

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE ON PANDEMICS AND BLAME

The author discusses “The End Is Only a Beginning,” his story from the latest issue of the magazine.

By Deborah Treisman

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Illustration by The New Yorker; Source photograph by Jamieson Fry



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Your story “The End Is Only a Beginning” opens in March of 2020, when COVID-19 was still in its early days, at least in France and the U.S., where

the story is set. What made you want to write about that time period from what (I hope) are the end stages of the pandemic?

From the beginning of the pandemic, I was intrigued by notions of personal responsibility and culpability, imagining the assignment of blame and the thousands of dramas playing out in households across the world. Who didn't wear a mask? Who couldn't resist going to a bar, a restaurant, a movie? Who brought the infection home? Just this past year, at Christmas, some relatives came to California from the East Coast to celebrate and infected my entire family except for me—luck of the draw.

The protagonist of the story, Riley, is a novelist who goes on a book tour to France and unwittingly helps in the spread of the virus. Were you on a book tour at around that time? Were you affected by those early waves of COVID?

Luckily—again, the randomness—I was not, though I have been there on book tours on many previous, non-pandemic occasions, and could draw from those experiences for my alter ego here. He is not me, or not entirely, but a shadowy simulacrum existing not in our terrifyingly stochastic world but in the orderly paginated one I have created in order to work out my own anxieties.

Riley is dismissive of the dangers, and he ends up paying a terrible price for that. Do you think he earns his comeuppance (though, of course, his wife doesn't deserve what happens to her)?

I will leave that for the reader to decide. Riley is, like many of us, oftentimes guided by selfish and perhaps less than admirable motives. I should point out that I am a saint. Riley, however, is not.

When you started writing the story, did you know what would happen and to whom?

I never know what a story will be until, in the process of writing, it reveals itself. That, for me, is the joy of writing fiction—this is a long, strange trip I've been on for most of my adult life. There is a great and consummate joy in creation,

even more so because the lineaments of any given work are undiscoverable until they are made manifest on the page.

How and why did you choose the title “The End Is Only a Beginning”? What is beginning here, for Riley, or for the world?

The phrase, as uttered by Riley’s clueless brother-in-law, is a cliché, a clumsy conventional attempt to paper over the reality we all face. For Riley—and for me—the question is how to write about such matters as mortality and the enduring mystery of our lives in a way that evokes emotion.

The spread of disease is a recurring theme in your fiction. What makes it an appealing subject for you?

Before the pandemic, all the way back in 2000, I published “A Friend of the Earth,” a novel about climate change that projects to 2026 and predicts, along with fires and floods, a pandemic like the one we’ve just endured. The title story of my collection “After the Plague,” which came out the following year, looks more specifically (and, forgive me, comedically) at that scenario, and in 2016 this magazine published “The Fugitive,” which examines the question of multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis and the ethics of public-health laws—i.e., should an infected individual be incarcerated? So, yes, these issues are still revolving in my mind. In a larger way, through the body of my work, my emphasis has been on our animal existence and how that jibes with our intellectual and spiritual being. We live, we die. What happens in between is grist for the novelist’s mill. ♦

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