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REVIEW: NOVEL

# Missed stop sign brings 3 lives to a halt

BY LIZZIE SKURNICK

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED JULY 23, 2006

## >>> Talk Talk

### T.C. Boyle

Viking / 340 pages / \$25.95

What's the cost of being 20 minutes late for a dentist's appointment? Running a stop sign? Having a cross word with your boss? In the real world, maybe an extra hour in the waiting room; a \$40 ticket; getting the fish-eye for a week at work. But in T.C. Boyle's new novel, *Talk Talk*, these inconsequential events do not pass into the realm of the quickly forgotten. Instead, they are the small jagged snips that unravel three people's lives.

Dana Halter, a tall, striking English instructor with a Ph.D. from Gallaudet, is the kind of person who inwardly recites poetry and notes Latinate roots while outwardly sporting a T-shirt reading "Deaf Power." Her boyfriend, the hearing Bridger Martin, painstakingly removes blemishes from actors' faces pixel by pixel before the frames hit the big screen. In the throes of early love, they are on a path toward giddy complacency when Dana, pulled over for running a stop sign on the way to the dentist's, is suddenly thrown in jail for a series of charges ranging from forging checks to assault with a deadly weapon. She is wanted in three states and numerous

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counties, one of which she has never even heard of.

Thus begins the ornate spectacle of *Talk Talk*, a transfixing caper in which the seemingly ordinary couple, against all sense and reason, decides to hunt down the man who has stolen Dana's identity, and, in time, Bridger's too. Establishing exactly why and how two model citizens turn into vigilantes is Boyle's challenge, and, as a master of the minute and momentary, he is more than up to the task. Boyle painstakingly details each humiliation Dana must endure: from the horrors of a weekend in the county jail to the enraging knowledge that she must pay the storage and towing fee accrued on her car in the interim. In identity theft, the reader learns, apparently everyone but the victim is blameless.

But William "Peck" Wilson, the thief in question, turns out to be as complex a character as his seekers. His rap sheet sounds like the work of a coarse, common grifter, but in fact he's a broccolini fan who enjoys preparing sea scallops in a white-wine reduction for his Russian girlfriend, Natalia, and her daughter. The fact that their Marin condo is paid for entirely in stolen credit cards, and that Dana Halter is actually a woman is, to his thinking, beside the point.

How Peck Wilson became Dana Halter - and how Dana Halter became Dana Halter - are intrinsic to the events that precipitate their inevitable, explosive meeting. For each player in this novel, character truly is destiny. For Dana, deaf since a fever at 4, is still the child greeting the classmates who attempt to sneak up on her in her bedroom with a blank, knowing stare, possessed of a sixth sense and a stubbornness that refuses to allow her to let one more tormentor remain faceless. And Peck is plagued simply by his given name, the boring William Wilson, a monicker that leaves him predisposed to acquiring new names legally before it becomes even more convenient to engulf the new identities completely. So what if Dana's stubbornness had not led her to spit "Bulls-t!" at her unsympathetic boss after her arrest? What if Dana weren't always 20 minutes late? Ignoring the Greek chorus of common sense, Dana and Peck are swung around like puppets stringed to their own unreasonable wills, and their mutual fate is set the minute Dana guns through the stop sign.

"Talk Talk" refers to a kind of doublespeak in signing, an accompanying volley of sound that emphasizes and adds meaning to each accompanying gesture. In his novel, Boyle shows how crucial, whether we are hearing or deaf, this undercurrent of explication is to our identity, how it tethers us both to the world and to those around us - and how, when it is taken away, we are all speaking into the void.

*Lizzie Skurnick, a Baltimore writer, is the editor of Old Hag, a literary blog at [www.theoldhag.com](http://www.theoldhag.com).*

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