



# The Terranauts

A book review by Sören Köpke

Author: T.C. Boyle  
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Why review a novel in an academic journal focused on food and agriculture? Because the very same themes, namely food production, agricultural efforts and ecological connections, loom large in T.C. Boyle's latest work *The Terranauts*. Boyle has long been interested in the interactions between human beings and the natural environment. First glances of this interest can be found in *Budding Prospects* (1984), a comical account of the challenges of growing Marijuana, but this theme really came to the fore in later works like *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) and *When the Killing's Done* (2011). The Southern California-based author has become a prolific writer on environmental themes, making his work a subject of study for the Environmental Humanities, an emerging academic field that approaches environmental topics through the methods and insights of the arts and humanities.

*The Terranauts*, set in the mid-1990s, takes many liberties in fictionalizing the real-life story of Biosphere 2 (called Ecosphere 2 in the novel). Biosphere 2 is a vivarium, a glass and steel construction in the Arizona desert that was designed to work as a closed ecological system. It consisted of five different biomes: a desert, an ocean, a mangrove marshland, a rainforest and cropland, as well as a human habitat. Beginning in 1991, the experimental, artificial ecosystem was staffed with a crew of people whose task was to survive in these self-sufficient earth-like surroundings. The long-term goal was to provide basic research for space colonization. The Biosphere 2 experiment marked the bold attempt to create a second ecosystem separated from earth – the ultimate hubris of technological invention. In reality, the project crashed through a combination of technological failure and human sabotage. T.C. Boyle decides to tell a slightly different story.

The story is told by three first-person narrators – two inside Ecosphere 2, one outside. This gives the narrative a good pace, making it enjoyable to read. T.C. Boyle's characters are ripe with flaws – cynicism, hypocrisy, self-loathing, betrayal, and loss of faith – which creates his trademark dark humor. The drama is amplified by the erotic tensions that characterize many group dynamics, especially under extreme situations: physical attraction, flings and affairs, passion and heartbreak.

Eight people – four women, four men – enter Ecosphere 2, each of them a specialist in his or her own field, be it rainforest ecology, oceanography, medicine, or animal husbandry. "Nothing in, nothing out", the "Terranauts" vow, for the entirety of the mission's two year duration. Thus, they inhabit a closed system in which they have to grow and prepare their own food, keep oxygen levels stable and monitor the interaction of species inside the glass dome. They milk goats, fish for Tilapia, slaughter a pig once in a while, and otherwise survive on a diet comprised of bananas, peanuts and sweet potatoes. The daily lives of the would-be space colonists are comprised of hard work in the fields and the animal pens. They unavoidably lose weight as they struggle to keep themselves and the system going. At a certain point, the Terranauts, half-starving for the sake of science, think only about calories.

Yet the system is not as closed as one might think, as the Ecospherians constantly communicate with the outside world, including countless phone calls and visits at the window by friends, lovers and relatives. This perhaps does not make it easier to endure the confined life inside the artificial ecosystem. "Mission Control", the controlling institution on



the outside, tries to direct the course of the project as the Terranauts fight for a degree of autonomy while losing their group coherence in the process. There is a common, underlying motif also apparent in some of Boyle's other works, like *Drop City* (2003), *The Road to Wellville* (1993), or *The Inner Circle* (1993): what happens when a group of people, bound together by a strong and spellbinding, even utopian vision, is confronted with the contradictions of this vision? How do people react, as a group and as individuals, when the dream begins to shatter?

Ultimately, it is not the environmental conditions or the scarcity of food that endanger the success of the mission, as might be expected from the outset. Rather, group dynamics and the tensions between insiders and outsiders drive the slow-onset failure of the mission. A failure that is cleverly dis-

guised through public relations. Yet what vibrates through the pages of the novel is a profound disillusion with any attempt to build an artificial environment, an otherworldly paradise.

#### **Information about the author:**

Sören Köpke is a doctoral candidate at University of Braunschweig, Institute of Technology (TU Braunschweig) in Germany. He has earned an M.A. in Political Science, English and American Studies from Leibniz University, Hannover.