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Writing Suburbia: The Periphery in Novels

I came to live in Shepperton in 1960. I thought: the future isn't in the metropolitan areas of London. I want to go out to the new suburbs, near the film studios. This was the England I wanted to write about, because this was the new world that was emerging. No one in a novel by Virginia Woolf ever filled up the petrol tank of their car.

(J. G. Ballard in an interview with Campbell, 2008)

Perhaps somewhat befitting their positioning vis-a-vis the city, the suburbs still manage to be comparatively marginalized in overview considerations of fiction. There is a *Penguin Book of the City*; an anthology of fictional writing capturing stories spun in the metropolis. Presumably due to its perceived naughtiness, there is no equivalent volume dealing with the suburb. Yet the examples of such work are voluminous and vary vastly. At one extreme the futuristic *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984) which contains the first ever mention of the word 'cyberspace' describes a postsuburban 'edge city' (cf. Garreau) environment where business and technology are enmeshed with multinational corporations in a sprawl called BAMA, the Boston–Atlanta Metropolitan Axis in which the entire American East Coast from Boston to Atlanta, have merged into a single urban mass. At the other extreme of suburban fiction can be found the historical sweep of events and moralistic undertone of the Delderfield 'Avenue' books set from 1919 to 1940. Just as any writer of non-fiction feels the need to justify their subject of enquiry as urgently needing elucidation the first volume of these *The Dreaming Suburb* maintains 'The story of the country-dwellers, and the city sophisticates, has been told often enough; it is time somebody spoke of the suburbs, for therein, I have sometimes felt, lies the history of our race' (Delderfield 1958:xi). This reference to 'our race' implying a monocultural entity

feels distinctly an anachronistic read now at a time when multi-ethnicity is now widely taken as a given, not just by sociologists as seen in recent furores over, for example UK television's *Midsomer Murders* and Aidan Burley MP's remarks that the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony was 'leftie multicultural crap'. The idea of purity in a suburban race in London, the suburbs of which the books were set in, is even more odd given how very few residents are indigenous Londoners or even born in the city let alone able to trace back multiple generations. Since Delderfield wrote these words multiple changes have occurred in suburban society on both sides of the Atlantic involving ethnicity, gender, technology, class and sexuality which have all been reflected in suburban novels directly and indirectly.

The US suburban novel enjoyed a boom period in the 1950s with works such as that of John Cheever and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) (later a film with Gregory Peck), an expression still synonymous with suburban way of life for a generation who had known war. This chapter however begins with the United Kingdom. A range of examples dealing with 'Asian London' are dealt with in Chapter 7 but in the beginning there is the social satire of Mr Pooter, a character dating from Victorian times.

The twenty-first-century suburban novel is inevitably shaped by earlier antecedents. Just as when a brand name becomes part of the English language we know that it has entered immortality, for example 'the Hoover' for the vacuum cleaner, or 'the walkman' for personal stereo, or 'kindle' for e-reader, the impact of a novel can be seen to have been profound when its characters become words in the English vernacular. Charles Pooter, the central character of *Diary of a Nobody* serves as an example of how a fictional creation has given rise to the adjective 'Pooterish' to connote an ingrained suburban mentality since the book's appearance in 1892. Roy Porter (1998:382) has referred to how 'Pooterish sorts – decent fellows living in the inner, and later the outer, suburbs.' In 2007 *The Guardian* remarked of 'suburban everyman . . . Pooter, as recognisable now as he was in 1888' and a theatre review from 2011 noted of the book's chronicling of everyday woes: 'in the age of the blogger, we are all potential Mr Pooters.'¹ Pooter's joyless commute to the city by bus or sharing with readers how he was at his happiest banging in nails in an age before the B and Q DIY superstore set the template for much of what we expect as suburbanite preoccupations. Numerous writers who have talked of the 'Pooterish' suburb connoting residential districts dating from the late nineteenth century include: Kidd and Nicholls (1999), Royle (1982), Tinniswood (1999) and Weightman and Humphries (1983). Pooter's corner of North London was Holloway, now

considered part of the inner city but was a suburban location in the Victorian era before much of what would now be thought of as suburbia was yet to undergo major development in the interwar years, for example Betjeman's metroland locations were at the time mostly open fields. Anne Perkins' use of the term 'Pooterish suburb' similarly refers to Brixton (2007:128). One of the most important conclusions we can draw from this prototypical suburban novel is not in anything that author and illustrator Grossmith and Grossmith actually intended us to take away from its content. The fact that support from housebuilders and railway expansion have helped these Pooterish suburbs transform into inner city locations over the past century demonstrates how the city has edged ever-outwards and the way that yesterday's suburbia can become the inner city of the future.

Pre-war antecedents: The narrative of English decline in *Coming Up for Air*

George Orwell's 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air* documents the uncontrollability of suburban sprawl, a phenomenon much revisited, for example in Franzen's (2010) US 'state of the nation' novel *Freedom* (Colebrook 2012) explored further below. The anti-hero travelling salesman George Bowling decides to secretly escape his predictable suburban lot with loveless marriage and joyless kids to the Oxfordshire countryside of his childhood with some illicit gambling winnings for a short sojourn. His road is

A line of semi-detached torture-chambers where the little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, every one of them with the boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches.

He steals away by car under the cover of a business trip to Birmingham, before his story unravels. This desire to preserve a bygone pre-immigration England is an enduring trope that Prince Charles' speeches and John Betjeman's *Metroland* musings lamenting the countryside's destruction continued in later years. At the time of Orwell's writing too critiques of suburbia among the intelligentsia were numerous. Chapter 1 has referred to Priestley's (1934:401) notion of an Americanized 'third England' which is fundamentally suburban in character. In 1928 Williams-Ellis likened the spread of suburbia to the grabbing tentacles of an 'octopus' (Hunt 2004) in his book kick-starting the rise of the Campaign

for the Preservation of Rural England pressure group. Meanwhile in the book Bowling replays incidents from his life including the trenches in the First World War while yearning for the simple pleasures in life such as fishing, only to find on arrival that the Edwardian genteel countryside of his boyhood too has become another suburban settlement with his vividly remembered rural paradise now site of mass-produced houses aimed at the £1,000 pounds a year income bracket. He visits the graves of his parents and the church he attended as a boy but he goes unrecognized by both the vicar who has remained the same and an old flame he spots who in his eyes has deteriorated in looks to the point that he can't understand what he ever saw in her.

Alluding to Orwell's prolific parallel career as an essayist and factual writer Raymond Williams (1971:52) argued 'Instead of dividing [his works] into "fiction" and "documentaries" we should see them as sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, "Orwell"'. *Coming Up for Air* is written in the first person and one can only assume Bowling in some respects was a mouthpiece to ventriloquize the author's own predilections even if Orwell was the son of a civil servant educated at Wellington and Eton who fought in the Spanish civil war and the narrator the son of a simple country seed merchant who was in combat in the First World War. Bowling remarks of his humdrum existence (p. 74): 'I'm fat and forty-five and got two kids and a house in the suburbs.' Orwell was dead by the age of 47 in 1950. In many ways his works of fiction were like his well-known essays. In his 1946 essay 'Why I Write' Orwell reportedly replied that his motivation was fourfold: 'sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse [and] political purpose' (Williams 1971:32). The same realization follows for George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air* who wants to revert to the simple pleasures of fishing and spending time by himself rather than continue taking the bait of the suburban situation he has bought into. The character literally comes up for air as the Second World War is about to hit.

Orwell's distaste for all things suburban, if we do take his writing to narrate his own opinions, can be seen as repeatedly voiced throughout his novels. In the early example *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935/69:175) there is a description of:

Southbridge . . . a repellent suburb ten or a dozen miles from London . . . labyrinths of meanly decent streets, all so indistinguishably alike with their ranks of semi-detached houses, their privet and laurel hedges of ailing shrubs at the cross-roads, that you could lose yourself as easily in as a Brazilian forest.

The suburban jungle idea continues in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* where the hateful houseplant of the title becomes the symbol for stultifying suburban mores. Gordon Comstock who begins the story working in a bookshop but ends up in advertising expresses disdain for a life as a suburban wage-slave at the book's start:

The types he saw all around him made him squirm. That was what it meant to worship the money-god. To settle down, to Make Good, to sell your soul for a villa and an aspidistra! To turn into a typical bowler-hatted sneak – Strube's 'little man' – the little docile cit who slips away in the six-fifteen [a suburban train service] to a supper of cottage pie and stewed tin pears, half an hour's listening in to the BBC Symphony Concert, and then perhaps a spot of licit sexual intercourse if his wife feels 'in the mood' What a fate! No it isn't like this one was meant to live. (Orwell 1936/2000:51)

The reference to 'Little Man' was the popular interwar creation of cartoonist Sydney Strube an umbrella-ed, bow-tied and bowler hatted gent who appeared in the *Daily Express* from 1912–48 as a national symbol of the long-suffering man-in-the-street, 'with his everyday grumbles and problems, trying to keep his ear to the ground, his nose to the grindstone, his eye to the future and his chin up – all at the same time'.² Indeed in a phrase that seems to echo hangings, Comstock's other put-down for the commuting classes is as 'strap hangers' referring to the overhead ceiling mounted device for passengers to hold onto in overcrowded tube carriages. Criticism of commuters here seems to construct them as lifeless, dull and unafraid of risk-taking although Comstock ends up submitting to the suburban cycle by the end.

Coming Up for Air also satirizes after-effects of the speculative suburban house-building boom of interwar years which saw the United Kingdom become a nation of home-owners due to relaxations in lending policies. By 1930 it became as cheap to buy property as to rent it (Rogers and Power 2001:71). Mortgaged property became the most popular mode of housing tenure. Orwell through Bowling is unsparing in his venom for the building societies responsible for the dramatic rise of owner occupation in Britain which he sees as 'a racket'. Read through the prism of the US subprime mortgage crisis which sparked the economic recession which began in 2008, this characterization seems strangely prophetic as does the observation from the 1940 essay *The Lion and the Unicorn* that 'All criticism broke itself against the rat-trap faces of bankers and the brassy laughter of stockbrokers.' There is almost a parallel with Marx' notion of false consciousness with Bowling's remark 'Nine-tenths of the people in Ellesmere

Road are under the impression that they own their houses' (Orwell 1939/75:14). Some passages relating to the role of the building societies are mocking rather than in sympathy with the lower middle classes, for example

We're all respectable householders – that's to say Tories, yes-men, and bumsuckers . . . And the fact that actually we aren't householders, that we are in the middle of paying for our houses and eaten up by the ghastly fear that something might happen to us before we've made the last payment, merely increases the effect . . . Every one of those poor downtrodden bastards, sweating his guts out to pay twice proper price for a brick doll's house that's called Belle Vue because there's no view and the bell doesn't ring – every one of those poor suckers would die on the field of battle to save his country from Bolshevism. (Orwell 1939/75:16)

In this way the view that the ruling classes need a consenting population to govern with their consent rather than outright coercion is reinforced, an idea that that has been rehearsed many times in sociology in varying degrees from Marx' notion of false consciousness to Gramsci's concept of hegemony and beyond. These individuals are ultimately selfish and as economic actors must keep up a process of constantly consuming on order to service the market and its demands for whom commodities must be churned out including mortgages that give the illusion of ownership. Marxist arguments see the industrial revolution as having resulted in an unequal classist society where freedom for the wealthy and powerful depended in the coercion of the working class and their continual exploitation. Bauman (2004:23) has written 'the chance to enjoy freedom without paying the harsh and forbidding price of insecurity (or at least with creditors demanding payment on the spot) was the privilege of the few; but these few set the tone of the emancipation idea for centuries to come.' In the early twenty-first century the availability of mortgages increased with lenders further relaxing criteria allowing borrowing on higher salary multiples and offering interest-only mortgages which make Orwell's 2:1 ratio for repayment look almost generous.

On his return Bowling has trouble recognizing his beloved Lower Binfield: 'All I could see was an enormous river of brand-new houses . . . several acres of bright red roofs all exactly alike. A big Council estate by the look of it' (177). There are distinct similarities with the sentiments Bowling voices here and as will be seen in the next chapter the songwriting of Paul Weller in the Jam's track *Tales from the Riverbank*, a composition which also borrows much from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Indeed Grahame in an 1892 essay *Orion* quoted by Hunt (2010:xi) declared as a statement of fact 'the desolate suburbs creep ever further

into the retreating fields'. The since much-copied pastoral whimsy of Grahame can be seen in *Wind in the Willows* chapters 'The Riverbank, Piper at the Gates of Dawn' (inspiring a Jam track and the title of Pink Floyd's first wistful, pre-prog rock album) and the murky presence of the 'wild wood' which became the title of Paul Weller's second solo album. The book has been seen to capture the rise of the clerkish suburban nobody preoccupied by home improvements as well as wealth and display. Hunt writes (2010:xi): 'The mole has about him the air of a respectable suburban clerk, a Mr Pooter figure straight from the pages of George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody*.' Toad of Toad Hall by contrast is loud and ostentatious representing 'new money'. Betjeman too in his television documentaries repeatedly lamented a vanishing England with the countryside rapidly disappearing at the mercy of suburbanization. There is a parallel to the description of Bromstead in H. G. Wells' political novel *The New Machiavelli* (1911:38–9): 'Roofs of slate and tile appeared amidst and presently prevailed over the original Bromstead thatch . . . Residential villas appeared occupied by [people] who deemed the place healthy.' In sum 'all the delight and beauty of it was destroyed' (Wells 1911:43) including its main river the Ravensbrook which becomes a dumping ground. George Orwell via Bowling as narrator reacts in horror at the change and decay around him: 'There was nothing left of the woods. It was all houses, houses – and what houses! . . . faked up Tudor houses with curly roofs and the buttresses that don't buttress anything, and the rock-gardens with concrete bird-baths and red plaster elves you can buy at the florists' (p. 214). A similar dislike of mock Tudor comes over in the passage in *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* when Gordon and Rosemary take a day trip to Burnham Beeches, Buckinghamshire some 25 miles from London described as 'the country'. The decline which is the backdrop to the book takes place on multiple levels. The empire which Orwell hated so much and which he was a product was coming to an end as well as the decline of the ruling classes now that the fast suburbanizing middle class was undergoing expansion.

Post-war Americana

In settling on what we can deem to be 'the Great American Novel' there are multifarious works of twentieth century vividly fiction chronicling their times from depression era Steinbeck through to the 1960s rebellions of J. D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac and the 1980s yuppie satire of Tom Wolfe. Yet within this broad bracket is the rich vein of suburban novel, a significant subcategory. Among the

best known exponents are John Cheever for his Wapshot books set in the New York suburbs. After his death in 1982 his local suburban public library honoured him with a Reading Room named after him, dedicated to ‘Ossining’s Chekhov of the Suburbs.’ Citing one-off suburban novels Kenneth T Jackson (1985:281–2) and Scott Donaldson between them list numerous examples: *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House*, *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies*, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, *The Mackerel Plaza*, *Rally Round the Flag, Boys* and Richard Yates’ (1961/2001) *Revolutionary Road* which has a back cover describing it about ‘a couple bored by the banalities of suburban life’. Perhaps best known however is Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in a Gray Flannel Suit* forever cited in descriptions of US suburbanism. In describing the ageing rockstar Richard Katz and his associates in the contemporary *Freedom* it is said of his bassist (Franzen 2010:151) ‘[his] dishevelment and disorganisation made Richard look like the man in the grey flannel suit in comparison’. Franzen incidentally wrote a forward to the most recent re-issue of the book. In series 2 of *Mad Men* the be-suited central character Don Draper attracts the disparaging epithet from a foe in the hippie commune he starts to frequent of ‘hey, it’s the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit’, suggesting that like the book he too epitomizes the ‘straight’ suburban mindset unlike the bohemian name-caller. Indeed the book has inspired numerous subsequent academic works spanning articles (Jurca 1999), and analyses which see it as symbolizing the triumph of big corporations (Spector 2008; Panayiotou 2012) including the book *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (Castronovo 2004).

Dissatisfaction seems to be prevalent in many of these post-war examples. Indeed Donaldson (1969:199) goes as far as to brand this strand of suburban fiction as ‘hysterical’. In *Revolutionary Road* (Yates 1961) the estate agent convinces the Wheelers of the merits of the suburban house in the aforementioned road despite their misgivings. ‘I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities’, ventures Frank as they view the house that eventually April feels trapped by and the suburban sell-out from their bohemian past begins (Yates 1961:29). This new way of living initially offers a solution to their haphazardness. We are told ‘The gathering disorder of their lives might be sorted out and made to fit these rooms, among these trees’ (Yates 1961:30). Of course it doesn’t take long before they are at each others’ throats. ‘I don’t happen to fit the role of dumb, insensitive suburban husband; you’ve been trying to hang that one on me ever since we moved out here, and I’m damned if I’ll wear it’, Frank rages in an argument (Yates 1961:25). The book is more harrowing than the brightly shot film it became later starring Kate Winslet and

Leonardo DeCaprio. A later strain of revisionist fiction looked at suburbia past from the vantage point of the 1990s, for example Jeffrey Eugenides' suburban gothic *Virgin Suicides* (1994) and Rick Moody's *Ice Storm* (1994) – both set in affluent 1970s suburbs of New York and both made into films. The same fate befell Updike's earlier *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) with critics predictably panning the film for not living up to the book. Cunningham's (1998) ambitious *The Hours*, set in three time periods and locations focusing on three women in respectively (i) present-day Manhattan, (ii) late 1940s US suburbia and (iii) the suburb Richmond in Greater London also was subject of a film. In the story the overlaps between parallel plotlines only become clear at the book's close. For Nash (1963) the advantage of the suburban novelist over the sociologist as their vantage point allows them to make powerful statements '[u]nburdened by even vague claims to statistical representativeness'.

In his essay on celebrated US novelist John Updike, Tanner (1987:39) states that suburbia is a 'compromised environment' where nonetheless most Americans live with 'all their joys and fears within its ailing routines and numbing geometrics'. Such declining if not quite discarded traditions documented by Updike include marital fidelity and the Christian church. The social realism is underlined by brand names and description of the mundane details of the everyday. Middle-class suburban mores were examined in his best-known work, the 'Rabbit' books, four titles chronicling the life of basketball star turned used car salesman Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, a suburban Pennsylvanian, through the lifecycle from high school graduate to old age mirroring the vicissitudes of American life across the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s from *Rabbit, Run* (1960) to *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) where generation gap and marriage under pressure surface. Suburban routine is further unsettled in the *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) which is complimented by his final work *The Widows of Eastwick* published in the year of his death 2009. For Tanner (1987:55) Updike professes 'qualified, or intermittent, support for the suburban environment which has sometimes provoked the criticism of writers and critics who feel that the writer's repudiation of American society should be more total.' Newman (1988) sees continuities between the classic study into American suburban society *The Organization Man* by Whyte (1956) and the society described by Updike (1968) in his novel *Couples*. She describes the local town hall busybody committee structure (also the premise of *Rally Round the Flag Boys*, Shulman 1958) with its 'suburban ethos of acquiescent participation' that swallows people up (Newman 1988:28). Here 'no real issues are debated [only] schools, highways, sewer bonds and zoning by-laws'. It sounds like a petty and parochial bureaucratic nightmare rather than

the stuff of radical politics with the potential to achieve social change. One taboo that Updike was not averse to dealing with was suburban sex liberated from its pro-creational function by the contraceptive pill.

Sex and the suburbs

Predating the hugely successful 1990s series and film spin-offs *Sex and the City* were representations of sex and the suburbs, for example in Yates (1961). Updike often took upper- to middle-class suburban life and failing marriage with partners playing away as his focus. The shock value of his 1968 novel *Couples*, a work combining social commentary on the US suburbia of JFK, cocktail parties, Town Hall and PTA meetings with some graphic sex scenes was reinforced when he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine the same year with the caption 'The Adulterous Society'. The feature inside asserted 'The fact is that beneath this suburban idyll, Updike's couples are caught up in a black mass of community sex.' In his obituary the *Wall Street Journal* declared 'Mr. Updike spoke as the high priest of the sexual revolution, with all its concomitant adulteries and divorces.' His *USA Today* obituary included the observation: 'The idea that people think *Desperate Housewives* is new and edgy – it was all there' (Minzesheimer 2009). As Paul Barker (2009:63) reminds us 'It's undeniable that the quiet privacy of suburbia has always led to the assumption of mysterious temptations.' The recurring idea that what goes on behind closed doors is never all that it seems pervades throughout depictions of suburban sex in both the United Kingdom and United States.

Leslie Thomas's wifeswopping tale *Tropic of Ruislip* (1974) is more of a page-turner or potboiler rather than a work from the canon of great literature that makes English syllabi, but nonetheless the book made an entry into the *Guardian* list of '1000 novels everyone must read: the definitive list' (23 January 2009) under the 'comedy' category.³ It is set in the inbetween-land imaginary northwest London location Plummers Park, 'thirty miles from Central London, in the latitude of Ruislip, in the country but not of it. The fields seemed touchable and yet remote' (Thomas 1974:11).⁴ The book recounts that one can hear the rattle of the Metropolitan underground line, which terminates at Watford, its furthest outreach from central London making John Betjeman's 1973 BBC documentary *Metroland* an obvious reference point. A picture of promiscuity in a society dominated by pettiness and snobbery is painted where unfulfilled local newspaper hack Andrew Maiby supplements his frustration and onset of

middle age with an extramarital fling with a girl from the wrong side of the tracks: the council estate from down the hill. The two public/private housing developments are juxtaposed from the start. Plummers Park is a picture of respectability shielding sexual tension and frustration. Its monotonous inertia of car-polishing, G-plan furniture and golf clubs is broken up by the bit of rough in the nearby social housing with addresses reflecting municipal socialism such as 22 Morrison Way, Atlee Park. There is a clear division between these two discrete bounded territories despite their physical proximity to one another:

Beneath the station burrowed a pedestrian tunnel nervously joining Plummers Park to the council estate. To venture through it was to leave one country for another: on one side fuchsias, and on the other sheets of newspaper drifting in the street winds . . . Trouble was rare between the tenants on the one side of the railway and the residents of the other . . . people were not well enough acquainted to fight. They were merely strangers. (Thomas 1974:13)

There also seems to be ethnic as well as class segregation. At a house-party the arrival of a group of West Indians is initially greeted with hostilities, with guests remarking 'Invasion! Plummers Park is invaded! There's a whole lot of blackies coming up the road!' (Thomas 1974:107). The revellers gain entry and the party becomes 'two distinct ethnic groups at each end of the room . . . it was an uneasy armistice' (Thomas 1974:109). The book's political incorrectness is seen not only in its treatment of women returned to in Chapter 6 but in ethnic references such as the description of the Jewish pensioner Herbie Futter who collapses as a 'prostrate old Jew'. In a pub exchange the following depiction of the suburb as uncorrupted by foreign or noxious influences occurs (Thomas 1974:54):

'Plummers Park is very, very nice.'

'Very, very, nice,' nodded Andrew with exaggeration. 'Very, very nice. Heaven in Hertfordshire.' He recited

Bring your kids, bring your dogs,

We've fresh nice air, and we've got no wogs.

If the same geographical area were to be written of today it is likely that a good number of 'the monster council-housing development built to rehouse families from slum London' (Thomas 1974:12) would have been sold under the Thatcher governments right to buy legislation and inevitably a proportion of those would have turned into buy-to-let or sub-let properties. Remaining houses with social landlords might have gone into tenancies under the control of housing trusts or

other arms-length management organizations. In the 1970s *Plummers Park Men* the expectation was that men would play around in a 'boys will be boys' way. The character Geoffrey describes the reason why he left his wife as his realization of his impending sense of mortality (Thomas 1974:101):

[E]xcruciating boredom. Every day I used to get on the train to London and I'd be sitting there wondering what the hell I'd do to escape, and every day on the dot, that bloody great overcrowded cemetery at Kensal Green used to straggle past the window. I tried not to look at it but I still used to. Miles of it. Sometimes I could hear the sods laughing at me. So one day I met Cynthia and I ran off with her.

His adultery is explained by a desire to break free of the suburban rat race, although he settles in Plummers Park with Cynthia who becomes his second wife, replicating the suburban routine he wanted to unshackle himself from with a newer model. He later has an entanglement with the already-married Ena who becomes pregnant and proposes that they move to New Zealand. This bawdy romp has much in common with other cultural depictions of suburbia of the time including the series of films begun by *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* (1974) in which a peeping Tom character was more likely to end up in attractive female clients' beds than on the exterior side of their windows with bucket and mop.

The newness of the estate is apparent from the descriptions of its flat rooves and iconoclastic 'Flat-Roof Man'. It is also evidenced in the touting for congregation by the vicar Reverend Boon who is told by the nonchalant resident Polly Blossom-Smith that 'I don't know. They go back to the places they came from originally for such things as Christenings and weddings. I suppose they think things are more *established* there.' Thomas (1974:133). The words 'established' with original emphasis is a play on words of the church as remarked on by the vicar but this has gone un-noticed by Polly. It appears that these are a godless people who have not put down roots in their new community. When Herbie Futter, an elderly character is taken ill and medical aid is slow at coming forward, Gerry remarks in anger 'We're like a flaming outpost of Empire here' (Thomas 1974:214). Futter dies on the spot. It seems that the public services cannot cope as the old (monogamy, a job for life, community bonds) is giving way to the new (mobility, promiscuity, impatience) and Futter represents something of an anachronism in this. Upward mobility and suburban dynamism is discernable at the close of the book. We learn that an empty property has been bought by a young couple from the council house on the 'other side' of whom the character Audrey remarks 'It shows that as soon as they can afford it they hop across

the railway line as quick as they can. As long as they don't have washing hung everywhere it will be alright, I suppose' (Thomas 1974:256). At the close of the book it occurs in conversation that 'half the neighbourhood are moving south of the river [Thames]'. The advantage of chosen destinations Wimbledon and its environs are described as an antidote: 'It must be the attractions of Victoriana after Plimmers Park.' Here the classic idea of urban leapfrog is invoked. Traditionally this moving up and moving out phenomenon refers to city-to-suburb population displacement but we see an example of suburb-to-suburb in this instance. The revival of period property is anticipated here, realized in the gentrification of Victorian-built areas like Islington.

Tim Lott (undated) has often cited Updike as a key influence to the point that he has claimed that his novel *Rumours of a Hurricane* was fashioned an attempt to create an English Rabbit. In *The Love Secrets of Don Juan* the onset of middle age frames the suburban experience as anti-hero/chief protagonist advertising copywriter Danny 'Spike' Savage finds himself through divorce condemned to live further and further away from central London. Things begin in a bedsit in Acton and conclude with him settling a few streets away from his original family home in Hanwell although his parents by then have moved to Watford, like himself they are suburbanizing further and further out as the story progresses. Spike muses 'Here on the westernmost drift of central London, the dull double-glazed terraces face out towards the lush suburbia of Chiswick and Ealing. I used to live in Hammersmith, and before that Shepherd's Bush, so I'm gradually being edged outwards, by some impersonal historical source' (Lott 2004:3). As he traces the anatomy of his marriage collapse through past failed relations he describes how with his first live-in girlfriend in his twenties 'Helen and I were in that suburb of hell that is a failing dependent relationship' (ibid. 2003:170). Suburban realities for Spike include parenthood. His desire to be a lothario is curbed by the reality of a 6-year-old daughter who spends alternate weekends with him, usually having to be prised away from her mother to do so. There are some deftly aimed sidewipes at the perceived tacky tastelessness of suburbanites. A nightmarish incident is described on a rainy day at noisy fit-to-bursting a suburban softplay centre he takes her to, a 'Heath Robinson in Hell array of contraptions' (p. 149). Seated at the side of the play apparatus, he has to endure an ill-tempered couple trading insults and effing and blinding at each other before foraging for reading material which he has neglected to bring (p. 149): 'There are a few abandoned newspapers and magazines in the rubbish bin. It seems that the *Economist* and *New Yorker* are not much in demand, but the *Sunday Sport*, most of the red top tabloids

and variations on *Hello!, Ok! And Chat* enjoy an enthusiastic following.’ Then Poppy, his daughter, becomes trapped. It is only when Spike begins bellowing and cursing at the top of his voice in this huge, crowded space with no staff to assist that he seems to make any impression and attendants appear: ‘This seems to penetrate the indeterminate padding that passes for brains in this postcode’ (153). The afternoon ends with a visit to his parents further up the A40 Western Avenue in Yiewsley when he realizes he has left his filfofax (nowadays this would be a smart phone) in the mêlée and thus has no wallet to treat Poppy to McDonalds. The visit home sees him becoming infantilized with his father shouting to him to go to his room.

From Orwell (1936/2000:51) in world weary prose describing how the put-upon suburban husband needs to make do with a ‘spot of licit sexual intercourse if his wife feels “in the mood”’, descriptions of sex seem to have got ever more graphic in recent suburban novels. In the thoroughly twenty-first-century tale *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen events including the migration of the early 1990s Berglund family from Sweden and the rape of Patty as a teenager are flashed back into the unfolding of the marriage between Patty and Walter Berglund. Various infidelities and sexual encounters are described, including lengthy accounts of masturbation in the middle section dealing with son Joey’s college years. Franzen sealed his status as a chronicler of American suburban life when he penned the introduction to the 2008 reissue of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and made the cover of *Time* magazine in a rarity being the first novelist for ten years and one of only a handful at all including Updike in 1968 and 1982 and Orwell long after his death in 1983. The caption claimed that this was a great American novelist writing about the way we live today. Not shying away from sex scenes is another parallel that can be drawn between Franzen and Updike. In a review of the 1970s-set *The Witches of Eastwick* Baym (1984:165) complains that this tale of suburban occultism and sorcery is ‘deadened by Updike’s joyless pornography’. Indeed there are references to sexual organs almost from the book’s start as seen in the description of choosing tomatoes in a kitchen suburban setting for the evening’s dinner: ‘Picking up the watery orange-red orbs, Alexandra felt that she was cupping a giant lover’s testicles in her hand’ (Updike 1984:6). When a mysterious dark newcomer appears on the block extra excitement is injected into the three witches lives and the shared experience of ‘the sorority of pain that went with being the dark man’s lover’ (Updike 1984:208–9). Illustrating the crossover between the different cultural products that inform this book, the novel was later by common consensus turned into a near-sacreligious film starring Jack Nicolson in 1987, then a Broadway musical.

By the time of its follow up *The Widows of Eastwick* set in post-9/11 times old-aged sexlessness is a running theme of it as the all newly widowed trio of central characters who had 30 years earlier ‘practiced a half-baked suburban variety of witchcraft’ (p. 16) are aged around the 70 mark. Alexandra (Updike 2009:46) remarks when the three are reunited ‘Just thinking about those days – aren’t you glad all that’s behind us? Sex, and all that lost sleep, all that hard hearted scheming that went with it.’ At a later point she observes watching teenagers outside a chain Ben and Jerry’s ice-cream parlour that had been a parade of independent traders (ibid. 2009:235): ‘Eastwick’s children, flaunting their growing power, ignoring the old woman sitting in a parked car, vying for attention with their peers, with female shrieks and boyish jokes, testing freedom’s limits . . . *Little do they know*, Alexandra thought, *what lies ahead for them*: Sex, entrapment, weariness, death.’ Other descriptions are offered of the ladies’ callouses, arthritic conditions and other physical tics, for example Alexandra looking at her hands which ‘resembled two fat lizards’ (p. 265). Even Sukie wearily states of the daily suburban assault course that amounts to life (p. 232): ‘[T]hese milestones. Weddings and funerals. Graduations and divorces. Endings. Ceremonies get us through. They’re like blindfolds for people being shot by a firing squad.’ The three’s children are also in middle age: on second marriages, balding, etc. They return to literally rehaunt their old haunt Eastwick and like George Bowling are shocked to see how it has become taken over by commercialization/corporate chains, for example a sports bar replacing their old watering hole the Bronze Barrel. The diner they used to hang out in too is in the process of a takeover. Sukie adds writes to Alexandra with no apparent irony that there is some mitigation ‘Dunkin Donuts has promised to preserve some of its historical features in their renovation.’ Their old powers are failing them just as the landmarks they once knew and objects of their earlier extramarital affairs have been wiped out or are rendered unrecognizable in a changing world. A one-time young virile beau of Sukie has had an arm mutilated in an industrial accident, has become shrivelled and is dependent on his wife. The Italian plumber who would come round at the drop of a hat to unblock a drain or perform other services has died, compelling anyone wanting to get their drains unblocked to ring an impersonal national call-centre. The local amateur orchestra-conductor has also met his maker, recounted with a dash of casual anti-suburban snobbery: ‘Poor Ray, trying to bring culture to this backwater where all people cared about was games and the tax rates and the cod catch’ (p. 147). A suburban séance goes fatally amiss. Sex is largely talked of in the past tense. Alexandra comments how she does not miss it, much in the same way as her admission ‘I think my magic’s about used up. Just the thought

of casting a spell nauseates me.' The same applies to many aspects of Eastwick. It is a realization that the wild abandon of the seventies of both Eastwick and Plummers Park had to give way in the end, buckling under the weight of AIDS and more importantly old age. We only get a sex scene towards the end where in a twist Sukie takes up with the bi-sexual Christopher who was a boy when they left and now is an actor leading him to make the remark that most sex was acting anyway (Updike 2009:296).

Macabre suburbia

Despite its supposed ordinariness suburbia has often been constructed as the sort of place where out-of-the-ordinary events occur in novels. The immediately post-war American suburb was even seen as a safe haven to escape to in the event of a nuclear attack, which against the backdrop of the cold war was painted by politicians as potentially imminent literally engendering a 'bunker' mentality – seen literally in the 2009 film of Christopher Isherwood's 1964 set *A Single Man* where the man character George's neighbours are building bomb shelters. Alienation and mental illness were themes of Jeffrey Eugenides' suburban gothic *Virgin Suicides* (1994) and numerous works by J. G. Ballard who once wrote 'The suburbanization of the soul has overrun our planet like the plague' quoted by Humes (2003). Crime in suburbia was seen in Nigel Williams UK novel *The Wimbledon Poisoner* in which the idea of the suburban busybody resurfaced a century after Pooter in the neighbour-characters of Maple Drive SW19 including Mr and Mrs Is-the-Mitsubishi-Scratched-Yet, the Nazi Who Escaped Justice at Nuremberg at number 42 and 'Dave Sprott, the northern dentist at 102, whose carefully preserved northern accent had always seemed . . . a way of criticizing the London suburb in which he found himself' (1990:108–9). In Ballard's *Running Wild* (1998:83) the children of the newbuild idyllic mock tudor modern suburban Pangbourne Village are the culprits of their parents' murders. The suffocation of their environment is given as the reason for being 'trapped within an endless round of praiseworthy activities . . . far from hating their parents when they killed them, the Pangbourne children probably saw them as nothing more than the last bars before they could reach out to the light' (Ballard 1998:83). The unhappiness of the Lisbon sisters is the cause of the string of five deaths in *The Virgin Suicides* in Grosse Pointe, an upscale suburb of Detroit. The story is seen through the eyes of the local boys who are in awe of the girls. There are clues to the environment 'They drove past the Little club, the Yacht Club, the Hunt Club' (Eugenides 1994:139).

Like the coverage of the Pangbourne murders on *Newsnight* the Lisbon murders become national news, worrying the authorities with its adverse publicity and other bodies, for example 'While the suicides lasted, and for sometime after, the Chamber of Commerce worried less about the influx of black shoppers and more about the outflux of whites' (Eugenides 1994:99). Gershuny (2005) has argued that busyness is a badge of honour in modern life and the impression from these titles seems that suburbia is a pressured environment in many ways. Even for Poppy the 6-year-old daughter of soon-to-be-divorced Danny Savage in *The Love Secrets of Don Juan* (Lott 2004:148) of whom we are told 'She's bored by books. She's bored by the theatre. She's bored by vegetables. She's bored by violin lessons. She's bored by the whole white middle-class fantasy. She likes to watch tv and eat crap.' The children of suburbia seem to rebel against the cloying safe confines of their suburban upbringings which may also explain the process of inner-city gentrification.

The late science fiction author J. G. Ballard's literary mark is evidenced by the inclusion since 2005 of 'Ballardian' in *The Collins English Dictionary* (Baxter 2008) referring to 'dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments'. Suburbia was present both in Ballard's lived reality but was also a theme across his books, for example *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), which begins with a stolen aircraft crashing in Shepperton (where the author lived) and features a narrator who cannot ever leave the suburbs, or *Running Wild* set in upscale gated community suburbia and Ballard's final novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006) about mega-shopping mall the Brooklands centre, 'a self-contained universe of treasure and promise' (2006:218). Early on in the book the chilling barren territory is described (p. 6): 'Warning displays alerted each other, and the entire landscape was coded for danger. CCTV cameras crouched over warehouse gates, and filter-left signs pulsed tirelessly, pointing to the sanctuaries of science parks.' The futuristic exurban suburbia as described also feels like a hollow, burnt-out carcass of its former self. Ballard (1997) has called his longtime base of Shepperton, Middlesex off the M4 motorway as 'a suburb not of London but of London Airport. The catchment area of Heathrow extends for at least 10 miles to its south and west, a zone of motorway intersections, dual carriageways, science parks, marinas and industrial estates, watched by police CCTV speed-check cameras, a landscape which most people affect to loathe but which I regard as the most advanced and admirable in the British Isles, and paradigm of the best that the future offers us'. This sounds a lot like Brooklands described thus by the character Maxted⁵ (p. 101): 'This isn't a suburb of London,

it's a suburb of Heathrow and the M25. People in Hampstead and Holland Park look down from the motorway as they speed home from their west-country cottages. They see faceless inter-urban sprawl, a nightmare terrain of police cameras and security dogs, an uncentred realm devoid of civic tradition and human values.' Fascism, violence and consumerism all concepts coalesce with each other in a populist amalgam of demagogery. Shopping is described as a religion: the Brooklands centre's media relations manager quips (p. 60): 'It's like going to church. And here you can go every day and you get something to take home.' This sounds extreme but then the suburbs as described in the book are not merely sleepy and unremarkable but hold pent-up frustration and violence.

The science fiction of the 1950s onwards has many common features with this prescription but many of the extra-terrestrial landscapes woven in stereotypical examples are unrecognizable to the average reader. By contrast Ballard takes the quotidian shopping mall exaggerating its negative features making mundane, unremarkable surroundings threatening. Instead of aliens alienation is the key theme. The nightmarish scenario includes violence perpetrated by men dressed in St George's cross clothing despite the ever-present uninformed security staff and CCTV. The brass band in the shopping centre sinisterly plays 'All Hail to the Chief'. Casual racism flares up towards 'Asians, Kosovans, Bosnians' (p. 58) among others. At one point the first person narrator Richard Pearson distinguishes between different racisms, for example '[N]ot in the bully-boy way of the street thugs who had driven the imam from the suburban mosque, but in the more cerebral style of the lawyers, doctors and architects who had enlisted in Hitler's elite corps' (p. 56). The Brooklands centre even has its own cable television channel which commands greater ratings than BBC2 with a messiah-like host who Pearson remarks is 'The Oswald Mosley of the suburbs' (p. 100). Again he has in his own words argued that the capital city has become antiquated by comparison with the modernity of suburbia: 'By comparison with London Airport, London itself seems hopelessly antiquated. Its hundreds of miles of gentrified stucco are an aching hangover from the nineteenth century that should have been bulldozed decades ago.' Such words are almost heretical in an age where period property is revered by people who celebrate past architecture but perforce inhabit modernity: two processes brought together in gentrification. Although H. G. Wells' later works of science fiction are more often about time travel and alien beings in his early novel *The New Machiavelli* (1911:45) he describes the advance of suburbia in Bromstead as 'a new order . . . a multitude of incoordinated fresh starts, each more sweeping and destructive than the last,

and none of them ever really worked out to a satisfactory completion . . . It was a sort of progress that had bolted; it was change out of hand, and going at an unprecedented pace nowhere in particular.' This foreshadows the fictitious Brooklands: is a world of modernism, technology and progress tempered with anxiety, doubts and fear.

Suburbia literally served as a backdrop to Ballard's own creative processes. Ballard insisted that interviewers come to his eccentric suburban lair. Billen (1994), for example noted 'Perhaps the best thing about visiting J. G. Ballard is getting a chance to marvel at his house, a peeling semi-detached in Shepperton [which] . . . makes no concessions to celebrity, fashion, cleanliness, the money he made . . . or, indeed, anything else.' Noting a clear mismatch between theory and practice, Campbell (2008) commented that the experience was tantamount to 'stepping through the looking glass . . . Ballard's electrical fixtures would interest the curator of the Design Museum. On a cold day, the rooms are warmed by small heaters positioned in the middle of the floor. The sleek stylist of western consumerism never got round to installing central heating.' Ballard has claimed in an interview that he always equated suburbia with new designs for life and the future, which is striking given the recurrent analyses of suburbia as anti-modernist. Indeed much popular cultural imagery at the time that Ballard began his career was often steeped in the past, for example bodice and top hat/bow tie cinema and the literary form of the novel which was frequently historical and/or nostalgic. In the interview he has explicitly repudiated the play *Look Back in Anger*: 'With all due respect to Kingsley Amis and others, I didn't feel that the angry young men were responding to what was really important about society. The same goes for John Osborne's plays. The laying down of the M1 was much more important than anything Jimmy Porter's in father-in-law thought about this or that . . . I thought: here is a fiction for the present day. I wasn't interested in the far future, spaceships and all that. Forget it. I was interested in the evolving world, the world of hidden persuaders, of the communications landscape developing, of mass tourism, of the vast conformist suburbs dominated by television – that was a form of science fiction, and it was already here' (Campbell 2008). This continues the futuristic impulses attributed to suburbia by H. G. Wells, at the turn of the twentieth century, another visionary who had suburban origins. In *Running Wild* (1988), a high-end housing estate built as a neo-suburban gated community 30 miles from London with ever-present CCTV witnesses a series of murders conducted simultaneously in macabre circumstances: one resident is crushed by the wheels of her own car and another at her exercise cycle for example. Among initial police theories are that the perpetrators were people

from northern England exacting revenge at southern Thatcherite prosperity – a reminder of the ‘North–South divide’ much talked of at the time. This is ruled out when a more sinister explanation unfolds.

Detractors of suburbia have been in existence since the concept came into being. In opposition to these familiar criticisms of the urban intelligensia there is almost a superiority inherent in the suburban-inflected Ballardian worldview towards the metropolis with the dwindling significance of the city that unfolded over a series of short stories and novels, for example *The Concentration City* (1957), *Chronopolis* (1960), *Million Sands* (1973) and *Crash* (1973).⁶ The position is stated clearly in *Kingdom Come* (Ballard 2006:101): ‘People in London can’t grasp that this is the real England. Parliament, the West End, Bloomsbury, Notting Hill, Hampstead – they’re heritage London, held together by a dinner party culture. Here, around the M25 is where it’s really happening.’ In the book the community described rather than being organic is peopled with actors within wider schemes and systems. The landscape of Brooklands, a public–private space, is not a green and pleasant land but beneath an eerily efficient superficial surface lies a dysfunctional suburban wasteland. Belief in god, family and morality appear to have been suspended with every man (most characters are masculine) for himself. The only loyalty people seem to have is to the cult of the centre: when it is under siege towards the end of the book there is still ‘a hard core of supporters who had forsaken everything, their homes and families, their jobs and cars and loft extensions to defend the Metro-centre’ (p. 232). The centre has become a substitute for community. David Cruise, the public face of the complex echoes Mrs Thatcher when telling a group of housewives in a televised gathering “community” . . . That’s a word I hate. It’s the kind of word used by snobby-upper-class folk who want to put ordinary people in their place. Community means living in a little box, driving a little car, going on little holidays, obeying what “they” tell you to obey . . . For me, the only real community is the one we’ve built here at the Metro-centre. That’s what I believe in’ (p. 176). This seems to echo early detractors of suburbia such as Whyte whose arguments were outlined in the previous chapter. There are also echoes of Thatcher’s famous utterance ‘there is no such thing as society’. It seems to be no accident that the building is topped with a dome, sealing its neo-religious significance. In *Milleneum People* (Ballard 2004) it is middle-class revolt at service charges and parking restrictions that lead to rebellion and terrorist incidents. At one point a video rental store in suburban Twickenham is blown up and at another it is the National Theatre.

Not all suburban fiction is held in high regard by the literary world. The self-described ‘far fetched fiction’ of Robert Rankin fits between fantasy and sci-fi for

its absurdist plots that are low on realism. The suburban landscape of the Brentford trilogy encompasses the Flying Swan public house, golfing, the allotment and 'the council' in titles including *East of Ealing* (1984), *The Sprouts of Wrath* (1988) after Steinbeck, *The Witches of Chiswick* after Updike (1984) and *The Brentford Chainstore Massacre* (1997) alluding to the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* film directed by Kaufman (1974) about Millennium celebrations. Literary allusion via punning titles continue in Rankin's other titles outside the trilogy – a series with far in excess of three titles, spanning to nine at last count up to *Retromancer* (2009) after William Gibson's *Neuromancer* set in Brentford circa 1967 and during the Blitz. *The Witches of Chiswick* (2003) is clearly derivative of Updike. Again like Leslie Thomas or R. F. Delderfield or the suburban strain of chick-lit that has included *The Rise and Fall of the Queen of Suburbia* by Sarah May or the *The School Run* by Sophie King, Rankin is unlikely to be considered literature yet his loyal fanbase extends to the Order of the Golden Sprout Fan Club who have a website and regular gatherings. The books are cultish in their dogged following but mainstream as they command consistent sales figures. They do not fulfil the 'critical acclaim' marker as they are the type of books that literary critics would not trouble themselves with yet they represent an important current of suburban writing. *The Sprouts of Wrath* (Rankin 1988) for its plot based around seeking a Brentford Olympiad complete with futuristic stadium can be seen as prescient and not so far fetched in 2012 as it may have seemed in 1988. The editor of the *Brentford Mercury* (Rankin 1988:48) thanks god for getting a break from the usual predictable suburban news-cycle of mundanity and greets the news with the sentiment 'Twenty years in this game. Twenty long years of flower shows and boy scout jamborees and now. . .'. He has finally hit on the big one in terms of career-scoops whereas by the time of the *Widows of Eastwick* (Updike 2009) the local paper Sukie used to write on has gone out of print, crushed by the weight of blogs – familiar fate of the local press in the United Kingdom today, matched by falling circulations of national newspapers.

Conclusion: Suburbia in the post-millennial age and continuities with the past

The chronicling of suburbia in fiction continues in post-millennial and post-9/11 novel which also includes Richard Ford's Bascombe books (Knapp 2011). Examples used in this chapter such as Updike (2009) and Franzen (2010) commonly contain wry barbs about the direction of modern US suburbia into

exoburb territory and references to contemporaneous popular culture. The three widows who become two are all acutely aware of their own mortality. After her insistence at being an old lady Alexandra's 8-year-old grandson tells her matter-of-factly (p. 271) 'Life sucks, and then you die. Kurt Cobain wasn't afraid to die. He wanted to do it. It's no big deal, the way they do it now. These bombers in Iraq, they commit suicide all the time.' Others who make appearances in conversation are Bush and Mubarak. It appears that the trio are somewhat baffled by modern mores and innovation such as the word 'partner' and the trackball mouse function of the contemporary laptop. On attempting to reach the Goddess and cast a spell Jane jests 'Doesn't she have a cell-phone yet?' (p. 200).

Franzen describes suburbia's reverse process of gentrification at the start of the book with the young pioneering Berglund couple buying and renovating an inexpensive yet spacious, ramshackle Victorian in a rundown part of Minnesota with Patty rejecting her own bourgeois upbringing in the upscale New York suburban hinterlands. Multiple moral dilemmas present themselves including trust/betrayal throughout. In the early part of the book we are presented with the need of the teenage Patty's parents to placate eminent local Democrat party dignitaries after her rape by their son. When Patty complains to husband Walter how she hates her family he cheerfully rejoinders (Franzen 2010:124): 'We'll make our own family!' Needless to say this is not all straightforward. The marriage experiences many pressures: their rebellious son Joey leaves home to move in with the white trash girlfriend next door while still at school before becoming a Republican think-tank apparatchik in contravention of his parent's liberal upbringing and Democrat heritage. The temptation of Walter's best friend from college who was also Patty's college crush resurfaces. Latterly there is the environmental activism versus corporate interests conundrum that the bicycling Walter must wrestle with and depression too features heavily. Such issues intersect: the personal is political to quote the old phrase. All three components of the post-war popular-youth cultural trilogy of sex, drugs and rock and roll emerge as the characters age over several decades before after several *rebondissements* the central couple come full circle again as moving back to New York city after selling their land to make an exclusive suburban housing development, the reassuringly derivatively named Canterbridge Estates for which virgin land has been bulldozed.

Inter-textual references are common in suburban novel: sometimes recurring as motifs such as *Madame Bovary* (returned to in Chapter 6) or *the Hours* constructed around the novel *Mrs Dalloway* in which writing, reading and literary promotion are all central. General pop culture also abounds. In

Little Children house-husband Todd plays his 3 years old nursery rhyme CDs but we are reminded that once he was an avid grunge-fan. Tim Lott's (2004) creation of the soon-to-be divorced dad Danny tries to get his 6 years old to sing the Sex Pistols but 'Anarchy in the United Kingdom' sounds all wrong delivered in his daughter's angelic, mellifluous tones. In some ways in these post-millennial sagas some of these details already feel dated demonstrating how fast technology moves. The advent of cellphones and email is present in Tom Perrota's *Little Children* (2004) but the adulterous Todd and his wife share one between them making the conduct of extramarital affairs troublesome – something fairly unimaginable now. In Updike's (2009) *Widows of Eastwick* again cell phones have been normalized but the smartphone has not arrived. In the latter sections of *Freedom* (Franzen 2010) blackberrys are with us but perhaps now it should be the tablet, android or iphone. At one point the contrast is made between Walter's concern for the preservation of bird species and the modern nature of communications technology which operates at a largely surface level. 'There was plenty of tweeting on twitter, but the chirping and fluttering world of nature . . . was one anxiety too many' we are told (Franzen 2010:546) although Facebook appears not to be as embedded into the characters' lives as it is now becoming. In the story part of the rift between Patty and Joey who once enjoyed a close mother-son relationship is her disapproval for his liking of the suburban sitcom *Married . . . with Children* and edgy rap star Tupac Shakur, hence cultural references are deployed to signify generation gap.

This chapter has been about changing contours of suburban representation in popular literature. Many features unite the titles discussed. Both the two Avenue novels of Delderfield and *Freedom* offer the reader epic multigenerational family drama but while the former is somewhat puritanical in some respects the latter was unbridled in description of sex enough to be recipient of a nomination for the 2010 Bad Sex in Literature Award for his, alongside such distinguished company Tony Blair for a passage in his memoirs (Freeman 2010). Even those written subsequently but set in the past where hindsight has coloured our understanding of the era which they describe can be seen as a way of understanding their respective historical period and appreciating commonalities. One can see distinct similarities between the pen portraits of J. G. Ballard (2006:165):

Dual carriage-ways and used car-lots. Nothing to look forward to except new patio doors and a trip to Homebase. All the promise of life delivered to door in a flat pack.

Or the observation of Orwell's (1939/75:214) George Bowling of Lower Binfield: 'It had merely been swallowed. . . .' The same sentiment can be discerned in H. G. Wells' (1911:46) description of Bromstead as

a dull useless boiling up of human activities, an immense clustering of futilities. . . [where] pretenious villas jostle slums, and public-house and tin tabernacle glower at one another across the cat-haunted lot that intervenes.

Or even the lament of the witch Jane (Updike 2009:139)

I remember Eastwick as a fun hick place. . . but it's gotten homogenized – the curbs downtown all fancy granite, and the Old Stone Bank twice the size it was, like some big bland cancer gobbling up everything.

Certain themes of the great suburban novel or simply suburban reading matter are enduring including descriptions of sex which have become ever more daring. In 2012 when the runaway hit novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* overtook Harry Potter to be the fastest selling paperback of all time, a filmed CBS newsreport announced 'It's sweeping through suburban bedrooms like wildfire' and labelled it as a 'marriage-saver' for its detailing of submissive sado-masochist sexual acts in its story of seduction and lost innocence.⁷ This sits alongside many other factors such as the descriptions of suburban interiors. In the 1970s Britain this meant polishing G-plan furniture from Leslie Thomas (1974) or Kureishi (1990:51) via Karim describing 'The things people in Chiselhurst would exchange their legs for: velvet curtains, stereos, Martinis, electric lawnmowers, double-glazing.' We often feel that we have inhabited these spaces before, be it in a real or imagined sense. In the contemporary US suburb Eastwick at Macy's place the exterior resembles 'a stranded-looking leftover from the Levittown era' (Updike 2009:156) while inside '[t]he living room bespoke a gauche prosperity' (p. 157) in which oversized leather armchairs and an unfeasibly large flatscreen television dominate. When Joey in *Freedom* visits the upscale home of his college room-mate in Virginia we are told (Franzen 2010:261): 'Despite having grown up in a home he'd considered book-filled and tasteful, Joey was staggered by the quantity of hardcover books and the obviously top quality of the multicultural swag that Jonathan's father had collected during distinguished foreign residencies.' He is described as floating through the beautiful rooms as if on helium. Artefacts and furniture gathered from overseas heritage rather than simply work attachments/holiday trips around the world or religious significance, for example Islamic wall hangings

of the *kaaba* at Mecca or Jewish *menorah* candleholders might just as easily be found in the suburban homes of today. It is narrow-minded and blinkered to reduce the diversity of the contemporary suburb to a space populated by one-dimensional characters who are backward in cultural taste. Nash (1963:35) writes that the characters of Max Shulman 'are not so fixed as casual reading of much popular sociology of suburbia would suggest' citing their ability to experience love as evidence that makes them more than mere automatons or victims of their environment.

The main examples discussed in this chapter are all of fairly classic status: Weedon and Grossmith began the trend towards the suburban novel with the daily life chronicles of Pooter first in *Punch* columns but then collected in book-form. The form has sustained through Orwell's critical reflections, Delderfield's historical sweep of documentary through to post-apocalyptic science fiction have sustained the suburban tendency in fiction. However new examples add themselves continually to the list of fictitious works representing the lived realities of suburbia. If we are looking for suburban happy endings they are not always present but often things seem to come to full circle. Bowling in *Coming Up for Air* ends up crushed. Following his return from the trip down memory lane signifying 'loss, disillusionment, disenchantment' (Williams 1971:49) he has no will or energy to explain to his livid wife Hilda that he hasn't been with another woman in his lost week away because the truth is even less credible to her. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* ends with one-time penniless rebel Gordon Comstock having taken a regular job and about to marry his on-off girlfriend with the couple now expecting a baby. As responsibility beckons he undergoes a realization that suburban mores have much to recommend them and the aspidistra plant that has been a constant of all his suburban-rented lodgings is not such a symbol of all that is bad with the world after all. Williams (1971:39) remarks 'most of Orwell's important writing is about someone who tries to get away and fails. That failure, that reabsorption happens, in the end . . . though of course the experience of awareness, rejection, and flight made its important mark.' It is again a submission to conformity but the self-loathing anti-hero of both of these novels anticipates the angry young men novels of the 1960s that followed them, predating and yet prefiguring the kitchen sink drama that Orwell never lived to see but would probably have approved of. In *Freedom* (Franzen 2010) the Berglunds begin by gentrifying their first area of residence and effectively suburbanizing it. Their marriage emerges renewed at the end despite the tribulations it undergoes. Our faith in the American suburban way of life is intact indicating essential conservatism.

This chapter has looked at books about the suburbs and set in them rather than enjoyed by readers there. The latter could have included Dan Brown's historical fiction, the Harry Potter novels, the Mills and Boon franchise of romantic fiction that has been long been popular among a suburban readership and more recently the escapism of the bondage book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The suburban novel uses a range of devices and flourishes, for example the letter in *Widows* (Updike 2009), or multiple voices and perspectives in a non-linear narrative where all stories join up at the end (Cunningham 1998; Franzen 2010) or even a story partially told in a journal completed at the insistence of a character's therapist which itself changes events (Franzen 2010). Suburban motifs are long-running in fiction, for example, 'the sinister suburb' is a trope running through the work of Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins dating from his novel *Basil* (1852) onwards. The number of books named in this chapter that have been converted into film or television adaptation is testimony to their potency ranging from the screwball suburban comedy of *Rally Round the Flag, Boys* to the melancholia of suburban alienation in say *Revolutionary Road*, *Little Children* and *Virgin Suicides*. Also powerful is the sense of suburbia's detachedness from the thrusting city but umbilical connection to it. Leslie Thomas' in between status of Plummers Park is also echoed in a letter Sukie writes to Alexandra in which she confesses 'The thing about all these suburbs is that having such a big city, *The big city* as far as the US is concerned [New York]', keeps us on our toes and at the same time is rather demoralizing because we don't *quite* live there, we just live in its aura, so to speak' (Updike 2009:73). We do need more nuanced readings of suburbia than some of these well-known examples have offered. As Delderfield attempted to show by celebrating it some decades ago, suburbia is not simply a trap for its inhabitants as has often been suggested. Despite abundant hype about new forms of popular culture suburban fiction is an old form which has long expressed cultures of suburbia spanning hopes, dreams and anxieties which looks set to continue. The formats may change with the e-book and kindle complimenting hardbacks and paperbacks and purchasing options shifting from bookstore to websites capable of recommending what others with your profile purchased but as this chapter has many of the same debates around class, culture and context remain the same while suburbia is subject to continual renewal.

Notes

- 1 See J. Wilde (2007), *The Guardian*, arts blog 23 April, 'I hope Diary Of A Nobody is in safe hands', at: www.guardian.co.uk/culture/tvandradioblog/2007/apr/23/ihop

ediaryofanobodyisin?INTCMP=SRCH and L. Gardner (2011) 'Diary of a Nobody: Review', *The Guardian*, 15 March, at: www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/mar/15/diary-of-a-nobody-review?INTCMP=SRCH.

- 2 www.cartoons.ac.uk/artists/sidney-conradstrube/biography.
- 3 www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jan/23/bestbooks-fiction.
- 4 Plummers Park is believed to be based on Carpenders Park, Watford, Hertfordshire. This remains an open secret to the point that estate agents for the area acknowledge this notoriety in present-day advertising for houses, for example: a December 2010 advert for a £330,000 bungalow includes the words 'the area gained some notoriety as Plummers Park, the setting for Leslie Thomas' *Tropic of Ruislip*' www.fairfieldestates.co.uk/Property-For-Sale-St-Georges-Drive-Carpenders-Park-Watford-PI-755.htm.
- 5 Maxted is also a character in the best-selling part-fictionalized autobiography *Empire of the Sun* (1984) about his formative years in Shanghai.
- 6 For full details, see 'J. G. Ballard – Summary Bibliography', at: www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?259.
- 7 <http://newyork.cbslocal.com/video/6792758-fifty-shades-of-grey/>.