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encompass the use of gothic tropes in other genres such as sitcoms. This produces an engaging reading of the figure of the wife-as-witch, seen, for example, in the popular TV series *Bewitched*, with Murphy arguing that Samantha’s struggle with the demands of her suburban life and ordinary husband dramatized, week after week, the struggles many women faced in creating and sustaining fulfilling lives within new residential patterns and spaces.

Murphy further contends that the anxieties engendered by suburbanization went beyond the effect on the lived experience of the individual to encompass America’s history of expansion and appropriation, as demonstrated in her reading of the much-used (and oft-parodied) ‘haunted Indian burial ground’ plot. Murphy notes, however, that suburban gothic texts based on hauntings have declined in popularity since their heyday in the 1970s. Instead, the kinds of familial and psychological conflicts which were dramatized through projection onto ghosts or possessed houses have been transferred onto the inhabitants themselves, with the suburbs harbouring local serial killers such as *Halloween*’s Michael Myers.

Some of Murphy’s most pertinent insights come from her discussion of the economic and racial dimensions of suburban gothic texts, such as her analysis of Wes Craven’s *The People under the Stairs* or the recent cable series *Weeds*. Perhaps as testament to their potency, these issues only manifest in genre texts occasionally and Murphy’s alertness to them is one of the study’s major strengths.

As the seemingly incongruous pairing of the popularity of *Desperate Housewives* and the economic fallout from the subprime mortgage fiasco remind us, the suburban ideal continues to exert a powerful pull on the American imagination, and Murphy’s work offers a timely analysis of its history and meaning.

*King’s College London*  
*Cara Rodway*

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**Reviews**


More impressively comprehensive than encyclopedic, Patrick O’Donnell does not try to cover every literary novel published in the last thirty years, but instead offers a broad critical overview of contemporary US fiction in terms that make *The American Novel Now* more than just a survey. Realism, postmodernism, history, identity, community and migration are used as headings to help organize the material, with familiar texts located alongside accounts of less well-known novels in terms that trace the continuities between them. By combining short sections focussed on the analysis of exemplary novels with summaries of comparable texts, O’Donnell is able to build his panoramic view of the subject as he goes. Significantly, he makes little attempt to create a hierarchy for these categories, but instead delivers something much more open and capacious. This is not the last word on the subject, but a beginning, a place to start for scholars looking to get to grips with the novels of the very recent past.
True, there is not much contemporary history here and little on the shaping influence of institutions (Oprah gets a few paragraphs, the publishing industry the occasional page, the Pulitzer a line or two), but perhaps O’Donnell’s instincts told him that to give these contexts prominence might have taken something away from the primary object of his inquiries. It is the novels themselves that are his priority and the author’s vast knowledge of them that is everywhere apparent. O’Donnell, a former editor of Modern Fiction Studies, knows these books so well that he is able to make countless deft connections between them, and his writing continually broadens our knowledge and adds to our range of reference. In the process, The American Novel Now makes its most telling contribution to the understanding of the contemporary novel. Obliging us to question the assumption that recent US fiction is the story of a famous few, O’Donnell insists that we take full account of the rich literary culture to which the likes of Roth, Morrison, DeLillo and Pynchon belong. The result is a book that pushes its readers towards a deeper understanding of the diversity of contemporary American literature. Beyond that, it brought me real pleasure for two particular reasons. First, it reminded me of the countless novels that have been published in the last thirty years that I have never quite got round to reading and renewed my determination to fill in some of the many gaps. Second, it brought books once read and then forgotten back to life and, more than that, it did so in ways that made me want to read them once again.

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