CULTURE

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FOR ALL its humping adulteries, unfuelled soccer mums and drunkens, stunted dreams, written about it can have a certain way of getting underneath your skin. The suburbs we read about residues of despair lingering from the daily struggle of trying to fit hopes, family and life into a house that we can afford in a nice enough neighbourhood. The suburbs we read about are a place where you can feel the “state of mind” strikes at universal fears, insecurities, disappointments and contentedness. And while the suburban hero is rarely likeable, he is almost always familiar.

“To call anything or anyone suburban is to utter a put down, an anaesthesia, a curse,” Paul Barker writes in his recent book The Freedoms of Suburbia. The very word is synonymous with too strivings, too smugly secure in having made their and academics and columnists use trade coffees and their skinny jeans, cycle around Fitzroy with their fair-trade coffees and cigarettes with fingery fingers and wait for Don in the TV series Mad Men.

Without ever wondering if this is all there is, it would be impossible to recognise the countless doughty husbands who squander their youth and optimism on ill-fitting notions of what it means to be a man as they wait for the 7:45 into the city. The “hopeless emptiness” that Frank Wheeler talks about in Richard Yates’ 1950s suburban novel Revolutionary Road isn’t really about where you live, but an indistinct longing for what you don’t have. The suburban hero seems to have it all, and yet there is it, a gaping disparity between what he thought he was going to be and what he is. It’s a feeling that crinkles sinews and spoils off the pages of the suburban work.

Shaun Tan, the artist and author of illustrated novel Tales from Outer Suburbia, believes that part of the appeal of writing and thinking about the suburbs is that they are a mirror for society. There’s also some sense of “careful what you wish for”, because being too comfortable can lead to a sort of arrested development. It can also nurture fear and ignorance, as exemplified by prime-time current affairs shows, he says. “If you have any curious or creative nature, there’s likely to be a tension there. Or will, eventually, if we are forced into a nice enough neighbourhood.”

The suburban novel exposes is compelling, and we are left raw. This treachery that the suburban novel commits to us is explored, too, in Christos Tsiolkas’ The Slap. The characters are profoundly unpleasant, but there we are, too: disillusioned, afraid, bloated with petty concerns and burdened prejudices. The suburban novel makes you aware of the ugliness that we try to hide, leaving cracked veneers.

The suburban novel is so often also gloriously smutty. While Gore Vidal described the “tacky” new suburban developments of killing any kind of passion, the suburban novel rarely lets thin walls and noisy neighbours get in the way of rather sordid, frequently adulterous, sex. In fact, often the sex is with the said nosy neighbours. And it’s usually enough — particularly in Updike and Roth — to make you feel self-conscious of anybody looking over your shoulder on the train.

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