Alan Arkawy

T. Corraghessan Boyle is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *Water Music*, and a second novel, *Budding Prospects*. Boyle has also published a collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*. Boyle's fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Antaeus*, and *The Georgia Review*. Boyle is working on a third novel, tentatively titled *World's End*, and a second collection of short stores, *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*.

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I Dated Jane Austen first appeared in *The Georgia Review*, and is reprinted here by permission of the author. The interview that follows was conducted as part of the 1984 *Writes of Spring* program, a series of readings and workshops with noted Southern California writers of poetry and fiction. The *Writes of Spring* was sponsored by the CSUN English Department and funded by a grant from the CSUN Foundation.

Because a substantial portion of the Boyle interview deals with his novel *Water Music*, a prefatory note is appropriate here: *Water Music* is based on a work of nonfiction by Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of West Africa*. Park, a Scotsman, spent the latter years of his life

(1794-1805) exploring the people and geography of the Niger River. *Travels in the Interior* . . . chronicles those explorations in journalistic form. In *Water Music*, however, Boyle uses Mungo Park's text as a point of departure from which to create a work of fiction. As Boyle states: "The whole concept of *Water Music* is built around the imaginative process. If I had wanted to reproduce reality, I would have written Mungo Park's biography. . . . Instead, I chose to imagine what happened or what I would like to have happened."

I Dated Jane Austen

T. Coraghessan Boyle

Her hands were cold. She held them out for me as I stepped into the parlor. "Mr. Boyle," announced the maid, and Jane was rising to greet me, her cold white hands like an offering. I took them, said my good evenings, and nodded at each of the pairs of eyes ranged round the room. There were brothers, smallish and large of head, whose names I didn't quite catch; there was her father, the Reverend, and her sister, the spinster. They stared at me like sharks on the verge of a feeding frenzy. I was wearing my pink boots, "Great Disasters" T-shirt, and my Tiki medallion. My shoulders slumped under the scrutiny. My wit evaporated.

"Have a seat, son," said the Reverend, and I backed onto a settee between two brothers. Jane retreated to an armchair on the far side of the room. Cassandra, the spinster, plucked up her knitting. One of the brothers signed. I could see it coming, with the certainty and illogic of an aboriginal courtship rite: a round of polite chit-chat.

The Reverend cleared his throat. "So what do you think of Mrs. Radcliffe's new book?"

I balanced a glass of sherry on my knee. The Reverend, Cassandra, and the brothers revolved tiny spoons around the rims of teacups. Jane nibbled at a croissant and focused her huge unblinking eyes on the side of my face. One of the brothers had just made a devastating witticism at the expense of the *Lyrical Ballads* and was still tittering over it. Somewhere cats were purring and clocks ticking. I glanced

at my watch: only seventeen minutes since I'd stepped in the door.

I stood. "Well, Reverend," I said, "I think it's time Jane and I hit the road."

He looked up at the doomed Hindenburg blazing across my chest and smacked his lips. "But you've only just arrived."

There really wasn't much room for Cassandra in the Alfa Romeo, but the Reverend and his troop of sons insisted that she come along. She hefted her skirts, wedged herself into the rear compartment, and flared her parasol, while Jane pulled a white cap down over her curls and attempted a joke about Phaetons and the winds of Aeolus. The Reverend stood at the curb and watched my fingers as I helped Jane fasten her seat belt, and then we were off with a crunch of gravel and a billow of exhaust.

The film was Italian, in black and white, full of social acuity and steamy sex. I sat between the two sisters with a bucket of buttered popcorn. Jane's lips were parted and her eyes glowed. I offered her some popcorn. "I do not think that I care for any just now, thank you," she said. Cassandra sat stiff and erect, tireless and silent, like a mileage marker beside a country lane. She was not interested in popcorn either.

The story concerned the seduction of a long-legged village girl by a mustachioed adventurer who afterward refuses to marry her on the grounds that she is impure. The girl, swollen with child, bursts in upon the nuptials of her seducer and the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and demands her due. She is turned out into the street. But late that night, as the newlyweds thrash about in the bridal bed—

It was at this point that Jane took hold of my arm and whispered that she wanted to leave. What could I do? I fumbled for her wrap, people hissed at us, great nude thighs slashed across the screen, and we headed for the glowing EXIT sign.

I proposed a club. "Oh, do let's walk!" Jane said. "The air is so frightfully delicious after that close, odious theatre—don't you think?" Pigeons flapped and cooed. A panhandler leaned against the fender of a car and drooled into the gutter. I took Jane's arm. Cassandra took mine.

At *The Mooncalf* we had our wrists stamped with luminescent ink and then found a table near the dance floor. The waitress' fingernails were green daggers. She wore a butch haircut and three-inch heels. Jane wanted punch, Cassandra tea. I ordered three margaritas.

The band was recreating the fall of the Third Reich amid clouds of green smoke and flashing lights. We gazed out at the dancers in their jumpsuits and platform shoes as they bumped bums, heads, and genitals in time to the music. I thought of Catherine Morland at Bath and decided to ask Jane for a dance. I leaned across the table. "Want to dance?" I shouted.

"Beg your pardon?" Jane said, leaning over her margarita.

"Dance," I shouted, miming the action of holding her in my arms.

"No, I'm very sorry," she said. "I'm afraid not."

Cassandra tapped my arm. "I'd love to," she giggled.

Jane removed her cap and fingered out her curls as Cassandra and I got up from the table. She grinned and waved as we receded into the crowd. Over the heads of the dancers I watched her sniff suspiciously at her drink and then sit back to ogle the crowd with her black satiric eyes.

Then I turned to Cassandra. She curtsied, grabbed me in a fox-trot sort of way and began to promenade round the floor. For so small a woman (her nose kept poking at the moribund Titanic listing across my lower rib cage), I was amazed at her energy. We pranced through the hustlers and bumpers like kiddies round a Maypole. I was even beginning to enjoy myself when I glanced over at our table and saw that a man in fierce black sideburns and mustache had joined Jane. He was dressed in a ruffled shirt, antique tie,

and coattails that hung to the floor as he sat. At that moment a fellow terpsichorean flung his partner into the air, caught her by wrist and ankle, and twirled her like a toreador's cape. When I looked up again Jane was sitting alone, her eyes fixed on mine through the welter of heads.

The band concluded with a crunching metallic shriek, and Cassandra and I made our way back to the table. "Who was that?" I asked Jane.

"Who was who?"

"That mustachioed murderer's apprentice you were sitting with."

"Oh," she said. "Him."

I realized that Cassandra was still clutching my hand.

"Just an acquaintance."

As we pulled into the drive at Steventon, I observed a horse tethered to one of the palings. The horse lifted its tail, then dropped it. Jane seemed suddenly animated. She made a clucking sound and called to the horse by name. The horse flicked its ears. I asked if she liked horses. "Hm?" she said, already looking off toward the silhouettes that played across the parlor curtains. "Oh yes, yes. Very much so," she said, and then she released the seat belt, flung back the door and tripped up the stairs into the house. I killed the engine and stepped out into the dark drive. Crickets sawed their legs together in the bushes. Cassandra held out her hand.

Cassandra led me into the parlor where I was startled to see the mustachioed ne'er-do-well from *The Mooncalf*. He held a teacup in his hand. His boots shone as if they'd been razor-stropped. He was talking with Jane.

"Well, well," said the Reverend, stepping out of the shadows. "Enjoy yourselves?"

"Oh, immensely, father," said Cassandra.

Jane was grinning at me again. "Mr. Boyle," she said. "Have you met Mr. Crawford?" The brothers, with their fine

bones and disproportionate heads, gathered round. Crawford's sideburns reached nearly to the line of his jaw. His mustache was smooth and black. I held out my hand. He shifted the teacup and gave me a firm handshake. "Delighted," he said.

We found seats (Crawford shoved in next to Jane on the love seat; I wound up on the settee between Cassandra and a brother in naval uniform), and the maid served tea and cakes. Something was wrong—of that I was sure. The brothers were not their usual witty selves, the Reverend floundered in the midst of a critique of Coleridge's cult of artifice, Cassandra dropped a stich. In the corner, Crawford was holding a whispered colloquy with Jane. Her cheeks, which tended toward the flaccid, were now positively bloated, and flushed with color. It was then that it came to me. "Crawford," I said, getting to my feet. "*Henry* Crawford?"

He sprang up like a gunfighter summoned to the OK Corral. "That's right," he leered. His eyes were deep and cold as crevasses. He looked pretty formidable—until I realized that he couldn't have been more than five-three or -four, give or take an inch for his heels.

Suddenly I had hold of his elbow. The Tiki medallion trembled at my throat. "I'd like a word with you outside," I said. "In the garden."

The brothers were on their feet. The Reverend spilled his tea. Crawford jerked his arm out of my grasp and stalked through the door that gave onto the garden. Nightsounds grated in my ears, the brothers murmured at my back, and Jane, as I pulled the door closed, grinned at me as if I'd just told the joke of the century.

Crawford was waiting for me in the ragged shadows of the trees, turned to face me like a bayed animal. I felt a surge of power. I wanted to call him a son of a bitch, but in keeping with the times, I settled for cad. "You cad," I said, shoving him back a step, "how dare you come sniffing around here after what you did to Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*! It's people like you—corrupt, arbitrary, egocentric—that foment all the lust and heartbreak of the world and challenge the very possibility of happy endings."

"Hah!" he said. Then he stepped forward and the moon fell across his face. His eyes were like the birth of evil. In his hand, a riding glove. He slapped my face with it. "Tomorrow morning, at dawn," he hissed. "Beneath the bridge."

"Okay, wiseguy," I said, "okay," but I could feel the Titanic sinking into my belt.

A moment later the night was filled with the clatter of hoofs.

I was greeted by silence in the parlor. They stared at me, sated, as I stepped through the door. Except for Cassadnra, who mooned at me from behind her knitting, and Jane, who was bent over a notebook, scribbing away like a court recorder. The Reverend cleared his throat and Jane looked up. She scratched off another line or two and then rose to show me out. She led me through the parlor and down the hall to the front entrance. We paused at the door.

"I've had a memorable evening," she said, and then glanced back to where Casandra had appeared at the parlor door. "Do come again." And then she held out her hands.

Her hands were cold.

T. C. Boyle: An Interview

Northridge Review: When did your interest in writing begin?

Boyle: My interest in writing began after I first read Goethe, at about the age of four *(laughs)*. No, really, I started writing short stories as an undergraduate—I was a junior or senior. I had been a music major, then switched to history, and then finally to history and English. Encouraged to continue my writing, I did so, although I wrote very little the first two years. I did publish a couple of short stories in *The North American Review*. This encouraged me too. Although I did not see myself as a writer, the idea was somewhere in the back of my mind. It eventually led me to the University of Iowa. At the time, the University of Iowa was the only college I knew that had a writing program, so I submitted three short stories, one of which is included in my first collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*. Iowa accepted me as a graduate student on the basis of those submissions.

NR: In an interview published in *The Los Angeles Times*, you said that you have published even your earliest stories.

Boyle: Well, I didn't drag out every short story I had ever written, but I made an effort to publish the ones I believed in, the ones I thought were good stories.

NR: Was it difficult to find a publisher for those first short stories?

Boyle: I was lucky. I sent out stories for only about six months when I received an acceptance, as I said, from *The North American Review*. But, yes, it's true—at first it's hard to get your stories published. Editors don't know who you are, they don't know your name, they're busy, and they don't pay much attention to unknown writers. But as you become better known, it's easier. Acceptance is more frequent.

NR: You began writing as an undergraduate in New York. When did you begin work on your first novel, *Water Music*, and how did you approach the writing of the novel?

Boyle: I began writing *Water Music* while I was still a graduate student at the University of Iowa. At the time, I had only written short stories. I had never written a novel and I wanted to see if I could do it. So I used the Mungo Park story, *Travels in the Interior of West Africa*, which forms the core of my novel, and used his story to graft on the rest of my story—the fictional part. The initial idea came to me after I had read about Mungo Park, who was a big hero in Scotland, and I wanted to explore that. The structure of the story determined who the other characters would be.

NR: In *Water Music* there is a chapter called "Explorer's Notes." Were those actual notes or were they fabrications?

Boyle: The notes were my invention. It's all part of the theme contained in the epigraph at the beginning of the novel. *[Editor's Note: The epigraph to* Water Music *is from a poem by W.S. Merwin, entitled "The Old Boast," and reads, "Listen natives of a dry place/from the harpist fingers/rain.]* Water music is what moves the natives in the poem. The natives are transformed by the music. They are made to believe that it is raining. In *Water Music*, the characters are transported, transformed, in the same way. The reader is also changed by the music of the water images. Handel's *Water Music* plays here as well. The whole idea of the novel revolves around the idea that it is the imagination which allows us to become something else, something new.

NR: In *The Los Angeles Times*, you were quoted as having said "I like to imagine rather than reproduce reality . . ."

Boyle: Did I say that?

NR: That's what it said!

Boyle: I'll stand by that *(laughs).*

NR: Is what we've discussed about this transportation—this transformation by means of the imagination—what you meant by that statement?

Boyle: Absolutely. The whole concept of *Water Music,* as I have said, is built around the imaginative process. If I had wanted to reproduce reality, I would have written Mungo Park's biography. I would have dug up his bones, labeled them, and merely written his history. Instead, I chose to imagine what happened or what I would like to have happened.

NR: In the chapter of *Water Music* called "All the King's Men," Johnson, Mungo's factotum, is somewhat disgruntled by a passage Mungo reads from his notebook, most of which is a distortion of the truth. Did you include this chapter as commentary? In other words, Mungo is supposed to be a myth-breaker, as Johnson says, a recorder of reality. What was your intention here?

Boyle: That whole passage is a comment on fiction itself. History, too, is subject to distortion, which may figure in its recording.

NR: You have written a new novel, to be released in May by Viking Press, titled *Budding Prospects.* Tell us something about the novel and how it came to be written.

Boyle: *Budding Prospects* is about a failed pot plantation in Northern California. It's a story about trying to make it in America—the pioneer spirit. The three central characters believe all they have to do is work hard, regardless of the illegality of the venture, and they'll get rich. The story is based on a true account about some guys who lived in San Francisco. They got some seeds and went out and broke their backs for nine months. They essentially got nothing out of it. What started out to be a business venture to make $200,000 ended as a fiasco in which they earned only about four or five thousand dollars. They spent nine months in

terror, paranoid, living in a hovel with no electricity, and this was all they had to show for their experience.

NR: In *The Times* you said that *Budding Prospects* is a different kind of novel for you. What did you mean? How is *Budding Prospects* different from *Water Music*?

Boyle: After *Water Music*, I was looking for something: I wanted to write a story that would read fast rather than demand the reader to ruminate, which is the case in *Water Music*. I also wanted something that would address a problem I've always had with characters. That is, instead of writing a book oriented towards the imagination, I wanted to write a novel dealing with a more conventional approach to characterization. *Budding Prospects* was an experiment.

NR: What are you working on now?

Boyle: I'm working on a novel titled *World's End*.

NR: In *The Times* you said that this new novel will be more like *Water Music* than is *Budding Prospects*. In what way is *World's End* similar to *Water Music* and in what way is it dissimilar?

Boyle: Like *Water Music*, *World's End* deals with history. I didn't want to write another strictly historical piece, although I was tempted. *World's End* begins in the present and backtracks to the Dutch colonization of New York. Actually, though, most of the novel is set in time from about 1949 to 1988.

NR: What is the novel about?

Boyle: It's a story of betrayal, which involves not only the protagonist but also parallels a similar betrayal involving his father and an ancestor. All three characters share in the betrayal.

NR: Where did you get the title for the novel?

Boyle: *World's End* is the deepest part of the Hudson River—

NR: Wait a minute—*Water Music* was a novel about the exploration of the Niger River, and *World's End* has its river—is there a trend developing here?

Boyle: *(laughs)* No, no, I don't think so. I think this will be the last novel about a river, although I will admit I am fascinated by them.

NR: How much research do you do when you're preparing to write a novel like *Water Music* or *World's End*?

Boyle: Well, I'm not a scholar and I really don't like research for its own sake, but I do enough reading of background materials to get ideas generated, and then I fill in when I find a need to. When I want to know something, I'll drag out a book and learn about it. For *World's End*, I sat down and started reading for about two months. I did this every day. Then I got itchy to begin writing. So, a couple of weeks ago, I began writing again. There are a lot of things I still need to know, but I'll do the research when the need arises.

NR: You were raised in Peekskill, New York. Is Peekskill on the Hudson and is this story somewhat autobiographical?

Boyle: Yes, it's my attempt to do what Thomas Wolfe did. I wanted to write a story about *home.*

NR: Did your research take you home? Did you find it necessary to return to Peekskill?

Boyle: No I didn't find it necessary to go back home, although I did, for about four months last year *(laughs).* The excuse was research—and I guess I did research the novel. I visited some historical sites and visited libraries where I read some little known, unpublished, manuscripts, but most of my time was spent having fun—visiting old friends and writing short stories for the *Greasy Lake* collection.

NR: Which is due out next spring?

Boyle: Yes, that's right.

NR: What writers have you been influenced by?

Boyle: I would say the Absurdist playwrights of the fifties and sixties and the Existentialist writers of our day. I read such literature when I was just beginning to develop an interest in writing. Through these early readings, the whole

idea of absurdity found its way into my work in terms of comic thrust and in terms of the incongruous conjunctions that I sometimes make. Then there's John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Robert Cooper, Donald Barthelme, and, more recently, some of the more surrealistic writers. I think these influences show themselves in *Water Music* and will show themselves again in my new novel, *World's End.* I like stuff that's free-flowing, mythical, and absurd.

NR: What do you see in the future for Tom Boyle? In what direction do you see yourself going?

Boyle: I'd like to do another short novel, a story which will deal with form. I want to shape a novel—experiment. I want the story to fit the form the way Marquez invents a new form in each of his books. For example, I have an idea for a novel similar to Marquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold,* in that the novel will be amenable to form. And I think it will probably follow *World's End.*

NR: Why fiction and not poetry for Tom Boyle?

Boyle: When I began writing, I didn't really understand poetry as well as I understood fiction. When I was at the University of Iowa working on my Ph.D., I read every poet who was anybody. But I had some bad teachers in high school—bad English teachers. Or maybe I just had a bad attitude, I don't know. *(Pauses)* But I couldn't grasp what poetry was all about. I remember one teacher in particular who would read the classics of English literature, which I later learned to love, in the most pompous tone. I was a horny adolescent and all I wanted to do was get out of school and go crazy and have fun. Then, as an undergraduate, I wound up in a writer's workshop with eight or nine people. I was the only fiction writer. The others were writing this turgid, mystical, *crazy* stuff—I couldn't make any sense of it. I guess I gravitated toward fiction as a result, and never really tried my hand at poetry, except to write incidental poetry within works of fiction.

NR: Where does one draw the line between prose and poetry? Surely one can easily call the fiction of, say,

Flannery O'Connor, *poetic*, and then there are Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, and now Alice Walker, to name a few. Where does one draw the line? Do you make such distinctions?

Boyle: It's what you call it, really. If I call it a novel, that's what I want it to be. *You* can call it whatever you *like*. Take, for example, the new books by Robert Cooper and Russell Edson. Cooper is setting up short stories with jambed lines and Edson is writing these little prose stories that he calls poems. If you looked at either of them without knowing what each writer calls his work, you'd reverse the labels. It all depends upon your definition of a work. These distinctions don't really bother me.

NR: How often do you write?

Boyle: Everyday, in the morning. I wrote today. I usually begin about eight o'clock and work until about one. Then, as I get more and more involved with a story, I put in longer hours, especially if I'm nearing the end of a piece. I used to write at night, but I found I kept putting it off. I was up until about four or five in the morning and I was exhausted by the time I began writing. Writing in the morning allows me to write some before breakfast. Then, by the time I've finished eating, I've already gone through half a scene. After one o'clock, I knock off and can do what I want for the rest of the day.

NR: Does your writing schedule conflict with your teaching?

Boyle: Well, most of the days I'm teaching, I don't write. I teach about 55 afternoons a year. I don't write on these days because, if I do, by the time I get to class I'm burned out. Actually, I like the break. I like to get out of the house.

NR: The "Writes of Spring" is, in part, the reason you're here and the reason this interview is taking place. What do you think about writing workshops?

Boyle: I was not a good workshop student, but I think workshops can be a valuable experience. The essence of a writers' workshop is to help the student writer learn what

effect he is having on the reader. The workshop is a sort of instant publication. Hearing others talk about your work can help the writer.

A workshop goes bad when a student objects to criticism, when he has an axe to grind, perhaps about some comment. The workshop can only work if the writer can learn to listen without entering into the discussion. We're not interested in what the writer has to say. The personality of the teacher is also important—the way the teacher approaches the work.

The disinterest of the writer is important. The writer has to be disinterested or he will get defensive. One has to try to imagine himself in a room, as though he is behind a glass wall listening to people talk about his work. If the workshop student assumes this attitude and doesn't say, "you're wrong!" when something is said, then he may learn something. The writer doesn't have to agree with anybody. He may think the whole group is wrong. However, the next morning, when he's in the shower, he may think, "Well, twenty-five people sincerely didn't know what I was talking about, so maybe I *was* a *little* obscure." This is all criticism can do for anyone: it makes the writer aware of how the work affects readers and how the work can be changed, if he feels it needs changing.

NR: Readings are also a big part of the "Writes of Spring" program. Do you enjoy reading from your works?

Boyle: Oh, yes. Readings are a way of getting the word out.

NR: Earlier today you said that you see yourself as a sort of cultural messiah—

Boyle: *A* messiah! There are probably *many* messiahs *(laughs).*

NR: What if the public decides it would prefer to attend a rock concert rather than to listen to Tom Boyle read?

Boyle: Literature is alive when it's read. This is why I like to read. However, literature is still alive even if the public

decides it would rather go to a concert. Whatever has currency should be pursued. If someone wants to listen to music instead of Tom Boyle, fine.

NR: I understand you were once part of a rock band. Is that true?

Boyle: Yes. My last band broke up just two years ago.

NR: You don't draw lines, do you?

Boyle: No. I do what I want. I do what makes be happy. I only draw lines between what's good and what's bad.