

The Criminal' Writer – T. Coraghessan Boyle

T. Coraghessan Boyle was born in Peekskill, New York and attended the State University of New York at Potsdam. Upon graduation, he continued his education at the University of Iowa's famed Writers' Workshop, where he wrote his first collection of short stories, the Descent of Man. Later, he published Greasy Lake, If the River was Whiskey, and Without a Hero. Aside from his short stories, Boyle also wrote several novels, including the award winning World's End, a historical novel about New York, Budding Prospects, the story of a group of marijuana farmers trying to avoid the authorities, The Tortilla Curtain, a chilling tale of the struggles of illegal Mexican immigrants, and East is East, the account of a illegal Japanese man who jumped ship off the coast of Georgia. Boyle currently owns a home in Santa Barbara, CA, and has taught English at the University of Southern California since 1977. His newest collection of short stories, T.C. Boyle Stories, included seven stories never published in book form.

Budding Prospects told the story of several men who agreed to grow marijuana in the hills north of San Francisco for half a million dollars. Vogelsang, the leader and financial supporter of the operation, told Felix, Gesh, and Phil that they would equally split \$500,000, tax-free. However, when they arrived at the plantation, they encountered numerous obstacles, from broken water pumps to an unreasonable police officer with a personal vendetta against Felix. In addition, Vogelsang had promised that they would each receive \$166,000 on the condition that they harvested 2000 plants. However, he never informed them that certain plants had to be weeded out, so in order to harvest 2000 plants, they would have to plant 4000 plants. Ultimately, they planted only 1000 plants, meaning that their net profit would be only 25% of what they were originally promised. However, they never received a penny. Two months before harvest season, Jones, a former marijuana farmer that was caught by the authorities a year before,

discovered the marijuana farm. He then approached Gesh and demanded that they pay him \$10,000 to keep him quiet. After several more encounters with Jones, Gesh deduced that Vogelsang had lied to them, and that Jones was working for Vogelsang. In addition, a special unit, led by the unreasonable Officer Jerpbak, was created to apprehend marijuana growers in the San Francisco area. After Vogelsang explained his entire plan of using Felix, Gesh, and Phil to improve his property so that it could be sold for a much higher price, Felix stormed out and headed for Willits, where he would be safe from the authorities. With a long winter ahead of him, he planned to “think things over, break some new ground, and maybe even – if things went well, plant a little seed” (p.326)

After *Budding Prospects*, East is East, the story of Hiro Tanaka, a Japanese citizen who jumped ship off the coast of Georgia, was published. Writer Ruth Dershowitz rescued the drowning Tanaka, and let him take refuge in her cabin in the woods. As she spent more time with him, Ruth began to fall in love with Hiro, but she already had a boyfriend, Saxby. In addition, the authorities soon arrived to look for Hiro, and his name soon appeared in the papers. Ruth, who rescued Tanaka out of the goodness of her heart, became a criminal for housing an illegal immigrant. Meanwhile, Jane, a pompous writer that lived nearby, had a mysterious grudge against Ruth. Jane had always tried to make Ruth’s life miserable, and insulted her at every given opportunity. The pressure of housing an illegal immigrant, dealing with a boyfriend that was away on trips every other week, and dealing with a fellow writer who wanted nothing but to destroy her affected her usually calm and collected demeanor. When Saxby notified the authorities that Ruth was hiding Hiro in her cabin, Ruth was on the verge of a mental breakdown. After Hiro was taken into custody, he was booked for deportation. Having been trained in the ways of the honorable samurai, he would rather die than be brought to shame in Japan. On the

morning of his deportation, he committed suicide. Ruth later avoided arrest by claiming that she was oblivious of Hiro's legal status.

Finally, in 1996, Penguin Books published The Tortilla Curtain, a tale that describes the plight of two Mexicans who illegally entered the United States. Unfortunately, the coyotes they paid to guide them across the border deserted them, and Cándido and América were forced to fend for themselves. Moreover, América was pregnant, and needed food, shelter, and care. After living in the forest for several days, Cándido was hit by a car while crossing the highway. However, due to his legal status, he refused hospital treatment. Delaney, the driver of the car, gave him \$20, and drove off. With Cándido injured, América was forced to look for work at the labor exchange. Amazingly, she found a job cleaning Buddha statues for a rich man. However, on her way home one night, several men along the highway abducted and raped her. To make matters worse, several days later, the INS shut down the labor exchange where Cándido and América searched for work. They had saved some money from América's work, but not nearly enough to move to the city and pay for an apartment. On Thanksgiving Day, a man at a convenience store was kind enough to give them a free turkey. However, the fire that they built to cook the turkey burned out of control. Soon, the entire Topanga Canyon was evacuated, including the home of Delaney. During the blaze, América delivered her baby in the backyard of one of the evacuated homes. Delaney, whose two dogs were just killed by wild coyotes, was furious, and vowed to find the man who caused the fire. He identified Cándido as the culprit, and a wild chase ensued through the hills of Topanga Canyon. Eventually, Cándido, América, and their newly born daughter fell in the Topanga River and were carried away by the powerful currents. Although Cándido and América survived the ordeal, their daughter Socorro was killed.

Boyle's novels took place in calm, quiet regions just outside of a city, and there was always an overcurious observer living nearby. In addition, the homes of the main character(s) were secretive, and far from luxurious. In Budding Prospects, Felix, Gesh, and Phil lived in a small house that did not have hot water. "The place was an extended shack, the yard strewn with refuse, the doorway gaping like an open mouth, like the hungry maw of the demon-god of abandoned houses demanding propitiation." (p.41) The surrounding fields were enclosed by barbed wire to keep animals and the overcurious trespassers out, but it did not stop their neighbor Sapers from nearly discovering their plans. The irrigation system, a fundamental part of the growing process, was crude and ineffective. They had access to a small town for supplies and nighttime entertainment, but spent most of their time on the plantation. In The Tortilla Curtain, Cándido and América secretly lived in the woods, where taking a shower was considered a luxury. They built their fireplace from sticks and stones, and lived in a homemade tent that barely protected them from the rain. They bathed in the nearby creek, and found work at the local labor exchange. From time to time, a curious hiker would discover their tent and sometimes destroy it, forcing Cándido to make a new one. However, the man who hit Cándido, Delaney, lived with his wife, Kyra, in the Arroyo Blanco Estates, a rich, private community "comprising [of] a golf course, ten tennis courts, a community center and some two hundred and fifth homes, each set 1.5 acres." (p.31) Although Cándido and América lived in secrecy, the densely populated San Fernando Valley was only a mile away. In East is East, Hiro Tanaka secretly lived in Ruth's cabin, which had running water and plumbing, but he was forced to sleep on the couch. He did not have enough food, as Ruth's food supply was not nearly enough for the both of them. "He felt his consciousness pull apart like a piece of taffy...his stomach spoke to him in the terms of the sharpest denunciation." (p.36) The cabin had nothing for

entertainment, for its purpose was to create a quiet environment for Ruth to write. Jane, suspicious that Ruth is hiding something, frequently visited the cabin in search of incriminating evidence. Although the cabin was secluded in the woods, a large city was just across the bay.

The main character(s) of all three novels shared many common traits. They were all middle to lower class citizens who lived isolated lives with no family nearby. They were also determined to earn money to improve their lives, even if it meant performing an illegal activity. However, their efforts were futile, for their lives were filled with harsh obstacles that sometimes ended in tragedy. In The Tortilla Curtain, Cándido and América were not officially married, but came to America together in search of a better life. However, their experiences in the US were anything but pleasant. In fact, after the baby was born, América asked Cándido to send her back to Mexico, for “I’m finished. If you think I’m going to raise my daughter like a wild animal with no clothes, no family, no proper baptism even, you’re crazy.” (p.323.) After Cándido accidentally set the forest on fire, he was forced to deliver América’s baby, even though he had no medical experience and had only seen babies delivered on TV. After delivering the baby, Cándido used whatever he could find to build a “hut” for his wife and his child. Unfortunately, Delaney soon discovered the hut and destroyed it, leaving Cándido and América no choice but to flee. Although he and América survived the ordeal, Socorro was killed. In Budding Prospects, Felix had recently divorced his wife, and was trying to earn money. Phil and Gesh were also tempted by the large sum of money promised to them. After all, who could refuse an offer like “How would you like to make a quarter of a million dollars?” (p.23) Ironically, they never received payment for their work. Felix, Gesh, and Phil were forced to abandon the farm just before harvest season after Vogelsang explained that he had been lying to them all along. Furthermore, the new unit led by Jerpbak would soon discover their plantation, and they would

be taken to jail. Unlike Cándido and América, who were compassionate Mexicans seeking only a basic living in the US, Gesh, Felix and Phil were greedy, irascible men who chose their destiny when they agreed to the marijuana deal. They had almost no conscience, for they believed their actions were justified so long as they do not get caught. “There were risks involved, sure, but if Vogelsang was behind it, it would go.” (p.9) In East is East, Hiro did not have any family in the United States, and would live in shame if he returned to Japan. However, his stay in the United States was anything but pleasant. Much like Cándido and América, Hiro only sought a basic life in the US. In fact, his situation was much better than Cándido’s, for he had a place to stay. Unfortunately, he was apprehended, and before they had the opportunity to deport him, committed suicide. Though many would classify his actions as reprehensible, he believed that “he was going, but not to the city of his ojisan and his mother and all the generations of samurai and kamikaze and the pure unimpeachable Yamato race. He was going to the City of Brotherly Love; there, only there...He was ...home” (p.363)

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