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Author T.C. Boyle talks about what makes architects such good fiction.

Text Katya Tylevich
Photos Alexei Tylevich

Just outside Santa Barbara, I meet celebrated author T. Coraghessan Boyle in the George C. Stewart house – Frank Lloyd Wright’s first California design and his only Prairie-style building on the West Coast. Boyle bought the home 19 years ago and spent the next 14 feeling he should write about the ghost he’d moved in with. In 2009, Boyle published *The Women*, a bestselling novel that investigates the life of Frank Lloyd Wright as it related to the four women who loved him (poor things). Through the prism of FLW’s three wives – Olgivanna Milanoff, Maude Miriam Noel and Kitty Tobin – and his mistress, Mamah Borthwick Cheney, Boyle lends insight into the life and personality of the architect. Still, *The Women* is no biography.

Save for a few quotes pulled straight from Wright-era newspapers, ‘all situations and dialogue are invented’, Boyle warns in his Author’s Note. In fact, *The Women* is one of the latest additions to a healthy and ever-growing genre of ‘architecture fiction’: novels, stories, operas, films and plays about architects. In Boyle’s immaculately restored living room, we talk about the role of the architect as literary device and the role of the novelist as architectural researcher and conduit. By

the way, I’m already drafting the Broadway musical about Louis Kahn, so hands off.

Did you have any background in architecture before you began writing *The Women*?

T. Coraghessan Boyle: No, I learn as I go. The writing professors’ old saw is ‘Write what you know’, but I find that limiting. I say, ‘Write what you don’t know and find something out.’ With each book I write, I discover something I want to know, not only artistically but also in terms of factual information.

What was your research process?

Many of the Wright family papers are at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, so I went there. I also did research in Spring Green [Taliesin] while writing the book and went back again once it was finished to check out the details. I visited several other Wright homes, particularly the ones in the Chicago area, like Oak Park. But, you know, I’ve still never been to Fallingwater. Though I did read some years ago that it costs their endowment about a million dollars a year for upkeep, because of the water. This house [referring to his own] costs a little less. [Laughs.]

What other revelations about Wright startled you?

I had no idea of the extent of the cult that surrounds him. It was amazing to see the fanaticism of people lined up in sub-zero weather to see one of his homes or just a Wright gift shop. All that was a revelation. Even moving into our house was a revelation.

Our first morning here, my children woke me and said, ‘Daddy, there’s somebody in the living room.’ It was an elderly couple just looking around. They figured, why not? I had to explain to them that this isn’t an open house. Since then, we’ve kept our gate locked. You know, Wright buffs – or fanatics – are like bird-watchers; they’re going to see every house, by god, so you better let ‘em in.

But I didn’t write this book only for the fanatics. I like to think that if someone were to pick up *The Women* without knowing anything about the architect, they would learn. All the facts about his life and work are true. My job is to wonder what’s underneath them. What must it have been like? How did people feel about all this? What did they say to each other? I’m just illuminating what really happened.

Are you also preserving it?

I think Wright has nothing to worry about there, since over a thousand books have been written about him and his work.

Why did you feel you had to contribute one more?

Because I’m an artist. I make stories, among other things. I was curious, and the way I explore things is through a story.

How many of the thousand-plus books about Wright did you read, for research?

In the acknowledgements, I mention nine biographers who were most important to me. Then, of course, the many newspaper articles and files at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Wright’s ▶

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T. Coraghessan Boyle in front of his home: the George C. Stewart house by Frank Lloyd Wright.

◀ autobiographical works were also extremely revealing. He was a control freak. For some clients, he designed not only the home, but the dishes and even clothing for the hausfrau. That's pretty crazy. If you think about it, it's like creating a dollhouse. The house is part of the story, and the furniture, of course, but there are also dolls to manipulate and style. Wright would often go to houses he'd built, completely unannounced – sometimes with a new client in tow – and walk in as if he owned the place. He would actually berate the owners because he didn't like the way they had the furniture and then move it around for them. That's pretty extraordinary.

There have been novels, films, plays, children's books, even operas about architects, and Wright stars or at least cameos in so many of them. What makes the architect a fiction magnet?
He was one of the great egomaniacs of the 20th century. One of my reasons for writing about him is because I grew up in America and have been a sort of punk all my life, doing exactly what I please and being very dubious about what I'm told by the government or anybody else. I've always been attracted to figures like Wright –

'Novelists don't have the power they once did in society'

guru figures – who have a following, who are narcissistic and cold, who don't care about people outside of how they fit in as followers of their regime.

But there is, of course, another factor to Wright. What's fascinating about him is his art. It's stunning. Look, I'm living in it. And his way of working is exactly the opposite of mine. He needed turmoil. He needed debt collectors. He needed to be humiliated in the newspapers and sued by lawyers in order to get his back up so he could work. I want just the opposite. If there's anything wrong in my life, I can't work. I can't concentrate. I'm too aggravated. So that's also interesting. He's completely the opposite of me. I'm the

only writer in history who has had only one wife. [Laughs.]

In the end, what is your relationship with the architect?

I admire him. I do. But I also have a kind of satiric impulse, where I tend to see what people who might wear rose-colored glasses don't see. And, again, as a dramatist, I'm dramatizing what it might have been like for the architect and for those around him. I was so absorbed in my story that I forgot Wright actually existed. He became my creature; I'd invented him. That said, there is always a weird echo of his ghost with me – also because I'm living in this house.

Architecture fiction

For those who've read a classic like *The Fountainhead* and are looking for more recent books featuring architects and their work, we've compiled a list of relevant literature. Not all these titles fall under the category of literature with a capital L, of course; among them are a number of thrillers, a few sentimental love stories and a graphic novel (*The Architect* by Mike Baron and Andie Tong). Although a couple of them are based on historical figures, all are fiction. We've limited the list to novels written in or translated into English from 2000 onwards.

House of Leaves, Mark Z. Danielewski, 2000
The Artist and the Architect, Demi, 2000
Piranesi's Dream, Gerhard Köpf, 2000
Female Ruins, Geoff Nicholson, 2001
The Architect: A Tale, John Scott, 2001
Island of Dreams, Katherine Stone, 2001
The Devil in the White City, Erik Larson, 2003
City of the Mind, Penelope Lively, 2003
Artificial Love: A Story of Machines and Architecture, Paul Shephard, 2003
The Architect, Keith R. Ablow, 2005
The House, Danielle Steel, 2006
The Architect, Mike Baron and Andie Tong, 2007
Temperatures Rising, Sandra Brown, 2007
Loving Frank, Nancy Horan, 2007
The Architect, James Williamson, 2007
The Architect, Charles Bancroft, 2009
Balancing Act, Meera Godbole-Krishnamurthy, 2009
A Shore Thing, Julie Carobini, 2010
Visitation, Jenny Erpenbeck, 2010
Seven Years, Peter Stamm, English translation 2011
House of Sand and Fog, Andre Debus III, 2011

'I've always been attracted to figures like Wright, who are narcissistic and cold'

Did the ghost follow you when you visited other homes?

I really felt him the second time we went to Taliesin. I knew the docents there, so after all the tour groups left, we sat by the fireplace and had a party. Then the docents insisted, as a great privilege, that my wife and I sleep in the house that night, in the very bed Wright slept in. So we did. That's when the ghosts were active. Oh, yeah, beating on the walls and howling all night long. It's freezing cold out there. But it was great. The nice thing was to wake up, walk into the living room of Taliesin, and see no one there. Even better was walking on the grounds, which, of course, you're not allowed to do unless you have the privilege of being there as I did. It was exciting to see how Frank Lloyd Wright had been the master of his circumstances there and created a manor, so that he could be its lord.

Do you find yourself looking differently at architecture now, having done so much research for *The Women*?

I won't pretend to be an expert, but I do appreciate many of the philosophies Wright espoused, especially in his Prairie period. Opening the home to nature, having the hearth for the family to gather. Of course, Wright pioneered suburban living at a time when the world was less populated. Now, new urbanists are going back to a model of people living in city centres and keeping surrounding countrysides open. I think Wright's model is changing because of ecological problems and population pressure and so on.

Did you look at any other examples of 'architecture fiction' while writing?

No, I didn't. The book, *Loving Frank* [a novel by Nancy Horan about Wright's love affair with Mamah Borthwick Cheney], had come out the year before mine, but of course I had already written my book by then. I give credit to the author because she brought the topic to the fore and stimulated a lot of interest in Wright. My book became a bestseller, and I think the

interest she stimulated may have helped. But I wouldn't have wanted to read any of the fiction about Wright, because it might have interfered with what I was trying to do.

In comparison with news articles about Wright that you researched and quoted in the book, do you notice differences or parallels in how architects are addressed by media today?

As far as the articles I looked at, we're talking about a time before we had great artists and stars like Kim Kardashian, for instance – we hardly even had movie stars, yet – so Wright and other intellectuals were the big figures that everybody gossiped about and wanted to know more about. I read that some time in the '40s the author, Upton Sinclair, came back from Europe, got off the boat, and found himself surrounded by a cadre of reporters asking about his impressions of the world. He was a celebrity. Architects and writers and painters aren't such celebrities any more, are they? We've moved on to daytime soap operas.

Do you sympathize, somehow? Draw the parallel between a writer and an architect?

Oh, of course. The struggle to get recognized and what that means to you. All that egotism, that craziness. In most people – not Frank Lloyd Wright – it slows down after a while, because once you do get some attention and feel more satisfied and more secure, you don't have to be out shouting to everybody in the street how wonderful you are all the time.

Is there a name for Wright's syndrome in psychology?

I don't know, but probably 100 per cent of all novelists have it. We just don't have the power we once did in society; film and TV have usurped it. You know me as a novelist, but I'm also an inventor; I have a lab in the basement where I'm working on a ray that will negate all TV transmission throughout the world forever. That way, books will be more popular again. ◀