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DAILY REVIEW

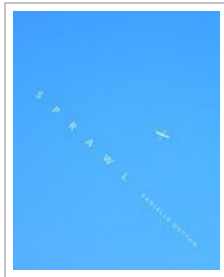
FEATURED REVIEWS

AUG 27 2010

Sprawl by Danielle Dutton

Leigh Newman

web exclusive



At the heart of Danielle Dutton's *Sprawl* is a lavish, endless list of domestic objects: water pitchers, sweaters, cakes on cake stands, petunias in a terra-cotta pot. Borrowing techniques from both fiction, poetry, and visual art (particularly photography), the book not only infuses each object, be it a juice glass or a paper napkin, with a Vermeer-esque glow but arranges it into part of a verbal still life. The result? A fresh take on suburbia, one of reverence and skepticism.

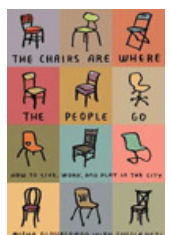
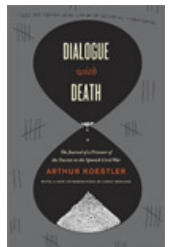
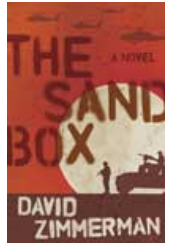
In terms of plot, the book follows the crumbling marriage of the nameless narrator. At night, her husband "makes creaking noises in some other part of the house" while she "resists the anti-rhetorical impulse to hurl paranoid, prefabricated abuse his way." The couple still go to dinner with other couples, still have sex after watching television, but for the narrator, a wry sense of loss has taken over her life. Reflecting on her furniture, she notes, with a hint of unbalance, "Several of my tabletops are tilted for better locating the center of my domestic charisma." Overall, the marriage plot becomes merely a hum under a symphony of observations and formal experiments.

Dutton, you'll quickly notice, does not use paragraph breaks. Though this may at first seem overwhelming, the book is highly, highly structured. The author uses three organized, recurring strands of thought: the domestic still lifes ("Meanwhile, a copper pot on its side sends a gleaming reddish glow onto a honeydew melon"), imaginary letters to neighbors ("Dear Mrs. Leslie, Take heed. Certain people have become married, certain streets have become diversified, certain birds continue to peck"), and exchanges of cropped dialogue ("Haywood says 'Fill in the blank.' He says 'Refreshing' and 'Obvious' and 'Bacon'"). The narrator weaves these three strands together, in and out, adding a dash of action (finding a dead squirrel in the gutter or confronting her husband's affair), which moves the story forward even as it stays still—a technique that nicely encapsulates the motion/nonmotion of the narrator's life.

Only the cropped dialogue fails to captivate. Dawn Raffel uses this kind of dialogue to hushed, grim effect in similar yet bleaker domestic settings (see: *In the Year of Long Division*). In Dutton's case, however, it feels frustratingly cryptic and out of place, in light of the book's overall transparency. The beauty of *Sprawl* resides in its fierce, careful composition, which changes the ordinary into the wonderful and odd.

Sprawl in fact does not sprawl at all; rather, it radiates with control and fresh, strange reflection. "One hardly sees oneself," the narrator says. "For example, one never sees one's

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privacy

own eyes." The humor and pathos, the intelligent and unexpected point of view, are why we keep reading along with Dutton, even as her narrator "makes all sorts of ordinary choices" and "campaigns hard with cheese-pimento sandwiches."

Leigh Newman's fiction and non-fiction has appeared in the New York Times, Tin House, One Story, and National Public Radio's "The Sound of Writing." Her memoir is forthcoming from Dial.

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