

Review of Brigid Rooney's *Suburban Space, The Novel and Australian Modernity*

Suzie Gibson

THE very word suburban often carries a pejorative meaning that aligns it with an unsightly urban sprawl. In reality, many modern suburban homes and streets are tarnished with a lack of individuality, presenting as part of commodified *en masse* living conditions where every home looks alike down to the ubiquitous and inhospitable roller door garage frontages. Much has been written about suburban spaces and the need to liberate one's self from their insularity. A widely known example is Richard Yates's famed *Revolutionary Road* (1961), chronicling a couple's efforts to retrieve their marriage through daring plans to leave their leafy suburban life in Connecticut in order to make a break for Paris – a glittering world city that promises to replace sombre mediocrity with freedom and glamour.

Revolutionary Road carries with it the influence of Henry James's great late novel *The Ambassadors* (1903), which depicts a middle-aged man's belated coming of age once he escapes the parochial environs of his small town of Woollett Massachusetts for the dazzling city lights of (again) Paris. In James's sprawling novel, the protagonist's fictional town of Woollett is demonised as narrow, parochial and inward-looking: a place that inevitably stultifies agency, creativity and imagination. Indeed, in his own life, James decided to live out his adult years in Europe and England, choosing what he believed was the grander world of art, literature and architecture over the tawdriness of American consumerism and its urban peripheries.

In Australian literature, too, there are many narratives which associate the unseemliness of suburban life with a kind of spiritual death. For instance, Thea

Astley's *The Slow Natives* (1965) deftly portrays suburban couple Bernard and Iris trying to maintain the façade of a happy marriage amidst a panoply of anger and despair. Desperate to rebel against his parents' seemingly loveless and compromising arrangement, their son Keith flees the everyday of suburbia for the cosmopolitan attractions of Surfers Paradise and the mysterious environs of the open countryside to the south. In David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975), yet another Australian novel about trying to liberate one's self from suburban spaces – this time mid-twentieth century Brisbane – the entire city operates as a metonym for the suburbs. Malouf's command of language is deeply evocative of a humid environment that stifles agency in a city that is 'so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawingly unlovely!' (51).

Brigid Rooney's *Suburban Space, The Novel and Australian Modernity* is a complex, fascinating study which tries to come to terms with the ambiguities and contradictions of these and other Australian tales of suburbia. In a clever move, she analyses the various renderings of suburban spaces through a number of Australian literary works that tend to unsettle a strict binary between the city and its outer suburbs. (Indeed, Rooney proposes a delineation between 'the suburbs' and the more derogatory term 'suburbia'.)

The author traces a chronology of literary works that have meditated upon various Australian dwellings from the pre-and interwar years up to the present day. As such the suburbs become mobile places of contemplation and creativity. She ruminates over spheres that were once considered very remote outer regions but now comprise suburbia, one example being Patrick White's real life abode in Castle Hill (once considered a faraway farming settlement on the outer rim of Sydney but today is at the very 'midpoint' of that city's ever-expanding metropolitanism.)

Rigorously researched, Rooney's book is at pains to disrupt elitist dismissals of the suburban space as lacking character and creativity. In part, this is undertaken by thinking subtly and complexly about what a suburban space actually is, what it entails and how it is part of an ever-widening world that is in constant flux: a world that is largely dependent upon transnational movements and economic factors that perpetually shape and reshape the way we live, think and inhabit space.

Divided into three parts, her book traces a series of perspectives upon the suburban sphere. The first chapter is dedicated to addressing an outsider's early impression of Australia's suburbs: D. H. Lawrence's 1923 novel *Kangaroo*. Through Lawrence she reveals a British perspective which places Sydney as a mere outer suburb of Britain. This was also an era before Sydney's urbanity was unified by a Harbour Bridge – meaning that the entirety of its development

could be interpreted as a series of suburbs loosely connected by the criss-crossing trajectories of tramlines, railways and ferries. In this opening chapter, she is also interested in focusing upon the bungalow abode that was once a very popular interwar architectural feature that spread across England, America and Australia. Much like the way suburban homes today are described, the bungalow is dismissed in Lawrence's *Kangaroo* as being part of a standardised series of houses that resemble a child's rudimentary drawing. Of course, today the 1920s bungalow is celebrated as an art deco architectural achievement, helping confirm one of Rooney's salient points: that shifting attitudes cohere with changes in social expectations and aesthetic evaluations.

Mapping is also crucial to Rooney's study, although she is more concerned with its emotional dimension rather than with the mathematical precision of cartography. Ultimately, suburban space operates as a metonym for Australia. In many ways, this country is still struggling to forge a sense of identity that involves looking both outward and inward. The double movement of looking beyond and within one's self and one's region is mapped onto certain suburban territories in which there is an abiding ambivalence that at once rejects and embraces familiarity and intimacy. Being associated with the private, domestic realm, suburbia's dismissal is also tied up with its feminisation. This is largely what drives Rooney's examination of both celebrated female authors (Christina Stead) and others far less well known (Doras Boake Kerr; Lesbia Harford). Tracing the works of the latter two writers is in many ways about paying homage to the private and interior worlds of women who toiled away in the invisible realms of suburban homes. Choosing to include these relatively unexplored writers captures a spirit of a book that generously unearths buried voices and perspectives.

In many ways Rooney's book is concerned with exacting a kind of justice for the forgotten and discarded. Arguably this is what propels her criticism of Patrick White's dismissal of suburbia as a vast wasteland, as expressed in his infamous essay 'The Prodigal Son'. In response, the author re-reads White's epic *The Tree of Man* (1955) through the prism of his Castle Hill Dogwood estate. For Rooney, the sheer earthiness of White's existence at the time (that involved selling flowers, growing vegetables and breeding dogs) is channelled into a novel about being part of a grand transformation that included building dwellings and neighbourhoods that would later develop into communities and suburbs. Her unique analysis puts into question, whether this was intentional or not, White's true feelings toward suburbia, for if he was able to craft such a weighty tome while occupying his kitchen's interior 'emptiness' then perhaps suburban living was not so barren and unlovely after all.

Another strand in this study is concerned with expatriate visions of Australia and how they both embrace and reject its suburban way of life. Much is made of George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964), which both disdains and yet also wonderfully conjures suburban spaces. Rooney is keen to point out that the negative attitude toward suburbia is nicely counterbalanced by *My Brother Jack's* lyrical prose style that at times lovingly invokes the intimacies of home. In Rooney's estimation, Johnston's novel along with many others written by expatriates – Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973), David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975) and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978) – all capture a tension that simultaneously embraces and rejects Australia and its suburbs. There is thus dual or double movement in Australian literature between pro and anti-suburbia, enacted in novels that fondly recall and re-conjure Australia from abroad.

When undertaking readings of novels such as Elizabeth Harrower's works *Down in the City* (1957), *The Longest Prospect* (1958) and *The Watch Tower* (1960), Rooney's prose comes alive, imitative of the electric currents running through the houses and characters in *The Longest Prospect*. At this mid-20th century point in history various homes were being inexorably connected through electrical power grids. Rooney's prose is arguably at its best when she dwells upon the internal workings of the novels themselves – literary forms whose poeticism can operate as imaginative 'word-homes'. While language itself has a way of sheltering both readers and writers, it can also sometimes operate as an alienating force – Rooney's book avoids this.

In the final sections of *Suburban Space* there is a careful consideration of our post-suburban era, where already well-developed suburbs and cities are becoming further transformed by geopolitical, technological and socio-economic factors and movements. Once more the frontiers between our cities and our suburbs are tested, bended and extended in alignment with the unrelenting march of neoliberal capitalism.

At times the sheer scope of Rooney's study can be unwieldy in its efforts to account for as many Australia writers as possible over the stretch of a hundred years. (Others who have produced work embedded in suburbia, such as Brisbane's Andrew McGahan and Nick Earls, are bypassed.) There is thus an anthological dimension to this book that risks providing short sketches of works instead of detailed interpretations. Nevertheless, the wide arc of Rooney's analysis is laudable in that it largely addresses hitherto overlooked narratives in the development of suburban space, including Indigenous and immigrant voices.

This commendable book embraces a desire to restore dignity to the places and experiences that have come to shape the lives of Australian writers and

poets – spheres that are often off the grid when compared to the metropolitan cores of Australia’s capital cities. Rooney’s careful scholarship and attention to detail is something to marvel at. In the end there is an internal illumination to this work that seeks to challenge easy oppositions between centres and peripheries, homes and homelessness, hospitality and inhospitality. The house featured on the cover of her book is a marvellous photograph of an installation created by the Australian artist Ian Strange titled ‘*Number Twelve*’: it helps encapsulate the attitude of a volume whose light generates outward like a beacon as it repositions suburban Australia as a place of intricacy and creativity.

Works cited

Malouf, David. *Johnno*. U of Queensland P, 1975.