



**Ged Pope, *All the Tiny Moments Blazing: A Literary Guide to Suburban London* (London: Reaktion, 2020), ISBN: 9781789146486, 559 pages, £25**

Reviewed by

Martin Dines

(Kingston University, UK)

Expansive, defined by familiar contours yet full of surprising detail: Ged Pope's 'literary guide to suburban London' is, in its construction and content, strongly suggestive of its geographical subject. This is both a limitation of the book and part of its appeal. The scope of *All the Tiny Moments Blazing* is indeed vast. It traverses territory exceeding one thousand square kilometres. It scrutinises around four hundred texts – fiction, poetry, plays, memoir, criticism – which engage with well over a millennium of suburban settlement; its literary corpus ranges from the Venerable Bede's appreciative eighth-century account of Barking Abbey to the venerable Sandi Toksvig's 2019 memoir and 'feel-good treat' *Between the Stops: The View of My Life from the Top of the Number 12 Bus*. To be sure, the enormous scope of Pope's 'literary guide' makes it an indigestible read. Consequently, suburban London fails to fully come into view. This, though, is neither an unintentional nor an entirely unfortunate outcome. Indeed, as Pope and other scholars – notably Lynne Hapgood – have cogently argued elsewhere, the difficulty of getting the measure of London's suburbs, their frequent failure to cohere as an object of scrutiny, is a long-established trope in fiction and criticism.<sup>1</sup> Hence Pope's chosen title for his book, which is taken from spoken-word performer Kae Tempest's 2016 novel *The Bricks that Built the Houses*. 'All the Tiny Moments Blazing' suggests rather well a totality that, on the one hand, evades complete

comprehension and, on the other, is comprised of fragments that are at once utterly ordinary and intensely revelatory.

Pope does not shy away from quoting some of the innumerable sneers about the suburbs' banality to be found in British literature. Indeed, how could he: they are such a key part of the cultural heritage of English suburbia. These putdowns include Iris Murdoch's infamous distinction, made in her first novel *Under the Net* (1954), between the necessary and contingent parts of London: 'everywhere west of Earl's Court is contingent' her protagonist Jake Donahue declares; in one especially indistinct suburb in southeast London, he suggests 'contingency reaches the point of nausea' (89). George Orwell's 1939 novel *Coming up for Air* provides a more typical – that is, a more bitter and self-pitying – response in the form of George 'Tubby' Bowling's jeremiad about his street, Ellesmere Road, which Pope locates in Ealing or Hayes. Bowling presumes the reader's familiarity: 'You know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same. Long, long rows of little semi-detached houses'; he goes on to liken his own to 'a prison with the cells all in a row', 'a line of semi-detached torture chambers' (281–2). In his introduction Pope makes clear his intention to challenge such entrenched attitudes: London suburbia, he insists, is not an undifferentiated mass; individual suburbs have distinct identities and characters; and, further, interesting things do happen in them. At least, that is what the three-hundred-odd writers who feature in Pope's book seem to show.

Pope demonstrates his theses of suburban differentiation and suburban interest by focusing on specific suburbs in turn. *All the Tiny Moments Blazing* tracks through several dozen suburbs: inner, outer, and every combination thereof that Orwell might have put to paper. Pope begins his tour in the near southeast (in Deptford, to be precise) and works his way around the metropolis in a generally clockwise direction before concluding in the marshes and industrial landscapes of Rainham and Purfleet in Essex. Suburban localities are arranged into twelve chapters defined by geographical area, e.g., southwest London (Brixton, Clapham etc.), outer southwest London (Wimbledon, Kingston etc.). Each chapter is furnished with a short but helpful introduction written by Pope and a minimal but neat, useful map designed and produced by Sebastian Ballard. This organisation helps bring forth the distinctiveness of different localities. For instance, despite their proximity to one another, Pope shows that the divergent economic histories and social milieus of the river suburbs of Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich have yielded very different stories. Other localities stand out for their special treatment by writers. While the genres of Gothic, mystery and crime provide familiar frames for suburban narrative, Crouch End in north London has been repeatedly singled out for its apparent weirdness, an association that is only partly explained by its being a haunt of horror writers such as Clive Barker, Peter Straub and Kim Newman.

The most interesting differences to which the book's organisation draws attention, however, relate to individual localities. Many chapters demonstrate how successive writers chart suburban change. Several of Pope's accounts commence

with description of a locality's rural beginnings, and the pastoral pleasures enjoyed there by writers. These give way to responses to development – optimistic, nostalgic or anxious – and frequently then to accounts of decline and deprivation, sometimes concluding with more recent engagements with the uneven effects of gentrification. Even more striking are the many contrasting responses that are coupled together throughout the book. Sometimes these pairings were penned at around the same time. For instance, we are invited to compare D. H. Lawrence's broadly positive responses to Croydon's 'transformative modernity' in his letters and short stories written while he was living and working in the suburb between 1908 and 1912, with 'lovable nostalgist' John Betjeman's take on Croydon twenty years later as a suburb that 'obliterates the past' (139). Some pairings underline the revisions of historical fiction. A remembered visit to the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in Andrea Levy's 2004 novel *Small Island* follows hard on the heels of Bertie Wooster's ethnographic explorations within the Exhibition's pagodas and pavilions. Others are simply hilarious. My favourite coming together by far occurs in the section on Holloway: it is hard for me to read the interminable mortifications of the most famous suburban clerk of them all, Mr Charles Pooter, the anti-hero of George and Weedon Grossmith's 1892 satire *The Diary of a Nobody*, without now thinking also of the 'frenzied homosexual saturnalia' (349) involving Joe Orton and numerous other males that took place seventy-five years later in a public toilet just outside Holloway Road tube station. Thus, with minimal authorial intervention, Pope manages to put into dialogue material about singular places written at different moments and from divergent perspectives. In doing so, his book partly realises American poet and historian Dolores Hayden's claim that 'contestation is the real story of suburbia'.<sup>2</sup>

The book's coverage is uneven, but unavoidably so. An entire chapter is dedicated to Hampstead and Highgate. The generosity afforded to the former – that 'artistic and thoughtful little suburb of London' (385), according to Cyril Fielding in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* – is understandable, given its long history as a transnational intellectual and literary hub, and its association with a particular (though uncelebrated) mode of literary fiction, the 'Hampstead novel'. While most of the book's sections consider the work of several writers, some suburbs are represented by a single author. J. G. Ballard and Stevie Smith, for instance, each flies a lone flag for their suburb; their respective garlands 'seer of Shepperton' and 'poet laureate of Palmers Green' thus appear to have as much to do with the lack of any local competition as the authors' long residency in those places. And then there are noticeable suburban absences. At least, they were noticeable to me, as I have lived in those suburbs. (Does Stockwell really have no literary heritage worth mentioning? Were it to exist, what would the 'Acton novel' be like?) Other noticeable omissions include playwrights, such as Mike Leigh and Alan Ayckbourn, whose oeuvres are so bound up with the suburbs. Likely, the relative absence of dramatic material in Pope's book stems from the tendency of playwrights to depict domestic interiors within a geographically unspecified suburbia. It was interesting though to read Paul Vaughan's suggestion that the insipid, archetypal suburban married couple who feature in Christopher Isherwood

and W. H. Auden's 1936 play *The Ascent of F6* were inspired by the latter writer's experience of New Malden. Such a mean-spirited representation, though, was balanced by more generous actions: Auden apparently wrote the school song for Raynes Park County, and even penned their school motto, drawing obviously on Marx: 'To each his need, from each his power' (251). Some writers, on the other hand, keep turning up in Pope's book like bad pennies. Ian Sinclair, it seems, really has walked nearly everywhere. The subtext of his lugubrious commentaries, though, always seems to be that he would have preferred never to have left Hackney.

Pope errs in locating a suburb in one novel. This is not in itself significant but does invite questions about his book's conceptual framing. In Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Orpington-based protagonist-narrator Karim Amir views his cousin Jamila's family home as being in a much more urban location than his. Pope suggests Jamila resides in Lewisham, but the text makes clear that she and her family are based in Penge. The novel's acute readings of a series of suburban locations in outer southeast London has always struck me as both amusing and telling. To Karim, Penge is urban and therefore dangerous and interesting; it is a world away from Orpington, the most miserably mediocre suburb in all existence. And yet Penge is only the other side of Beckenham and, like Karim's hometown, lies within the boundaries of the outer London Borough of Bromley. Determinations of urbanity and suburbanity, Kureishi's novel repeatedly suggests, are defined by such relative perspectives. As I have indicated, Pope's book brings into relief both suburban change and diversity, but it has little purchase on a dynamic that seems to define Londoners' sense of place perhaps more than it does for the residents of other cities: the ongoing and always highly localised disputes over the boundary between city and suburb. Pope does, however, attempt to delineate suburban London. Most of the locations under discussion, he declares in his introduction, 'form part of that doughnut of Victorian mass suburbia, built up from the 1860s'. And while he acknowledges that many of the 'once "classic" Victorian suburbs [...] are not suburban in that sense anymore', he insists that they retain quintessentially suburban attributes: 'commons, parks and open spaces [...] streets of semis, villas and board schools [and] thronged High Streets and Parades [...] that are very different to central London and very different to the "Edgelands" even further out.' Pope concludes: 'These places feel like suburbs' (10), and makes further references to how suburbs 'feel' throughout the book. Really, though, he means these places *look* like suburbs. But, as Kureishi's novel demonstrates, suburbs look different depending on where one is looking from. And what are suburban *feelings*, in fact? What kinds of understanding might be usefully achieved by attending to them? Pope's loose comments suggest that a fruitful line of inquiry – drawing perhaps on American anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's work on 'ordinary affects'<sup>3</sup> – may indeed be to scrutinise literary expressions of the affective qualities of suburban habitats.

In a manner similar to some suburbs, then, Pope's book lacks sufficient critical infrastructure. Indeed, while the observations with which Pope opens each

chapter are often canny, his commentary, frustratingly, always peters out to nearly nothing by the chapter's end. But, then, *All the Tiny Moments Blazing* is less a critical study than it is a deftly organised compendium. Its quotations talk to one another at least as much they are talked about. Pope's book offers up to careful and interested readers all kinds of vital evidence, from expressions of pastoral nostalgia from behind London's suburban frontier to the perspectives of successive waves of gentrifiers in Canonbury. Anyone planning to embark on a serious study of virtually any aspect of London's literary suburbias would be well advised to first consult this work.

## Notes

1. Ged Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture, 1880–1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).
2. Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Vintage, 2004), pp. 244–5.
3. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

## Works Cited

Ged Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)  
Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture, 1880–1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)  
Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Vintage, 2004)  
Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007)

## Note on Contributor

Martin Dines is Associate Professor of English Literature at Kingston University. He is the author of *The Literature of Suburban Change: Narrating Spatial Complexity in Metropolitan America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

## To Cite this Article

Dines, Martin, 'Review of: Ged Pope, *All the Tiny Moments Blazing*'. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/reviews>.