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If the River Was Whiskey

By T. Coraghessan Boyle

Viking. 224 pp.

T. Coraghessan Boyle rises to any challenge, no matter how preposterous. His first published story, in *Esquire* 1975, told the steamy tale of t.v.'s Lassie in love with a sexually deprived coyote. Boyle followed that in his first collection, *The Descent of Man*, with stories about Idi Amin as the guest at a Dada arts festival, an inventor who photographs God, and a woman's passion for a chimpanzee who translates Nietzsche. In his second collection, *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*, he gave us an Elvis Presley impersonator whose wife gets seduced by a high school counselor and Dwight Eisenhower in a love affair with the wife of Nikita Krushchev.

Boyle is no less willing to mold fiction from the ludicrous in his third story collection, *If the River Was Whiskey*. Sometimes he succeeds dazzlingly, sometimes marginally, sometimes not at all.

Among the tallest tales that manage to work are "Sorry Fugu," a spirited account of the chef/owner of an Italian restaurant living in dreaded anticipation of his review by a vicious newspaper critic, how he woos her on her third visit and seduces her palate; "Hard Sell," the monologue of an L.A. publicity man hired by the Ayatollah to create for him a positive image outside of Iran; "The Human Fly," a parody of Kafka's hunger artist presenting a daredevil who climbs buildings, flies on an airplane wing, and meets his death against the side of a truck yet survives in an animated Saturday morning t.v. series.; "Modern Love," a droll caricature of dating amid today's health risks where the wooing culminates in lovemaking conducted in full-body condoms from Sweden; and "King Bee," the tale of a couple who adopt a 9 year-old psychopath obsessed with bees, who kills a puppy in an oven, rapes a fifth grade classmate, issues over 30 death threats to his parents, then hunts them down armed with 80,000 bees.

Boyle's sinewy prose and ear for parody are as strong as ever in "Me Cago en La Leche (Robert Jordan in Nicaragua)," a hilarious Hemingway burlesque showing Robert Jordan III, grandson of the hero of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, fail in his attempt to secure a load of cocaine. Whole passages sound as if Boyle intended them for the now-defunct Harry's American Bar & Grill Bad Hemingway Contest: "It began to rain. The rain, Robert Jordan understood, would be bad for his hair. He finished a granola bar, exchanged curses with the old man, and crawled into his one-man pup tent. 'You take the first watch,' he growled through the wall of undulating nylon in his very bad Spanish. 'And the second and third too. Come to think of it, why don't you just wake me at noon.' "

For all the ingenuity and self-amusement, however, Boyle is at his best when he plays it straight, as in "The Hat," included in *The Editor's Choice III* prize anthology, a strong story of the romantic entanglements of a group of residents, tourists and adventurers in a small Alaska town, and especially in the title story, a poignant rendering of a boy watching his father's compromised and unfulfilled life fall apart, and the father realizing what the boy is watching.

This last, of course, is among the many themes Boyle handled so deftly in his 1987 PEN/Faulkner Award-winning novel, *World's End*, still the best book Boyle has written. That book

encapsulated three centuries of Hudson Valley history with a scope and depth Boyle has yet to condense to short story size. The acidic wit of Boyle's stories was every bit as much at play in that novel, but the extended form allowed his characters to unfold through their reflection and emotion, often unwisely and too well.

Free to roam more time and space, the Boyle of "World's End" managed to move past his story pose of self-congratulation for his cleverness and submerge himself in substantive themes, such as the malignity between those controlling and controlled. Starting with a world no larger than, say, Jay McInerney's, Boyle added sweep and dimension with each chapter. While we cannot fairly demand sweep and dimension of the short story, we can demand their counterparts: depth and reverberation. We get these ceaselessly from Alice Munro, Lee K. Abbott, Robert Stone, Elizabeth Spencer and Andre Dubus, even from such youthful writers as Mona Simpson and Rick Bass. Only seldom from T. Coraghessan Boyle.

When Boyle is good he is very very good, but when he is bad he is turgid. *If the River Was Whiskey* contains more larks than an aviary, and often we witness exceptional talent brought to unexceptional themes, the masterful artist going for the joke rather than the jugular, looking like Nadia Comaneci doing a one-hand cartwheel while yawning or Hank Aaron laying down a bunt. Although his humor works on every level from cerebral to visceral, Boyle is at his best when he probes the nuances of human experience, at his worst when he becomes pointedly satiric as he does in "The Devil and Irv Cherniske," lampooning the American lust for wealth, "born again" ministers, and possibly Stephen Vincent Benet.

Bizarre and outrageous, Boyle seldom fails to entertain, but he often makes us feel we're dining on cotton candy. Now 40, he is too perceptive and gifted to continue undernourishing his readers. The best stories in his new book rise above the confections surrounding them to inspire certainty that strong, moving fiction will come again soon from this enormously talented writer, cover-to-cover, not just as occasional treasure tossed in with the gag gifts.