh yeah, well this will happen, and that will happen, and this is why, and it will end here," and I jot down a few lines to that regard, but basically I'm just following the story through to see where it will take me.

SR: Do you have any kind of set routine for writing? Do you set any schedule for yourself?

T.C. BOYLE: I work 7 days a week. I get up, and I read the newspaper, then go to work, and I usually work four hours a day, on average, something like that, and then I'm done, I don't even think about it until the next day.

SR: That probably helps keep you sane.

T.C. BOYLE: Yeah. I think you need to give the unconscious time to resolve some of the questions of the work, some of the problems. Hemingway said that when he would stop writing each day, he could only stop if he knew where he was going the next day. I think he was pretty much saying the same thing I am. I get to a certain point where it goes dead. I don't know if I know where I'm going to be the next day, but I know that nothing more is going to come out of banging my head against the typewriter today, so I may as well move on.

SR: When you were growing up, were there any particular books or authors whose work was particularly important to you?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, it depends on how you define growing up. When I was a kid, I didn't read much. I read comic books, and animal stories, and things like that. When I went into college, I began to read, and especially to read contemporary authors. In that period of the early 70s, I was reading: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Borges, Julio Cortazar, Gunter Grass, Pynchon, John Barth, Coover, Barthelme, the absurdist playwrights, Flannery O'Connor, people who were on the scene

current at that time. Usually it was stuff that was a little extra-real, stuff that had a little bit more of a sweep, or a larger overview of life than, let's say, the minimalists that we had in the 80s, that kind of thing.

SR: I hope that period is over.

T.C. BOYLE: Well, I think there's great work that was done then, and I love many of the writers—

SR: Yeah, well, I mean, Carver was great—

T.C. BOYLE: Carver's the best, and Mary Robison did great work too, in that style, Richard Ford as well, but it wasn't exactly my style. Although I've written some stories that—they're not minimalistic, exactly, but they are of that ilk, because, you know, this is a grab bag. I want to try everything.

SR: Food and restaurants seem to be a recurring obsession in your fiction. Restaurants make for an interesting milieu in your stories, in that they are often the site of both an essential activity, eating, for the human-as-animal, and yet also a place where the superficiality and peccadilloes of "high culture" are put on display. Do you see restaurants as places where visceral humanity puts on its cultured airs?

T.C. BOYLE: Well that is a great question, and brilliantly phrased, and it answers itself, pretty much. I very much like the idea. I've thought about food a lot, because I'm always asked about it. I think it stands as a kind of symbol of conspicuous consumption. My restaurant critic piece ["Sorry Fugu"] began with the idea that it's so absurd. I mean, people are starving all over the world, and we're concerned about how they're cooking the sea bass tonight. But eventually, as you know, it became a story not so much about restaurants and restaurant critics, but my little love letter to the critics of the world in general, as opposed to the artists.

And yeah, it does bring our animal natures into conflict with what is polite. And to be civilized, to be able to go to a

restaurant, without killing everybody, eating their food, and then eventually eating them too, is a miracle in a way.

SR: So were you the guy in "Sorry Fugu" with the burnt steak and potatoes?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, I'm a pretty fancy guy these days. I get wined and dined a lot all over the world. I like good food and good restaurants. But I'm not obsessive about it. I'm not obsessive at all. I'll eat anything. I never met a food I didn't like. During the Wellville tour, all the journalists thought it would be hilarious to take me out to the chili stand, and eat hot dogs and stuff. Sure, no problem.

SR: So what are some of your favorite dishes?

T.C. BOYLE: My favorite cuisine is Japanese. I love sushi. It held me in good stead when I did my book tour in Japan, in '89. A lot of Westerners, I guess, are kind of squeamish about Japanese food, or unfamiliar with it. Invariably, when I went out to dinner, my hosts would say, "So Sensei, is there is any food that you do not eat?" and I would say, "No, bring it on. I'll eat it all." The way they do it in Japan is: You don't order sushi, you just come in, everybody sits down, the chef is going to bring you twenty pieces of sushi, and he cuts it up, and everybody eats the same thing. A lot of times they just set it on the wooden bar and you eat it with your fingers. You're having fun, you're drinking saké, and then the chef brings out another round of stuff down, until you say stop. It's a lot of fun. And good stuff.

Of course, one of the jokes I've already developed for the Friend of the Earth tour in the year 2000 is this: Don't invest in a sushi bar, because everything they serve there is going to be extinct in ten years. That be the truth. It's all going to be extinct, everything. Everything in the sea is gone. I just finished a book yesterday called *Cod*, by Mark Kurlansky, that Penguin just reprinted. It's a wonderful, wonderful book about the history of cod, cod fishing, how it's effected us, how it helped us to break away from England and all of that. And the sad fact is that the cod stocks are depleted and there is no cod fishing anymore.

SR: You're known as the P.T. Barnum of American fiction—

T.C. BOYLE: Am I really? I think I should get a T-shirt that says that, "The P.T. Barnum of American Fiction"—I think I will. My god.

SR: Your readings are legendary, and you're far less reclusive than J.D. Salinger. To what degree do you see fiction-writing as a kind of performance?

T.C. BOYLE: I came up with a formulation years ago of levels of fame. The first level of fame is: Nobody knows who you are, and nobody cares. The second level of fame is what I have achieved: People read my books, they come out to see me, and sometimes they will come up and say "T.C. Boyle?" I'll say yeah. They'll say "We love your work," and then they'll go away. The third level is the same scenario only they'll say, "T.C. Boyle?" I'll say yes, they'll say, "You son of a bitch," and punch me in the face. And then the final level is J.D. Salinger.

So, I'd like to stay at level two.

Well, fiction, all art, is a performance. It's a performance, and it's a seduction too. You have to get the reader's attention, I guess that's where the performance comes in. You have to seduce the reader into entering your world, and believing that it's true, and staying there.

As far as being on stage is concerned, unlike most writers, I am extroverted. I like to be onstage. Most writers are introverts—that's why they became writers in the first place. They didn't want to have to deal with anybody. I don't mind, and I get a real charge from giving a live performance. To connect with the audience in the way that comedians do, or musicians do. It's one-on-one. You deliver a line, they laugh. I mean, that's a great feeling. It reaffirms the power of the work, and the power of the written word. And also the rhythm of it. You don't hear the rhythm of it if you leave it in your own head.

I think it's great for the audiences too, because so many authors don't present

their material well, or they're kind of dull. And then everyone's eyes droop and they begin to think they're back in English class in the ninth grade with Mrs. Cox, you know? Literature's not supposed to be like that. If it's going to be like that, stay home and read it yourself.

I like to turn 'em on, I like to just do a performance. It has nothing to do with the book itself. I'm not going to read them the most difficult passages, they can read that, it's on the shelf.

That's what I do. I'm not shy about it. I mean, I'll go on TV in an orange jacket and tell jokes. I go on all the radio shows and call-ins. I don't mind being an entertainer. If it attracts more people to literature in general, and specifically to my books, great. Why not?

I really stand opposed to this whole notion, this whole academic notion, that literature is the province of the academy. I don't agree with that. Literature is the province of anybody who can read. Just as popular music is, too, it is an entertainment. Which is not to say that you would ever compromise what you're doing, or to write down to the audience, or write thrillers or vampire novels or any crap like that, but given the context of writing good, serious literature, you have to grab the audience in some way, and I feel that any way you can do it, without compromising yourself, is fine. And I don't consider the publicity part of a book to have anything to do with the book itself, and the writing of the book—that's done, that's finished. Now it's time to go out and let everybody know it exists.

SR: I think literature needs a few good salesmen.

T.C. BOYLE: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. I resent the fact that there's anybody considered more of a celebrity than writers. We are the greatest. We should be it. I mean, who are these soap opera stars and mere movie actors and actresses, and mere Rock 'n Rollers? Anybody can do that crap. Come on, let's give credit where it's due, and revere our writers a little bit more.

SR: Exactly. We need a Pantheon up there on the Washington Mall.

T.C. BOYLE: Yeah. It's a losing battle, I'm afraid. But I'm fighting it, nonetheless. I have no choice. This is it.

SR: Much of your fiction is loaded with references to pop culture. What advantages or disadvantages do you see to utilizing the stuff of pop culture in writing literature?

T.C. BOYLE: Well, there are a couple of writers who I admire, who have written good stuff, who have come out with selected stories. And they were very much of their time, well one in particular, who worked very much with references to pop culture, but specific references to a time and place in pop culture. I think that that can be limiting to a degree. If the story depends upon knowledge of it, you're dead. But obviously, every story becomes a piece of history the moment it's finished. That, more than anything, was brought back to me doing this book of collected stories. And to come back on the given references to a certain war, or a group of people, or a product, or a scientific advance, those were obviously hip, current references, by a hip, current, contemporary writer, but you'd need an encyclopedia and almanac to figure them out. Footnotes.

Yeah, every story does become part of history once it's done. But you are writing to reflect your feelings, and your thoughts, about society in your time. And, obviously, current references, and products, and so on, have to play a part in it. Unless you're going to write all your stories set in Ancient Greece. And even then—

SR: Then you better learn about the pop culture of Ancient Greece.

T.C. BOYLE: That's right, you'd have to represent the pop culture of Ancient Greece, and even then, you would still be writing it as a person in your time. Borges had fun with this in his story, "Pierre Menard, the Author of Quixote," which is so hilarious. You know, he had read Don Quixote, like all of us did, when he was a kid. He hadn't looked at it since. But he

decided to rewrite it, exactly verbatim, by becoming Cervantes, by studying the period of the 16th Century in Spain, by becoming completely infused with it, and knowing everything. And then Borges—who is a critic in the story—says, "Here is the original," and he gives you a paragraph, and then he says, "Here is Pierre Menard's inspired version," and it's exactly the same, but he says, "And can you see? The way he infuses it with modern angst!" So hilarious.

SR: You're a tenured Professor of English at the University of Southern California, where you teach fiction writing. What kind of advice do you regularly find yourself giving to young writers?

T.C. BOYLE: They have to read their contemporaries. They have to know them, thoroughly, and be totally infused with the idea of what is happening now. I often—aside from my advanced class, I also have a community class—I've often asked them to list their ten favorite works of contemporary fiction, and few of them can do that. But all of them could list ten CDs or ten movies. They have to understand that, if they're going to perform at all, they need to know what's out there.

The second thing is that they shouldn't really listen to anybody's advice as being definitive. If it sounds reasonable, then perhaps you might adopt it. You have to have a kind of chip on your shoulder, and feel that you ultimately know what your work is going to be. Otherwise, you might become a clone of somebody else, or you might write in the same style as your teacher, or someone you admire. I think you have to develop your own style, in your own way, and to know what is unique about your approach, and to work fanatically at writing. Because the more you do, the more you practice, the better you're going to get.

SR: In the past year, you've written a novel that marked a substantial stylistic departure from your earlier work, and now published a volume that is a complete retrospective of your career as a short story writer. By publishing this substantial volume now, are you doing something similar to what happens in the closing

story of the volume, “Filthy With Things,” a kind of mental housecleaning? Do you see this as a kind of clearing of the decks?

T.C. BOYLE: Wow, that’s an interesting observation. Since we’ve spoken to this earlier—I guess so. I haven’t really thought of it in that way. It’s—there so much material, there’s so much material. What am I going to do? Wait until I’m eighty, and do a volume that’s 2,000 pages long? I think it’s a good time to do this. Again, I resisted the idea of it at first, because I’m too young to do a collected volume of anything, but I think it’s good. Your observation—I hadn’t really thought of it in that way, Scott, but it is a clearing of the decks, it does sort of finish off twenty-five years. In fact, the picture on the back speaks to that. That big head shot with the severe lighting. My best friend took that picture, and he took the very same picture, in the same pose, on the whole back cover of my first book, *Descent of Man*. So it does kind of bookend it.

And what if I didn’t collect it? I would just come out with my next regular collection next year anyway, that’s fine. No loss. But I think maybe this will introduce a new audience to the work, people who came aboard in the last five

years and who might not have been there fifteen or twenty years ago when I first began publishing books. So yeah, I guess it is putting those stories behind me, and now we start Volume II. It’s good. It closes a chapter. It doesn’t mean that I’m necessarily going to write different stories altogether, I just want to continue to grow and find out where I go from here.

SR: Another of the recurring obsessions in your stories is human mortality. If you were to be hit by a truck tomorrow, how would you like the world to remember T.C. Boyle, American author?

T.C. BOYLE: The same way I want my biographer to remember it. I want my biographer not to write a biography, because my life is so boring, so full of joy, and pure happiness. He lived, he wrote, he died. You know? That’s it.

I would like to have another hundred years to write stories. But those aren’t the parameters we’ve been given in human life.

Although . . . just because everybody else who has lived has died doesn’t mean that I have to die. So I’m still holding out some hope.