

The Road to Wellville Short Guide

The Road to Wellville by T. Coraghessan Boyle

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Characters

In portraying Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, Boyle exaggerates certain traits of the historical figure who actually did invent corn flakes and start a Sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Kellogg was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist, which has imbued in him a repugnance for caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, and sex. Besides caring for his clients, Dr. Kellogg rears forty-two adopted children at his Sanitarium, the ownership of which he has finagled from the Seventh Day Adventists, ironically. He has traveled to Africa and returned enthusiastic about the concept of interior cleanliness that he has learned from Orang apes. The patients at Dr. Kellogg's Sanitarium are subjected to both physical treatments, such as enemas, and psychological indoctrination, including lectures about the dangers of eating meat and participating in sexual activity. To his outlandish philosophy and missionary zeal, Dr.

Kellogg adds a flair for showmanship and keeps some wild animals on the premises in order to show his patients that a vegetarian diet is better for animals, too.

Will and Eleanor Lightbody are guests at the Battle Creek Sanitarium.

Will's character is perhaps based partially upon Will Kellogg, the actual brother of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg.

Will Kellogg swindled John Harvey Kellogg out of the corn flake business.

In the novel Will Lightbody gradually grows disillusioned with Dr. Kellogg's enterprise, especially when he sees how susceptible his wife Eleanor is to experimental therapy. At their home in Peterskill, New York, Eleanor has treated Will for alcoholism with Sears' White Star Liquor Cure, which only complicates Will's condition. At the Sanitarium, Will is treated for autointoxication and submits to Lane's Kink surgery.

Eleanor Lightbody is introduced in the novel as one who is emotionally vulnerable because she has just lost her newborn baby girl. Eleanor falls for the false claims of one of the biggest quacks in Battle Creek, Dr. Siegfried Spitzvogel, who administers Manipulation Therapy. When Will discovers that Dr. Spitzvogel's treatment is actually sexual massage, he takes Eleanor from Battle Creek back to Peterskill, New York.

George is the most conspicuous of Dr. Kellogg's forty-two adopted children. George is nineteen years old and since childhood he has rebelled against Dr. Kellogg's disciplinary measures, such as requiring that George submit to a regimen of taking a jacket on and off, hanging it up in between times.

George simulates breaking wind to interrupt the children's Christmas pageant and sets fire to the Sanitarium.



The novel's final scene is a graphic parody of Freudian psychology and Darwin's theory of evolution as George calls Dr. Kellogg "Dr. Anus" and "Dr.

Shit," throws samples of feces at him, and releases the chimpanzee and timber wolf that are caged at the Sanitarium. The animals attack Dr. Kellogg, who perseveres and drowns George in a thousand-pound vat of macadamia butter.

Charlie Ossining and Bender are hustlers who swindle investors and each other as they try to become players in Battle Creek's cereal industry.

Charlie had been a gatekeeper on Mrs. Hookstratten's Tarrytown estate on the Hudson River. He was a bad student, and upon arriving in Battle Creek, he proceeds promptly to solicit funds from Mrs. Hookstratten for his cereal venture. He eventually makes his fortune selling a tonic laced with alcohol and lives in Paris with an ambassador's daughter. Bender continues his con artist's antics in Montana, where he plays something called the Soap Game.

Social Concerns

By exposing the fraud practiced by the health and nutrition industry in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, Boyle suggests that nothing has changed in American society or business since then. Boyle never makes a direct connection between the state of the breakfast cereal industry in 1907, when the action of the novel takes place, and 1993, when the novel was published. Nevertheless, such a direct connection would be superfluous because at the time he wrote the novel, breakfast food companies were still notorious for their flamboyant packaging and marketing of relatively insubstantial cereals, and readers were likely to recognize the similarities between the past and the present.

Besides portraying the hypocrisy of one sector of American business, Boyle's novel shows also how the health and nutrition industry has served as a backdrop for various American political trends throughout the twentieth century. While the industry's dishonesty in advertising represents the worst of capitalism, the philosophy of Dr. Kellogg is considered more compatible with socialism. For example, the portraits of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln are among those of famous vegetarians that hang in the Sanitarium. Upton Sinclair has been a guest at the Sanitarium, and Dr. Kellogg cites Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle* (1906), during one of his speeches to his clientele. Sinclair is probably the most active socialist in American literary history, and *The Jungle* is a harsh expose of the meat packing industry. In the Coda to Boyle's novel, Will Lightbody plans to read the complete works of Dickens, the most socially conscious of British authors. Also in the Coda, Will's wife Eleanor has become a suffragette, traveling and lobbying on behalf of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. In 1958 Eleanor opens the first health food store in Peterskill, New York, and Boyle notes that the establishment attracts Unitarians and Transcendentalists. Boyle's intention in thus linking health food to yet another American philosophical and literary current is not entirely clear, but the suggestion is that the health industry is somehow always in the background of the American political and social arena. On the last page of the novel, the health industry is associated once again with capitalism as Dr. Kellogg is forced to shut down his Sanitarium when the stock market crashes in 1929.

Techniques

The Road to Wellville is a pseudohistorical novel about pseudo-scientific medicine and nutrition. While Kellogg, C. W. Post, and other characters were actual historical personages, Boyle's novel presents them in a slapstick, almost surreal scenario. The liberty that Boyle takes with history is appropriate for parodying the liberty that advertisers take with the truth. The Sanitarium has the aura of a medicine show; and at the end of the novel, one of Kellogg's competitors, Bender, even resorts to playing the so-called Soap Game in Montana. The cereal industry has prepared Bender well for a Wild West con game.

Themes

The Road to Wellville is about America's obsession with health and diet and also about the propaganda and advertising that the health and food industries use to manipulate the public. The novel's title, The Road to Wellville, is mentioned in the novel as the slogan of C. W. Post, a manufacturer of breakfast cereal and the rival of Kellogg, the novel's protagonist and director of a sanitarium. Kellogg dismisses Post as a charlatan, but Kellogg also combines rhetoric with nutrition by delivering motivational speeches to the patients at his sanitarium. In fact, the novel's organization into three parts with classical names — Diagnosis, Therapeusis, and Prognosis — represents a medical variation on the classical rhetorical scheme of organization: exordium, narratio, confirmatio, refutatio, and peroratio.

The novel also touches upon the American public's gullibility regarding pseudo-sciences, especially those of foreign origin. The Japanese Dr. Tomoda administers lung X-rays, Sir Arbuthnot Lane of the Royal College of Surgeons specializes in Lane's Kink surgery on twisted colons, and the German Dr. Siegfried Spitzvogel disguises sexual massage as Manipulation Therapy. Will Lightbody orders the Heidelberg Electric Belt to cure his ailments.

Boyle's coup de grace regarding imported quackery is the Swedish Manual Movements practiced by Ling of Sweden who has learned his skill from an ancient Chinese text in French translation. The Italian tenor Tiepolo Cappucini administers laughing therapy, which also might summarize the effect of Boyle's writing style on the reader.

Adaptations

In 1994 a film version of *The Road to Wellville* was released, which is faithful to the novel in both plot and tone. The film was produced and directed by Alan Parker, who also wrote the screenplay. Anthony Hopkins plays the part of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, Bridget Fonda plays Eleanor Lightbody, Matthew Broderick plays Will Lightbody, John Cusack plays Charles Ossining, and Dana Carvey plays George Kellogg.

In 1993 an audio tape of *The Road to Wellville* was released by Highbridge Company. Ragtime music introduces Boyle reading his own novel.



Key Questions

In choosing to write about Dr. Kellogg's Sanitarium, Boyle has found a topic perfectly suited to his brand of humor. If his wit seems incongruous when applied to some of the situations in other novels, the scene in Battle Creek could only be discussed in Boyle's satirical style. The film version of the novel contains a Keystone Cops sequence, and the audio version includes ragtime music. Boyle has succeeded in writing a valid period piece that is adaptable to any medium.

1. Are the similarities between the breakfast cereal industry at the beginning and end of the twentieth century readily apparent, or should Boyle have made the connection explicit?
2. Is the reference to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* gratuitous, or does it provide a useful context for Boyle's own commentary about American society during Sinclair's time?
3. What are the present-day equivalents of such false sciences as phrenology, which is mentioned in the novel as being popular at the time?
4. Can the reader easily suspend his or her reason and pretend to believe Boyle's alternate version of history, or does Boyle abuse his literary license to the point that the novel seems fantastic?
5. Are Boyle's scatological references offensive, or do they provide the basis for a legitimate satire of a common Freudian personality type?
6. How are the "politically correct" beliefs of the late twentieth century comparable to the prudish, puritanical, hypocritical practices of Dr. Kellogg and his followers?
7. Can such a novel succeed in translation and publication abroad, or does the Battle Creek Sanitarium represent a peculiarly American phenomenon that would be incomprehensible to other cultures?
8. Do present day advertisers take as much liberty with the truth as the promoters in Battle Creek in the novel?
9. How do today's alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers resemble the Battle Creek Sanitarium?
10. Who in today's society has achieved Dr. Kellogg's guru status, deservedly or not, by hawking a nutritional product, fitness regime, or other physical or spiritual improvement scheme?

Literary Precedents

The Road to Wellville is about Americans' tendency to be attracted by reform movements and revivals. The author Upton Sinclair is mentioned directly in Boyle's novel as a guest at the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Sinclair published *The Jungle* in 1906, which is almost exactly the time of the action of Boyle's novel. *The Jungle* is a Naturalistic portrayal of the corruption, filth, and exploitation in the meat packing industry in Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century; and Sinclair's novel represents a precedent for Boyle's treatment of the food industry in *The Road to Wellville*. Upton Sinclair eventually became a socialist politician, and Boyle's novel examines how nutritional fads have been fostered by both socialists and capitalists. Charles Dickens is also mentioned in *The Road to Wellville*. Like Upton Sinclair in the United States, Dickens intended his writing to be a vehicle for social reform in England.

Related Titles

The Road to Wellville does not depend as heavily upon literary allusions as do other novels by Boyle. Like Boyle's other novels, however, *The Road to Wellville* is loosely based upon historical characters and incidents. Boyle takes liberty with history in order to dramatize the chaotic nature of history, which he considers a destructive force rather than a civilized progression. As he does in his other novels, Boyle adds a touch of music to *The Road to Wellville* by introducing the Battle Creek Sanitarium String Quartet.



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