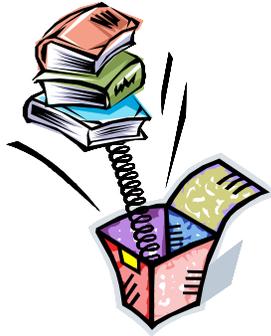




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# Book Club in a Box

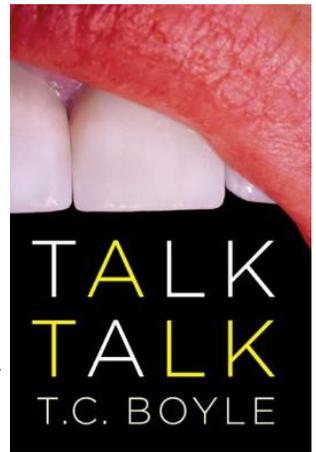
# TALK TALK

## About the Book

The first time Bridger saw Dana she was dancing barefoot, her hair aflame in the red glow of the club, her body throbbing with rhythms and cross-rhythms that only she could hear. He was mesmerized. That night they were both deaf, mouthing to each other over the booming bass. And it was not until their first date, after he had agonized over what CD to play in the car, that Bridger learned that her deafness was profound and permanent. By then, he was falling in love.

Now she is in a courtroom, her legs shackled, as a list of charges is read out. She is accused of assault with a deadly weapon, auto theft, and passing bad checks, among other things. Clearly there has been a terrible mistake. A man—his name is William “Peck” Wilson as Dana and Bridger eventually learn—has been living a blameless life of criminal excess at Dana’s expense. And as Dana and Bridger set out to find him, they begin to test to its limits the life they have started to build together.

*Talk Talk* is both a thrilling road trip across America and a moving story about language, love, and identity from one of America’s finest novelists.



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## About the Author



As a teenager, Thomas John Boyle adopted his mother’s maiden name, changing his name to T. Coraghessan Boyle. The graduate of the State University of New York at Potsdam entered the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1972. A collection of stories, published as *Descent of Man* (1979), served as his dissertation in 1977. Boyle then began teaching at the University of Southern California.

Boyle’s first novel was *Water Music* (1981), loosely based on the experiences of Scottish explorer Mungo Park (1771-1806). The novel features a narrative that alternates between Park and Ned Rise, a fictional London criminal who joins Park’s African expedition. The deliberately anachronistic, postmodern novel established Boyle’s concern with the disparity between the haves and have-nots, presenting Park’s cultured Britain in ironic juxtaposition to Rise’s poverty. The novel’s innumerable coincidences

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es, moreover, indicated Boyle's debt to Charles Dickens.

In *Budding Prospects: A Pastoral* (1984), Felix Nasmyth, having failed at everything else, tries raising marijuana in Northern California. Felix and his friends want to get rich quick, and Boyle uses them to satirize American greed and the perversion of the free-enterprise system. *Greasy Lake, and Other Stories* (1985) was Boyle's first short-story collection after his dissertation. It dealt with such topics as survivalist paranoia, an Elvis Presley imitator, and an affair between Dwight D. Eisenhower and the wife of Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev. "The Hector Quesadilla Story," in which an aging baseball player redeems himself during the longest game in history, demonstrated Boyle's concerns with myth, redemption, and popular culture as a metaphor for American life.

*World's End* (1987) represented a shift to less comic fiction, as Boyle presented conflicts among Dutch and English settlers and Native Americans in New York's Hudson River Valley in the seventeenth century and the consequences of those conflicts for the inhabitants' twentieth century descendants. In the novel, the wealthy Van Warts exploit the poorer Van Brunts, while the Kitchawanks are consumed by a desire for revenge. Boyle uses these characters to explore myths about America and to dramatize the nation's self-destructive impulse.

The stories in *If the River Was Whiskey* (1989) depict such characters as a Hollywood public relations specialist who tries to transform the image of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and a man forced to wear a full-body condom by his health-obsessed girlfriend. The collection also includes a parody of Lawrence Kasdan's film *The Big Chill* (1983). "Me Cargo en la Leche (Robert Jordan in Nicaragua)," on the other hand, is less a parody of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) than a questioning of Americans' loss of idealism. The

unhappy marriages in "Sinking House" comment on the emotional failures of the American middle class.

Boyle refused to be tied down to a single subject, genre, or style, demonstrating a restless need to encompass all of American experience in his fiction. His true subject was the contradictions at play in the American soul. His work was therefore of particular importance to the 1980's, a decade in which the contradictions between humanitarianism and greed, between altruism and nationalism, were more apparent than ever.

*Adams, Michael, and Adams Michael. "T. Coraghessan Boyle." Eighties In America (2008): 1. Biography Reference Center. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.*

### Further Reading

#### If you liked *Talk Talk*, you might like:

*The Given Day* by Dennis Lehane

*In the Woods* by Tana French

*The Keep* by Jennifer Egan

*The Silver Swan* by Benjamin Black

*Songs for the Missing* by Stewart O'Nan

1. There is a great deal of brand-name dropping in this novel (e.g. Mercedes, Jetta), especially in scenes involving Peck and Natalia. Discuss Boyle's satiric portrait of our culture's conspicuous consumption. What is the relationship of designer brands and personal identity established in the novel?
  
2. "Base identifier" is a wonderfully suggestive phrase that is repeated throughout the novel. What are the base identifiers, in all senses of this phrase, of the main characters? How do the characters understand selfhood? How does the novel dramatize the fragile nature of personal identity?
  
3. Dana is post-lingually deaf (i.e. she was not born deaf), who refused surgical attempts to restore her hearing. Discuss her condition and her reasons for maintaining it. How does she understand her condition? How does Bridger; her mother? How does it contribute thematically to the novel?
  
4. Often in literature, film, or television, a character who doesn't necessarily have many redeeming qualities will evoke pathos nonetheless. Although Peck Wilson is a man capable of brutal, calculated violence, he certainly arouses our interest, and at points, our sympathy. What was your opinion of Peck?
  
5. At four different points in the novel, Dana recites favorite poems to herself: Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier," a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edgar Allen Poe's "Annabel Lee," and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." What is the significance of each of these poems to the narrative?
  
6. While ostensibly a road novel, *Talk Talk* is really a bicoastal novel. Discuss Boyle's juxtaposition of East Coast and West Coast culture. What are Peck's attitudes toward each? Do they resonate with you?
  
7. Sandman's corruption of an Army recruiting slogan into a motto for identity thieves ("Be anyone you can be") is one example of how America's obsession with self-reinvention is parodied. What other examples come to mind? What do you think the novel says about our capacity, or lack thereof, to reinvent ourselves?

## Discussion Questions

8. The scene at Peck's mother's house is both humorous and deeply disturbing. The naïve Natalia, full of the expectations and anxieties of a future daughter-in-law, is finally going to meet the mother of the man she hopes to marry, the man whose name she doesn't even know. Did Boyle intend for this to be a comic scene? Why do you think he chose to omit Peck's mother entirely from the scene?

9. Discuss the confrontation at the end of the novel. Why did Peck suddenly lose his nerve, the only instance in the entire novel? How do you interpret Peck's answer to Dana's seemingly simple question: "What do you want?" What is it about the ending that surprised you the most?

10. Dana and Bridger's relationship is unusual, but like most couples their problems are generally problems of communication. What makes them unique and typical as a couple? Why does Bridger decide to join Dana on this perilous journey to find her identity thief? What happens to their relationship along the way and why does it ultimately fail?

11. In some respects *Talk Talk* is a variant of the doppelganger novel, a long-established literary convention in which the protagonist is haunted by the apparition of his or her double. Compare *Talk Talk* with other classic examples of the genre, such as Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose," and Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson." Do you think Boyle has successfully updated this literary form for the twenty-first century?

12. Dana and Peck share a fascination with language, which isn't matched by their respective partners. See for instance Peck's recollection of the word "plebeian" and Dana's interest in the etymology of "dis." Besides this, do they have any other traits in common? At the end of the novel when they confront one another they are said to be "united, wedded." What is it that unites them?