

The Literary London Journal

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Ged Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith*, hardback, 239 pages, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN 978-1-137-34245-4; £55.00.

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The Literary London Journal, Volume 13 Number 1 (Spring 2016)

Ged Pope's study, *Reading London's Suburbs*, contains some highly original and close readings of a range of texts and contexts from the late eighteenth century to the present. Pope ably traces changes in the material conditions, lived experiences and cultural representations of suburbs, as they went from being 'a negative debased space containing deviant elements unhappily *expelled* from a broadly assimilative core', to 'potential welcome space for expansive elements actively *escaping* a threatening core urban milieu' (23). To tell this story Pope enlists some usual suspects—Dickens, the Grossmiths, Wells and Orwell—as well as some unusual ones (Conan Doyle, for example). This chronological breadth affords insight into particular periods, as when Pope discusses slums as 'the dark shadow of Victorian suburbanism' (31), and particular genres in those periods, as in the account of nineteenth-century suburb-set ghost stories. Similarly, Pope elegantly explores how the 'hapless' suburban clerks populating texts like *The Diary of a Nobody* (1888) are not in fact "'no-thing'...lacking any real substance', but are actually 'plagued by "thingness", that is by a materiality gone wrong' (74). These kinds of refreshingly developmental or counterintuitive analyses recur, as when Pope discusses post-war migrant writers' experiences of London's suburbs as 'doubly estranging' (143). And all these analyses are underpinned by Pope's articulation of what he perceives to be a key paradox: the disconnect between what policy-makers, commentators and philosophers alike mean the suburbs to be and what writers of fiction present them as being. As Pope puts it: 'the suburb, ideally, can be managed: it can be comfortable and knowable.... Yet ... most urban fiction tends to repeat one key theme: the problem of knowledge in the

suburb' (5). In short, suburban fiction 'foregrounds anxious epistemic dilemmas' (5). Making this 'one key theme' *his* theme allows Pope to sketch the bigger picture of what is at stake in this study: 'suburban fiction ... enacts a key struggle of cultural modernity—*how the individual struggles to make any lived place meaningful and habitable*' (10). Addressing this issue allows Pope to 'avoid the deadlocks and sterile thinking that tends to divide suburban-set fiction into positive or negative camps' (13). In turn, this means Pope also laudably avoids what he notes John Carey observed in the work of modernist writers in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992); that is the tendency to reduce suburb-dwellers to empty, contemptible creatures, rather than recognising and appreciating the significance of their lives and communities. With justification, then, the suburbs emerge here as a moving target, significant but hard to pin down, materially and epistemologically, even or especially when opposed to or discriminated from 'city' and 'country'.

However, despite this study's evident detail and strengths, some key questions remain underexplored, a concern that might have been alleviated with a clearer statement of aims nearer the start. Notwithstanding the text's focus and argument, is there something specific and special about the way prose fiction engages with the 'epistemic dilemmas' of suburbia, as opposed to the ways any other cultural form does or might? At times the specific valency of prose fiction comes into view: informed by Homi Bhabha, Pope evinces how Zadie Smith's representations of 'what it might mean to be suburban today' occurs 'at the level of narration itself' (169). But this attention to the particular devices, functions and effects specific to narrative fiction might have been more consistent or more clearly validated; either that, or the study's focus could have been more inclusive by looking beyond such fiction. In other words, it might have helped to either explain more explicitly why prose fiction is uniquely placed to explore suburbia, or consider it alongside other forms of representation more rigorously if it isn't. Pope's opening paragraph cites Peter Brooks's comments on the value of 'fictions' to our humanising of a hostile world; but Pope, again citing Brooks, then implies that such fictions need not be articulated solely in prose, and refers to what is done by 'The art work, the "poem" ... Cultural work, literature' (1). Pope does helpfully, if briefly, consider other forms of 'cultural work' in this study, challenging assumptions about Stevie Smith and her 'suburban' poetry in fascinating ways (93). There is similarly short but valuable coverage of 'pop culture and youth pop cultures' (150), including TV sitcoms, Mike Leigh's play *Abigail's Party* (1977) and popular music (though this is largely, if justifiably, mediated through a discussion of Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*). Pope even goes so far as to say the way 'pop seeks to make sense of the city from the suburb' is an 'important reversal of the dominant perspectival mode of suburb viewed from city' (150), which is a fascinating point worth making more of. There is an ambition here, then, to reach beyond suburban fiction, but the execution does not always match that ambition. For example, the book is prefaced, punctuated and tailed with a tantalising series of photographs by Salim Hafejee of what we can assume are doors, houses and streets in London's suburbs, forming a kind of visual essay complementing the text. Yet it would seem these images are not referred to in the text, despite fleeting commentary on someone else's curation of photographs, in the form of Martin Parr's 1999 collection of images *Boring Postcard* (131–2). If Hafejee's images are meant to pose

an 'epistemic dilemma' as profound as the suburbs they depict, it would be good to know this, and celebrate their contribution to the study's aesthetic. Such examples only intensify the question: why concentrate on suburban fiction, however comprehensively, and not include more on other media? We might find that suburbs resist or attract some representational modes more than others.

No study can do everything, though, and the fact that the book raises such questions is all to the good and should prompt further discussions invigorated by Pope's work. Less gratifying, perhaps, were the too frequent typographical or grammatical errors in the text. Everyone makes mistakes and getting details right is hard, but the proofreading is not of the standard readers should expect for the price. Some sections could have been much clearer, not least to avoid repetitions: 'the suburb promoted the domestic, the single family, to be peripheral and dispersed; also domestic, familial and private' (10). Some phrases just don't make sense: 'This perfectly display' (132); 'the De Certeau's distinction' (185). And what is a 'pyschogeographer' (187)? Sources are apparently misquoted (as in the citation of Roger Webster on page 9, or Stevie Smith on page 112) or misreferenced (in my edition of *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Jeannette Baxter's interview with J. G. Ballard is on pages 122–28, not 1–10 as cited in the Bibliography). Authors' names are incorrectly given ('Goldsmith' for 'Grossmith' on page 2; 'Sheryl Stevenson' on page 110, but 'Stevenson, C.' in the Bibliography; 'Sansom' in the Bibliography, but 'Sansom' on page 195). Given the richly interdisciplinary nature of his work, it *is* hard to determine whether Lefebvre is a 'philosopher' (5) or a 'geographer' (127), but we are on surer ground with his first name, which is Henri, not 'Henry' (127). Parentheses are incomplete (as on page 136) or extraneous (as on page 198); colons appear when a period is required (as on page 161); and speech marks for quotes disappear when they are needed (as on page 163 or 166). While these matters hardly compromise the book's intellectual validity, they do become distracting. At one point we learn that 'London writing thus puts place at the centre whilst underling [*sic*] that place as insubstantial' (143). As insubstantial as the 'underlining' done by a copy-editor?

Note on Contributor

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To Cite this Article

Adam Hansen, 'Review of: Ged Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 13, Number 1 (Spring 2016): 57–59. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2016/hansen.pdf>.