

Review of *Wild Child*, by T. C. Boyle

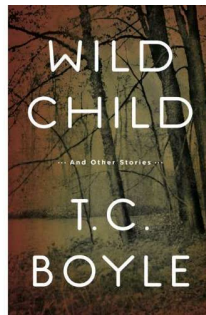
By JOSEPH PESCHEL

You never know what T. C. Boyle will write about next. His twelve published novels include fictionalized stories about sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, cereal titan Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, and architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Boyle has written about struggling illegal Mexican immigrants, about an ecological nightmare set in 2025, and of hippies on a sojourn from California to Alaska.

This ninth book of short stories, some collected from *The New Yorker*, a few from literary magazines, and two from *Playboy*, includes fourteen serious tales that seem conjured from the news—old or recent—and told with Boyle’s paradigmatic humor, grace, and irony.

Even “Sin Dolor,” which appears to be a fantasy in the manner of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Funes the Memorious,”

was inspired by a real Pakistani boy. It’s the best story in this fine collection and tells the tale of Damaso Funes, the son of two Mexican street vendors, who does not feel pain. At first, the doctor thinks the boy is a child abuse victim because of the bruises and burns all over his body, but he finally sees him as someone who can “redeem us from all the pain of the ages.” The boy’s father wants to make money off the kid.



In the funny and ultimately sad “Admiral,” a young woman, Nisha, is hired to care for an Afghan named Admiral. The dog has been cloned—for the “mere little pittance of a quarter

million dollars”—from the original Admiral that Nisha, as a teen, used to dog-sit. Now, just out of college, she’s expected to reproduce the original Admiral’s experiences as nearly as possible. “Admiral” was selected, with good reason, by Salman Rushdie for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2008*.



Indeed, several of Boyle’s stories have been included in the Best American series, or mentioned, as were “The Lie” and “Ash Monday,” in its list of “100 Distinguished Stories” in 2009.

In “The Lie,” Lonnie logs movies for a production company. Unhappy with this job—he was promised an editing job—he’s used up all his sick and

personal leave. Instead of going to work, he spends his days in restaurants and bars, after blaming his absence from work on a sick baby. The lies worsen to the point of claiming the baby has died.

“Ash Monday” is the story of two neighbors, a traditional Japanese family and a single mom whose pyromaniacal son is something of a racist, too. Set in the prone-to-

wildfire hills of California, the story is full of irony leading to sad conclusion.

Why one of those stories was not included in BASS 2009 mystifies me.

“Wild Child,” the longest of the stories in this collection and nearly as good as the aforementioned best, gives a fictional account of a young boy who grew up naked and alone

in the woods during the Napoleonic era in France. Eventually captured, he becomes an experiment for Dr. Itard who genuinely wants to help the boy, but also wants to test his educational and philosophical theories on the nature of man.

Every story in this collection is fascinating and affecting, and you hardly notice that Boyle, too, is testing his philosophical theories.

Wild Child, by T. C. Boyle (320 pages; Viking; \$25.95 hardcover; \$26.00)

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