

**Nathanael O'Reilly. *Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel*. New York: Teneo Press, 2012.**

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Australian writers have long been caught up in narratives about how an individual discovers himself or herself in relation to the natural world, and these experiences—often involving struggle against and triumph over the physical challenges of the landscape—operate as allegories for Australia's national identity. National stories predominately favour the rugged arid landscapes of the bush, or azure coastal beaches, which position the Australian people generally as either tough bush larrikins or athletic beach-goers. Both narrative positions are explicitly embedded in the natural world, and they celebrate a nationalism that takes place under the sun and in connection with the land or sea. The mythologised tales of Burke and Wills, Gallipoli, and Ned Kelly are a few examples of how, in particular, stories about boys from the bush feature prominently in the national imaginary (O' Reilly, xi).

In his 2012 book, *Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel*, Nathanael O'Reilly steps outside of Australia's nationalistic tropes, and investigates the often uncelebrated domestic space of suburbia. In a comprehensive literature review, *Exploring Suburbia* explains how, as the space that hangs tenuously between city and the bush, suburbia has been portrayed as culturally and artistically lacking—a no-man's land, ripe for parody and comedic derision. One need not think too far beyond Barry Humphries' caricatures of suburban dwellers, immortalised most memorably in the characters of Dame Edna Everage and Sandy Stone, to see how suburbia is criticised for its alleged obsession with commodity culture.

O'Reilly argues that suburbanisation in Australia sought to achieve what was not fully accomplished in Britain—a division between domestic and work spaces. The suburbs were built on the dream of a more spacious and independent commuter lifestyle by enabling working class people to live in affordably close proximity to the city, but also stay in touch with the free and open rural spaces. For many people, suburbia represented the best of both the urban and rural environments, but however idealised suburban planning was, anti-suburban attitudes formed early on in Australian history. Long before the Post-World War Two suburban boom, which saw the emergence of figures such as Dame Edna as a critical response, resentment of suburban expansion began to be expressed in literary representations. For instance, in Louis Esson's famous 1912 play *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*, a central character claims that the suburban home 'stand[s] for all that is dull and depressing in modern life' (qtd. in O'Reilly xxvi). Opponents of suburbia have typically read the space as visually depressing because homes were constructed out of veneer and artificial commodities, which was believed to be emotionally and creatively oppressive—a sign that physical space reflects and affects the psyche of those who live there.

A central tenet of *Exploring Suburbia* is that the suburbs are home to a diverse array of people, and its thesis statement is: 'The novels analyzed throughout this book clearly demonstrate that suburbia is not homogenous; in fact it contains a great deal of ethnic, class, sexual, religious, and economic diversity' (xxx). In spite of the prevalence of anti-suburbanism in the Australian literary tradition, *Exploring Suburbia* is not alone in writing against anti-suburban attitudes. For instance, Robin Gerster, Garry Kinnane, Rodney Wetherell, Donald Horne, and Hugh Stretton have all written on how suburbia can be home to

diverse and creative people. However, there is a difference between O'Reilly and his predecessors who read Australian fiction as damning of the suburban intellect, and who claim that writers of fiction should engage more seriously with suburbia. O'Reilly revisits some iconic Australian novels that have been labelled as anti-suburban, and questions whether that label is accurate.

The chapter structure of the text generally tracks a linear and chronological movement from exploring the development of anti-suburbanism, which O'Reilly argues begins with George Johnston's 1964 novel, *My Brother Jack*, and continues in David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975), and Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991), and Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* (1997), for instance. The final three chapters explore those texts that (according to O'Reilly) challenge stereotypes about suburbia and those who live there. These texts are Gerald Murnane's *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976) and *Landscape with Landscape* (1985), Peter Carey's *Bliss* (1981) and *The Tax Inspector* (1991), and Steven Carroll's Glenroy trilogy.

The premise of the book is intriguing, especially for those with an interest in place theory. An unexpected turn is in how the first chapter bravely challenges some very established criticism of Patrick White, a canonised author, whose work is widely referred to as anti-suburban. O'Reilly questions whether Patrick White and his work really deserve to be labelled anti-suburban. Writing about White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), O'Reilly claims that scholars have conflated White with his texts' narrators in order to leverage the argument that White is an anti-suburbanist, and that their reading of White as a person has coloured their textual reading. However, in a similar way, the chapter also works to deconstruct the view that White—as a person—was not anti-suburban through an analysis of personal letters. The text argues that, 'if White really hated the suburb, he surely would not have voluntarily lived there for for almost two decades' (7).

O'Reilly argues that there is not enough convincing evidence that White was personally opposed to suburbia, but some of his characters offer critiques of the suburban mindset which O'Reilly distinguishes from the physical suburb at some points throughout the book. This distinction between the physical or geographical space of the suburb and the 'suburban mindset' is at times problematic. As O'Reilly acknowledges in the introduction, to live in 'suburbia' or to be considered 'suburban' is about more than the geographical space occupied as home. These terms refer to a mindset, or qualities commonly implied as inherent to those that live outside of the city.

Rather than fall into what O'Reilly terms a 'pro or anti-suburban binary,' *Riders in the Chariot* is 'ambivalent' toward suburbia (38, 41). That a text does not need to either overtly celebrate or criticise suburbia is an interesting point, and one that O'Reilly could have potentially made more of in terms of questioning the usefulness of blanket terms such as 'anti-suburbanism.' The argument that *Riders in the Chariot* takes a critical look at the complex lives that are lived in suburban space, and that, more broadly speaking texts about suburbia are more complicated than critics have considered is significant and, has been lacking to date, yet the book takes upon a very difficult task in attempting to destabilise the text's historical connection to anti-suburbanism.

An interesting pattern that could have been further developed is the fact that throughout *Exploring Suburbia*, the characters who are identified as being most dissatisfied with suburban life are women. However, In *Exploring Suburbia's* conclusion, O'Reilly explains that all of the texts chosen for analysis—with the exception of Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam*

*Pigs*—were written by male authors. He argues that even though there is a vast body of work about suburbia written by women,

. . . they often focus on domestic issues rather than social issues such as immigration, environmental degradation, Indigenous rights and religion—all issues I wished to explore. I certainly do not wish to suggest that domestic issues and feminism are not vitally important; rather, I want to stress that I focus on issues I wanted to address, not because I sought to exclude female authors. (338)

However, female authors and domesticity are not an exclusive equation, and in *Exploring Suburbia* the brief discussion about female characters who are dissatisfied could have been more fruitfully developed. Although such issues were not the book's intended focus, they seem so overt within the novels themselves as to warrant critical attention or acknowledgement. For instance, in the chapter entitled 'Taking Suburbia Seriously,' the text analyses *Bliss* and argues that 'Carey does not depict suburbia in an overwhelmingly negative manner' (255), but states that the main protagonist's wife, Bettina, does 'on a few occasions . . . briefly expresses disgust with suburbia and its residents' (255). Specifically, *Exploring Suburbia* notes how, while visiting a hospital, Bettina hates the 'dreariness' of the nurses' occupation and their lives generally which she imagines reside in suburbia (255). In defending the stance that Carey's novel is not overwhelmingly anti-suburban, Bettina's feelings are rationalised:

However, Bettina's hatred is directed at other people generally, rather than suburbia or suburbanites specifically. Moreover, since Bettina is a suburban wife and mother with thwarted ambitions, her hatred of other suburbanites may well be a manifestation of self-loathing. (255–56)

Bettina's self-loathing may also stem from feelings of oppression that manifest within the suburban space, or which suburbia kindles. Also, I wonder, if 'Australian novels set in suburbia . . . question the reality behind the suburban mythology' (xxiv), as *Exploring Suburbia* claims, what is being said about the myth of mothers, and women generally, belonging in domesticity? It is intriguing that as a wife and mother Bettina's ill-feelings are projected on to nurses who, like mothers, have a nurturing occupation. A feminist reading of such characters here, while arguably falling outside the scope of the book, may have presented a less generous interpretation of the effects that suburbia has on the feminine subject. As O'Reilly argues in the introductory chapter, the suburb in Australia is more than a physical space, but was built upon a dream about an ideal living space, and here those 'ideals' seem restrictive to at least some subjects.

I offer this alternative reading of Bettina not to undermine the work of *Exploring Suburbia*, but to highlight, as is the spirit of the text, that there is much work on the representation of suburbia in Australian literature that can be explored, too much to include in the first full-length book study on suburbia. O'Reilly is aware of the development and research waiting to be uncovered in this area, noting a bibliographic list of texts by women writers in the book's conclusion which may invite further critical readings. In terms of stimulating debate around suburbia and what suburbia says about Australia's identity at an individual and national level, *Exploring Suburbia* is successful and represents a promising renewal of research and interest into the not-so humble Australian suburb.

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