

# Force of Nature: An Interview with T.C. Boyle

The celebrated author talks with Catamaran editor Dan White about “The Extinction Tales” and our strained relationship with the natural world

## The Extinction Tales and Beyond: T.C. Boyle Explores Our Relationship with Nature

Close to the end of “Big Game,” (1990) a celebrated short story by T. C. Boyle, we wind up, for a few seconds, in the head of Bessie Bee the elephant.

As it turns out, her head is an uncomfortable place to be. This moment is shocking because Boyle has just crossed an uncrossable line. We have entered into the mind of nature itself, only to find the natural world is not a peaceable kingdom after all.

In the inaugural issue of Catamaran, we are proud to present Boyle’s first take on an issue he has been exploring for more than three decades. “The Extinction Tales” is required reading for any Boyle fan who wants to trace Boyle’s development as an idiosyncratic nature writer, starting with his early satires and continuing through more nuanced work, including 2010’s *When The Killing’s Done*, a novel that offers his most uncomfortable and complex look yet at the human/nature divide. In spite of their thirty-three-year age difference, this early story and the recent book maintain a close relationship. Both fictions deal with human consequences and natural landscapes. Nearly identical anecdotes about the extinc-

tion of the dodo can be found in “The Extinction Tales” and *When the Killing’s Done*. While the early story makes explicit links between human and animal extinctions, *Killing*, set in the Channel Islands off California, shows people in a state of domination over the animal world. Our role as the apex species seems not to be in question. Now that our survival as the ultimate invasive species appears firmly established, we have a choice to preserve certain elements of nature and kill off the rest. But who is qualified to make such choices, and what happens when we privilege one kind of nature over another? By pitting two very different breeds of conservationism against one another, the book poses such questions while leaving the answers to the reader.

T.C. Boyle’s view of nature has always been unsentimental. In his stories, nature is just as likely to be an agency of horror as wonder; consider the slasher-movie surprises that await the survivors of an Amazonian plane crash in “Green Hell” (1976). And the destabilizing influence works both ways. If people can wreak havoc on the natural world, even with the very best of intentions, the natural world will exert its own crazy-making powers in return. Consider the wilding of Junior, the nebbish loser who gets duped into adopting a vicious African hunting cat in “Tooth and Claw” (2005).

Even his upcoming book, *San Miguel*, has a certain affinity with “The Extinction Tales.” *San Miguel* will return Boyle’s readers to the Channel Islands, but this time, he’s serving them up as part of a straight-up historical novel, free of satire, with the environmental issues off to the side. Boyle says he’s never attempted such a book before, but his fans may notice certain threads carrying over from “The Extinction Tales,” which makes heartbreaking use of historical facts, from the fate of the last aboriginal Tasmanians to the killing off of the Passenger Pigeon.

This summer, Boyle sat down with Catamaran to talk about his long engagement with the natural world, starting with “The Extinction Tales.”

—Dan White

**D**an: It’s one thing to be worried about the environment; it’s another thing to engage with the subject in an artistic way. What is it about people in relation to the natural world that keeps speaking to you as an artist?

**T.C.:** Everybody finds his own theme and obsession, if he’s lucky that is, and this is mine. I might have been a biologist if it weren’t for its dreaded math component. I am simply fascinated by the natural world, as an explorer in it, as an animal in it, as one who spends a lot of time alone deep in remote nature.

**Dan:** Was there a starting gun for you, something that got you fired up about this topic when you were young?

**T.C.:** I guess I blundered into it. I wrote “Extinction Tales” while I was a student at Iowa, in the Writers’ Workshop. My first collection, *Descent of Man*, stems from my reading of Darwin, and my disillusionment with the fact that people have always maintained that we are not animals, that we can separate the intellectual part of our being from the animal part, and it’s not true. Around that time, I began to become aware of extinctions of various creatures. Magical creatures like the dodo for instance. Where have they gone? And why have they gone? What does it mean? And so I wrote a conglomerate story about various extinctions, which of course comes down to the fact that not only will our parents be extinct, so will we ourselves and our lineage too, at some point.

**Dan:** “Extinction Tales” feels like a short story collection in its own right, several microfictions linked with the extinction theme.

**T.C.:** Early on especially I played around with fragmenting the structure of stories. My hero in those days—he remains one of my heroes—was Robert Coover. Coover’s *Pricksongs & Descants* blew me

away when I first saw it because he was doing the same thing and perfectly well. Maybe my narratives are more connected now for the most part, but if you look through the stories in the *Collected Stories*, the second volume, which is from ’98 until the present, you’ll see that there are several that also work in this way.

**Dan:** Your fiction suggests a natural world that is worth preserving but not a peaceable kingdom. I’m thinking of that famous scene in the short story “Big Game,” when we’re in the point of view of an angry elephant, Bessie Bee, and she’s going to kill the people who are pursuing her—a scary moment. I’m wondering about this unsentimental view of the natural world. Not a John Muir perspective, in other words.

**T.C.:** No, not at all. That is one of my proudest moments, when we enter Bessie Bee’s head and see humans for what they really are. I enjoyed that and I’ve come back to scenes like that in other stories—for instance, in my novel *A Friend of the Earth*, which is about global warming and projects twenty-five years into the future; it was published in the millennial year of 2000. In it, we have a rock ’n’ roll star who maintains an estate in the Santa Ynez Valley stocked with various animals that he keeps as tokens of the wild. And I wonder what the ethics of that are. So too in my most recent novel *When the Killing’s Done*, which is about the fight over restoration on the Channel Islands. There we have two environmentalists, going head to head. In some sense it becomes a kind of turf war. Yes, they want to preserve the indigenous species, which are threatened with extinction, but on the other hand, each wants to do it in his or her own way.

**Dan:** *When The Killing’s Done* pushed your environmentally themed fiction into gray areas. It makes me wonder how your perspective as an artist might have shifted or become more complicated since “Extinction Tales.”

T.C.: We want to exert control over nature. We build things. That's who we are. We make things. And in the case of these environmentalists—the novel, by the way, is based on a true story to a degree—they want to exert control over nature, to select which species belong. The conundrum comes to a head towards the end when environmental activist Dave LaJoy, in an act of revenge and arrogance, brings a raccoon to the island and lets it go. And Park Service biologist Alma Takesue sees that raccoon but is of two minds. One, if it has been dropped off there by somebody then it doesn't belong, it might negatively impact the environment so it must be removed. However, if it got there on its own, let's say by rafting, as we presume the island fox and others got there, well, then it belongs. It's a pioneer. Who has the right to make that decision, and can the decision go radically wrong? So yes, I think you're right, Dan. Over the years I've kind of deepened my view of the subject. It's inevitable. It's a conundrum. It's irresolvable. But I like to make art in order to address it and try to think things out on my own.

Dan: What is it about the American character that makes us behave in such extreme ways towards the natural world, whether we're trying to protect it or despoil it?

T.C.: In Europe, their wild creatures are fairly well gone. The papers were going crazy in Germany over the one brown bear that came into the country and was of course shot and killed. But we're a pioneer society. We're a young society. We moved west. We saw nature for what it was in our minds, that is, to provide us with food and shelter without any thought to replenishment or balance or harmony. We're still a pioneer race. My novel *Drop City* was set back in the late sixties, when there was a back-to-the-earth movement, I was trying to assess that. It takes us to the last frontier of America, Alaska, and I talk about a trapper there, Seth Harding. It turns out that we can't

go back to the land because there are too many of us. We would need twenty-five square miles each in order to be able to live off the land in that way. But I still went back to kind of meditate on that. And again, that's the American pioneer spirit.

Dan: We've been talking about some weighty, important topics: extirpation of the species, degrading the biosphere. There's another side of you I haven't addressed yet: being an entertainer for the reader. Some authors can be so sheepish about the performance aspect. You've always gone the other way ...

T.C.: Well, everybody is different. A lot of us become writers because we're introverts. I am not. I have that side of me, of course. You don't see me performing on stage when I'm writing a book. I'm holed up in the mountains, writing. I have a private side. But I really enjoy being in front of the public. I get a tremendous rush from performing. And I like to remind people, especially young people who might only see fiction as the dreaded homework assignment, that it's subversive, it's cool, it's fun. And despite what the theorists might say and the people of the academy, all art is entertainment at root. If it doesn't grab you and take you someplace, then it's poor art. It doesn't work. Of course, on stage, I'm not going to read difficult passages, or give you my deepest thoughts. I'm going to find something in my work that will entertain you for that evening. If you showed up for that hour, I want to give you all I've got. So, there is that side of me. I've fronted a rock 'n' roll band. I love to be onstage. I love to hear the audience. For many years I would only read comedic stories because that's easy. You hear them laughing. But once I wrote the story "Chicxulub," a grueling, dramatic story, I began to read that and felt a whole other kind of rush. There's a point in that story, and I've read it to huge crowds, where nobody moves. You go to the theater, you go to the opera, people are sneezing, they shuffle, they drop something, they eat popcorn. Nothing. I can feel

every single person, absolutely horrified. And as an actor, that makes me feel pretty good. Because that's what fiction does for us. It takes us to a place that we never wanted to be in real life.

Dan: Your latest book, *San Miguel*, takes you far outside the category of the funny, the social satire. Is that a little bit unnerving for you, taking on a straight-up historical novel?

T.C.: Yes, it is, Dan, and I thank you for mentioning that. I'm always trying to do something different, to push myself, to see what I can do. And this is probably the most difficult novel I had to write, because it's the first time I've done it in the straightforward realistic mode. My first novel, *Water Music*, about Mungo Park's explorations in Africa, does have an environmental theme. It has to do with expropriating lands, with colonialism. But it also takes the traditional historical novel and sets it right on its head and has fun with that. I don't see at this stage why I shouldn't attempt to do every possible kind of narrative. Why limit myself? In an artistic career in which you produce a great deal of work, you don't want to be repeating yourself. That's self-defeating. You have to challenge yourself and move on to new things, even though they may still revolve around the same themes.

Dan: What made you decide to return to the Channel Islands in this new novel?

TC: When I was doing research for *When the Killing's Done*, I came across a wonderful historical story about San Miguel Island. It's the most remote, the farthest one out, and the most damaged ecologically by sheep grazing. And this is the story of two families that lived there in different periods but had these amazing correspondences. And of course, the ecologic theme remains, although this is mainly a drama. And it deals with the way we all want to have our own place, our

own island, our own kingdom, our own place away from everyone else and live in harmony with it. With San Miguel, I was lucky to discover these real narratives (including a fragmented diary).

Dan: We began this interview in a rather apocalyptic vein, when we discussed "Extinction Tales" and its origins. Have you grown any more optimistic about the survival of the biosphere and the human race in the years since you wrote "Extinction Tales?"

T.C.: I've learned a great deal more of course over the years. And I would say that it's difficult to find much hope for the future of our species. People want good news. And the only good news I can give them is that in a mere three and a half million years the earth will be a flaming cinder once the sun expands into a yellow giant. That's the good news.

Dan: I guess the good news is that's out of our control.

T.C.: When you look through these stories and novels and issues we've been talking about, that's another element. When you create art, you are exerting control over the material and over some portion of the world and creating an alternate world, in which you exist as the god. But in our world, without a god, where everything is utterly random, there isn't a whole lot of hope that anyone can really find. We live, and we die. That's it. And my hope, and my joy, is to make art out of it, and to ruminate on what it means to be alive on this planet.

Dan White's first book *The Cactus Eaters* published by HarperCollins in 2008 was a Los Angeles Times "Discovery" selection. Dan has his MFA from Columbia University.

T.C. Boyle has published over 20 books, including twelve novels and eight short story collections. He has won the Pen/Faulkner award, France's Prix Medicis award, and been a National Book Award finalist. He currently teaches at the University of Southern California.