fying new female voices is that of Nicole Flattery, whose story "Feather" is funny and disturbing in equal measure. "I used to be scared of strange men and now strange men were scared of me." Released from a psychiatric clinic, the narrator is issued with a companion, Simon, as an aid to normal life. Is Simon a hallucination or a chicken? The deadpan tone, the pungent non sequiturs, give few clues.

Like all the stories in the Faber anthology, "Feather" was specially commissioned; at the same time, Flattery's first collection, *Show Them a Good Time*, has just appeared. It is filled with a succession of young women, all adrift in one way or another, all radically disconnected from everyday routines. They, with their creator, veer between irony and acerbity. They are generally in the throes of a nervous breakdown, brought on by the awfulness and incomprehensibility of the world. They are not dispirited, though: there's a bracing element to their predicaments and observations. "The gap in my canoe knowledge was huge and overwhelming", states the heroine of "Hump" – the title indicating either an actual physical disfigurement provoked by the death of her father, or its metaphorical equivalent. Elsewhere: "My career had taken a sinister turn and I had started to keep an eye out, like you do for a new lover, for other things I could try. There weren't many". The longest tale in this collection, "Abortion, a Love Story", has a couple of university students, Natasha and Lucy – one of whom puts her professor in mind of a young Susan Sontag – who write and produce a terrible stage play in order to act out their own bad attachments and circumstances. They have forgotten the subjects they are studying and "the unemployment building" looms. "Well," says Natasha, speaking for the author, and underlining the stories' modus operandi, "let's not do the obvious thing."

Others among Flattery's characters inhabit a curiously makeshift or unreal, not to say surreal, environment: installed in a flat in New York by a fading celebrity boyfriend (a comedian); or escaping a town that was "famous amongst people with car-sickness. It was here they stood retching and spewing before moving on somewhere better"; or growing up among caravans housing migrant workers while taking an interest in newspaper reports about murdered women from the Irish Midlands. Confronted by a wrong reaction on someone else's part (a sister, for example, appearing to take you for a stranger), they might dissolve into a "faint trace of a person". In the final story, mischievously titled "Not the End Yet", a forty-something primary school teacher embarks on a series of discouraging dates with unsatisfactory men in a dingy basement cafe, against a background of imminent global catastrophe. Two men on the radio "were shouting about disease and rising sea levels … Today I had to write 'China: Wiped Out' on the board". She takes it all in her stride, before getting into a car and driving off accompanied by a cat called Screechy, refusing to relinquish her wild autonomy.

Dryness and precision – "I had a personality that was best suited to short interactions" – the ability to cast a cold, contemporary eye, a feeling for absurdity and creative inconsequentiality: these contribute to the narratives' weird integrity, their devious charm. If they've come by the left hand, as in Stevie Smith's phrase, this enlivens their plentiful anxieties, and opens the way for an abundance of aplomb.

Acid house

A satire on Timothy Leary's loyal trippers

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

T. C. Boyle

OUTSIDE LOOKING IN
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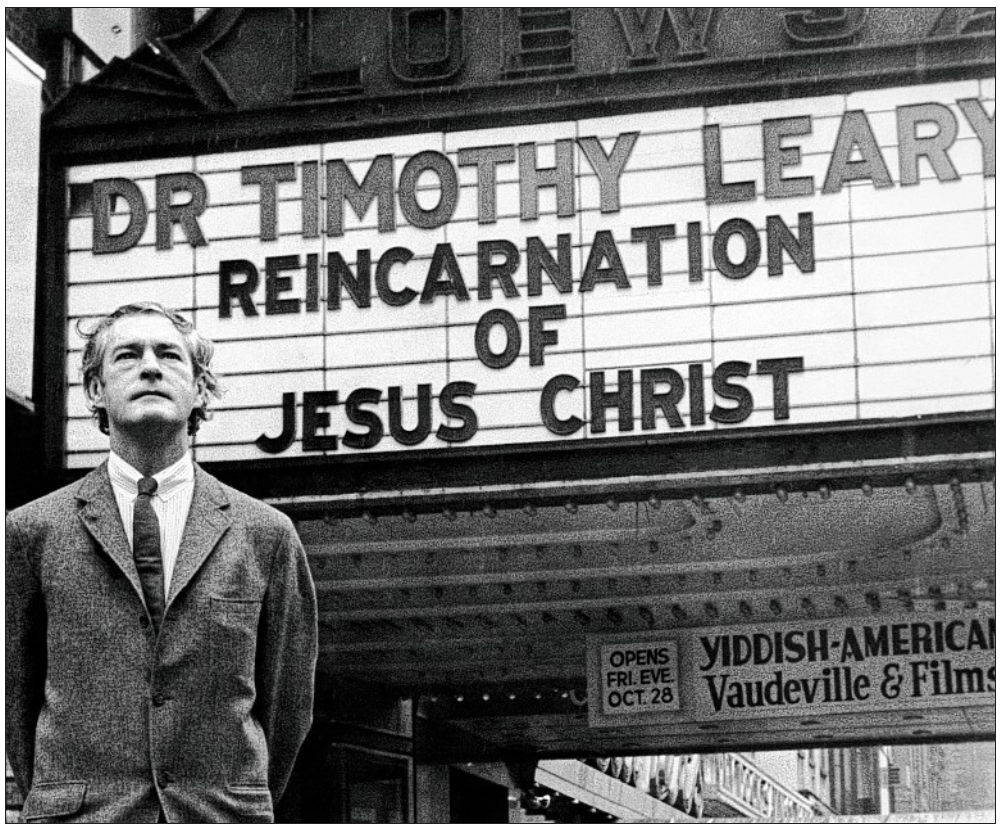
The Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann famously discovered LSD by accident in 1943 when he got a trace of the compound on his skin. His experience was mind-expanding and the pharmaceutical company he worked for went on to manufacture the drug. T. C. Boyle's seventeenth novel begins with a retelling of this story from the perspective of Hofmann's twenty-one-year-old laboratory assistant Susi, who reluctantly helps her boss experiment on himself. The book then jumps to Harvard University in 1962, where the psychedelics evangelist and clinical psychologist Timothy Leary has set up "an inner circle" – of his graduate students, wealthy bohemians, a few famous poets and musicians – around LSD, ostensibly to test its potential use in psychotherapy. Their "sessions" take place every Saturday night at Tim's rented townhouse ("how casual it all was ... a party"); the "researchers" sometimes fill out questionnaires afterwards. In the two years that follow, the experimental community moves to a remote hotel in Mexico and then to a baroque-style mansion on a 2,500-acre estate in Millbrook, New York.

Most of the narration comes from the fictional characters Fitzhugh Loney, a strait-laced student of Tim's, and his wife Joanie, who has a soulless job stacking shelves at a library. They are struggling to get by, having become parents to their now teenage son Corey when they were barely adults themselves. All hope for a better life rests on Fitz's academic success. Initially uneasy about joining the LSD project, he gives in to his professor's pressure. Soon, the couple are among Tim's most loyal trippers, eagerly "stepping across the threshold into a new life that made the old one seem like so much worn carpeting". But the idyll doesn't last.

Boyle has reconstructed the lives of eccentric historical figures before, including the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, the nutritionist and inventor John Harvey Kellogg and the sexologist Alfred Kinsey. He has also dealt with the emotional fallout of utopian communes and countercultural movements, such as the Biosphere Two project in *The Terranauts* (*TLS*, October 21, 2016) and the American sexual revolution in *Drop City* (*TLS*, March 28, 2003). Boyle's version of Timothy Leary, much like the one in real life, is deified by his followers. Fitz sees him as "the shining star everybody wanted to study with"; in his Harvard office – where the inner circle gather to drink and discuss their sessions – the desk lamp casts "an annulus of golden light" around Tim's face. When Fitz and Joanie take psychedelics for the first time, Tim dispenses the pills ("the sacrament") into upturned palms: "This was a ritual, a ceremony, and Tim was at the center of it".



Timothy Leary, Village Theatre, New York

Tim abuses his power, of course. He tells Fitz, "I've got to fuck every woman who comes into the house because they fixate on me – and the drug ... I'm the source of the drug – and the fuck too ... What we have to do in the name of science". At one point he simultaneously seduces Joanie and the wife of another student. Later, we hear Joanie's thoughts about that night: "he was Tim and Tim always got what he wanted".

It is terrifying, too, how Boyle's characters – all of them solipsistic, fickle, pleasure-seeking – neglect their children. While the adults take LSD, Tim's fourteen-year-old daughter slips "unobtrusively through the room like the hired help, a tray of glasses cradled in her arms". During the inner circle's first summer in Mexico, Corey and another boy return from the jungle one day covered in blood. It turns out they have repeatedly stabbed an iguana in the head for fun. Joanie, on a comedown, reacts by laughing. Towards the end of the novel, the kids are even given a small dose of LSD to further the experiment. "How marvelous it was going to be, how right and necessary and enduring", Tim says.

The strength of Boyle's writing lies in his ability to punctuate these dark, squalid moments with sardonic comedy. The inner circle's elated car journey to join Tim at Millbrook, for example, stops short at the house's front gates: they are locked out, as if their host couldn't care less about their arrival. A few months later Tim allows paying guests to stay there for psychedelic seminars in order to bolster the commune's funds. Having decided that the mansion looks "too bourgeois", he instructs the inner circle to paint "mandalas and eyes on the walls" and to cut the legs off the furniture "to reduce everything to floor level, Arabian Nights style". Joanie recognizes the absurdity ("they were selling out, constructing some ersatz version of the life they'd chosen"), but she carries on anyway.

Outside Looking In contains the kind of surreal and stunning imagery one might expect from a novel about psychedelics, even if it most notably appears at the points when Boyle's characters are not high. A hot-dog bun at a barbecue is "split down the middle like a woman's private parts"; anxious thoughts "flap" through someone's mind "like flocks of black-winged birds"; a field of daffodils looks as though "somebody's smeared the whole landscape with butter". The characters' trips, by contrast, which take up a large chunk of the book, are often so generic (swirling colours, mostly) that we wonder what all the fuss is about. This seems to be Boyle's point, but it makes for an occasionally monotonous novel. The final pages contain no dramatic disasters or sense of heightened consciousness. Instead, the adults become more and more pathetic, languishing in sexual jealousies and unrequited lusts. Families very slowly fall apart. The group's whole purpose – the "project", the Gospel of Tim – has seemingly gone nowhere.