

*Drop City*

by T. Coraghessan Boyle

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*Reviewed by Granville Ganter*

I always thought Boyle was a hipster, and his most recent novel, *Drop City*, confirms it. I don't know much about contemporary fiction, and I'm not a Boyle expert either, though I've read most of his novels and stories as they've come out. But I do know about one thing, and that is hippies. Normally, it doesn't take much of a nose to smell a hippy a mile off. Often, it's the stink of hypocrisy as much as it is patchouli and rank-foot. Sure, Boyle covered it up pretty well for years. The pretentious name, the urbane coverleaf photos, the wickedly precise syntax, the take-no-prisoners plots. His hilarious novel about the travails of pot growing in California, *Budding Prospects*, shows him *familiar* with dooper life but hardly *sympathetic*.

Few people would call Boyle a sentimental novelist. Although he is a gleeful humorist, his plots tend to go sour. The typical Boyle story introduces a handful of quirky, comic characters, puts them in a car, and drives them off a bridge. One of my favorite recent short stories of Boyle's is an essay that I read in *The New Yorker*, "Attacked by Indians," reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor. It's the story of a dysfunctional marriage brought to a climax by the appearance of a serial killer. The husband, a literary critic, gets what he deserves. The wife fairs only slightly better.

Boyle's ninth novel, *Drop City*, focuses on a commune of Sonoma hippies who decide to move their digs to northern Alaska to escape being hassled by local law enforcement. One hundred and sixty miles from Fairbanks, their camp is 10 miles upriver from the nearest road. The land is dominated by bears, wolves, savage weather, and human beings who go weeks without seeing another of the species. During the six-month nightfall of winter, it's often 60 degrees below zero, the kind of cold and dark where you could die with wet feet trying to walk the distance from one side of Manhattan to the other. *Drop City's* hippies arrive in July, 1970, in sandals. It's like watching a cinder block about to drop on a kitten.

Despite his dark side, part of the reason I associate Boyle with hipster counterculture is his similarity to Thomas Pynchon and Tom Robbins. They tend to write about bohemian themes and have an appreciation for the well-crafted sentence as a fundamental unit of democracy. Reba, one of *Drop City's* memorable characters (if only for her crustiness), recalls her experience at a San Francisco group-sex commune:

I was on my back half the time, and if I refused some guy, one of the family members, I was the one who was uptight, I was the one spreading the bad vibes and poisoning the atmosphere, because that was the way it was. The bedroom down the hall. Take off your clothes. Five A.M., five P.M. Lets's ball. She paused, and her voice sank right down through the floorboards. Everybody had jobs, like mop the floor, cook the pasta, go out and bring in a paycheck. My job was to fuck. Like a machine. Like a goat.

Boyle also shares with Pynchon-inspired writers a glib and conspiratorial air of deep knowledge about a subject. When Pynchon describes how to make hallucinogenic joints of *amanita muscaria* mushrooms, or how to adjust the fuel mixture for a V-2 rocket engine, he conveys the impression that he knows what he's talking about. In *Drop City*, Boyle has done his homework. He knows what hippy life smells like: fresh bread and coffee in the kitchen, the funk of a moldy plywood party shack, the stink of human waste in the yard.

He is also aware of the psychological tensions that develop when members of a dependent group stop working together. He paints a vivid portrait of the resentment that builds between the latrine diggers, the cooks, and breadwinners, and the others who show up for easy chow, drugs, and a place to crash. I was reminded of a discouraged member of the Renaissance commune in central Vermont, named Rainbow Jim, who once turned to me and said, "all I see is a bunch of fat people drinking expensive German beer." After

making his incisive diagnosis, Jim headed off with a roll of toilet paper to take a dump behind a nearby bush.

But what makes *Drop City* a rewarding read, and a book rich in Americana, is Boyle's utopianism. Boyle is often writing about groups of people in search of a better life. One of his better known novels, *The Road to Wellville* (turned into a movie, starring a buck-toothed Anthony Hopkins), describes the crusade of the health-spa vegetarian guru, John Kellogg, inventor of the corn flake. Although Kellogg himself was a late-nineteenth century phenomenon, he was a by-product of an earlier age of reform, the ultraist decades following the 1830s. During this period, the northeastern United States was in the grip of the most wide-ranging interrogation of human life the country has ever seen. Nothing was beyond scrutiny: food, marriage, capitalism, the church. Some of its more famous achievements were Mormonism, Graham's whole wheat cracker, Transcendentalism, and the Civil War. Some of its less well-known consequences include the New-age body culture we associate with Los Angeles, Beat poetry, and the 1960s. But in contrast to the youth-oriented radicalism we associate with TV footage of the Black Panthers and the Kent State shootings, the antebellum reform movement influenced almost *every* middle-class northeasterner in one way or another, male or female, black or white.

By the 1830s hundreds of utopian communities began to appear from New York to Ohio. They had different emphases: free love, collective marriage, vegetarianism, pagan worship, neo-Christian sectarianism, various kinds of socialism. Most collapsed in a few years, the members wandering off to another community or dropping back into U.S. life. The diagnosis for failure, according to one of its participant historians, John Humphrey Noyes (founder of the Oneida community), was a tendency to buy more land than could be effectively farmed. Members literally worked themselves to death, often to feed those who decided they did not like to work.

Boyle's book takes its title from a commune founded in 1965 in southeastern Colorado called Drop City, named after its founders' performance art. Formerly students from Kansas and Colorado colleges, they dropped material out of their apartment windows---mattresses, whatever---onto the streets to watch them hit. The falling items were tied with ropes so they didn't hurt any one on the bounce. ("Tune in and *drop out*," said LSD guru Timothy Leary, after he left his professorship at Harvard.)

Drop City was well-known for its geodesic dome-housing cut out of junkyard car roofs. Buckminster Fuller, the physicist, gave them an award for it. The community project broke up the early 70s but it is hard to look at the architecture it inspired—from geodesic housing in backwoods Carmel, California to student shacks in the woods behind any Alternative College, U.S.A—without a bourgeois grimace at the sagging, delaminating remains of the domes.

But aesthetics and imbalanced work ethics aside, there were other issues that led to Drop City's demise. According to Chris Suggs, who was then a graduate student doing research on the group, Drop City failed due to sexual tension. As he put it in a letter to the *New York Times*, "it's one thing to share your old lady, it's another to share your wife." As Boyle's novel shows, the girls told a similar story.

In addition to the *Grapes of Wrath*-on-LSD travel narrative, Boyle's novel develops a second plot that focuses on the rivalries among people already settled in the Alaska backcountry. These exiles from the commercial mainstream include a fur trader named Sess Harder, and bush pilot named Joe Bosky. They are living a different sort of utopian dream. In contrast to living on dope, free love, and other people's money, these men subsist on bear fat, firearms, and alcohol. Women are hard to come by. Then one day, a busload of loose ones shows up.

As a novel, *Drop City* does not always get to the point quickly. The structure jumps from a few chapters on the Alaska characters to a few chapters on the commune. Particularly in California, it is sometimes hard to keep the large palette of apparently minor characters from running together. But, as in life, sometimes the long term players don't show the strength of their hands right away. Herbert Spencer, a second-rate British philosopher, popularized Darwin's theories in the *Origin of the Species* with the phrase, "survival of the

fittest." Spencer tells one kind of story, Boyle's novel another. In the words of Hunter Thompson, another proud citizen of hipster utopia: "when the going gets tough, the weird turn pro."