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S P R A W L

In suburbia, everything seems the same but isn't.

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S P R A W L by Danielle Dutton

Release: AUGUST 23, 2010

\$18 • Paper • 144 pp • 7.5 x 6 • FICTION • ISBN: 978-0-9799562-3-2

Advance review copies available now.

An absurdly comic and decidedly digressive novel, *S P R A W L* chronicles the mercurial inner life of one suburban woman. With vertiginous energy and a deadpan eye, the narrator records the seeming uniformity of her world—the dissolving marriage, crumbs on the countertop, the drunken neighbor careening into the pool, a dead dog on the side of the road—constructing surprising taxonomies that rearrange the banalities, small wonders, and accouterments of suburban life. As the abundance and debris accumulate, the sameness of suburbia gives way to enthralling strangeness. We suddenly feel the force of orbit when only moments before the world felt infinitely flat.

Inspired by a series of domestic still lifes by photographer Laura Letinsky, Dutton creates her own trenchant series of tableaux, attentive to the surfaces of the suburbs and the ways in which life there is willfully, almost desperately, on display. In locating the language of sprawl itself—engrossing, unremitting, ever expansive—Dutton has written an astonishing work of fiction that takes us deep into the familiar and to its very edge: nothing is ever the same under such close inspection.

Selections from *S P R A W L* have appeared in several magazines including *Harper's*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *jubilat*, and *Shiny*, as well as in the anthology *Where We Live Now: An Annotated Reader*. *S P R A W L* is Dutton's first novel.

An excerpt from *S P R A W L* will be the "Fiction for Driving Across America" feature in *Bomb* magazine's summer 2010 issue.

DANIELLE DUTTON is the author of the short story collection *Attempts at a Life* (Tarpaulin Sky) and editor of *Dorothy*, a publishing project. She is the book designer at Dalkey Archive Press, and she also teaches in the MFA program at Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. Born and raised in California, she now lives with her husband and son in Illinois.

Dutton's mini-masterpiece—a womanly treatise on suburban decay and fatigued love—is a triumph! Each sentence should be celebrated for its hilarity, rigor, eccentricity, and passion. SPRAWL is the work of a brilliant mind.

DEB OLIN UNFERTH

author of *Vacation*

Just when it appeared that suburbia was going to be strangled in its own entrails, a victim of peak oil, collapsing infrastructure, and credit card debt, here comes Danielle Dutton to show us how magical that sprawl is after all. The magic is in the oddities of the particular, the cat that "doesn't matter so much as the feelings its tiny feet feel." Dutton's SPRAWL is a different kind of sprawling: it reaches forth, takes up, and redeems. Here, the same old is something else again. As she writes, "Prepare to Merge!"

CURTIS WHITE

author of *The Barbaric Heart: Faith, Money, and the Crisis of Nature*

Dutton's groundbreaking SPRAWL . . . jams Lisa Robertson's intelligence and music into a Jane Austenish scrutiny of the manner of being in those new landscapes we continue to call "suburbs."

MATTHEW STADLER

editor of *Where We Live Now: An Annotated Reader*

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END

Q & A with Danielle Dutton, author of the novel **S P R A W L**
forthcoming August 23, 2010 from Siglio Press

Where did you find your inspiration for **S P R A W L?**

In the wake of 9/11, I, like everyone else, was thinking a lot about America, about what we are, inasmuch as we are something. We spread out. We seek edges and then we balance precariously or we push through. And so, given my own background, I was thinking about the suburbs, about sprawl.

This had been on my mind for a while when I read about certain twentieth-century poets and their “language of the city” as opposed to an earlier “poetics of the pastoral.” I began wondering about the language of the suburbs, or the poetics of sprawl. What does that look like? Around this time, I came across the domestic still lifes in photographer Laura Letinsky’s *Hardly More than Ever*, which seemed to resonate, for me, with this question.

And, finally, I went home to the California town I grew up in, which was once a tiny Western town, but now feels suburban, although there’s no city for hundreds of miles. It was nice out, and having been living in Chicago, where I walked everywhere, even in blizzards, I decided to walk downtown from my mother’s house. I didn’t see a single other person walking on the entire twenty-minute trek. It was surreal.

How a project begins is hard to pinpoint, but I believe the writing came out of this conglomeration of questions, sights, and sensations.

Is **S P R A W L a novel about the suburbs?**

Since sprawl infiltrates much of America and American life, physically and culturally, I don’t see the novel as necessarily *about* the suburbs, or not only the suburbs, though it takes place in the suburbs.

My intention in writing a novel was to create an experience, not a commentary. To me this is a character-based book, a book about a woman who is totally awake to the world around her. And if this “awakeness” is often disorienting and painful (which I think it is), that’s not necessarily because of something particular to this individual character, but because of the nature of the world, and sprawl itself, which is irreducibly complicated and generally without resolutions or stopping points or even pauses.

How did the photographs influence your writing **S P R A W L? Do they appear in the novel?**

As I said, Letinsky’s photographs resonated with this question I had about the poetics of the suburbs, a poetics that I felt would be naturally somewhat banal, but not easily or only banal. More than this, the images complicated my questions, presented a kind of buzzing, eerie domesticity. The photographs are messy *and* spare, domestic *and* public. Any human subjects are offstage; Tupperware balances on edges of countertops. I didn’t want to inhabit the photographs so much as I wanted them to inhabit the story. So I wrote them out without trying to interpret them or enliven them. Basically, I “catalogued” each one, which gave me a space to work with, a room, a series of objects, a mood. I think something of the objectness of her work infected

the world of S P R A W L, as did the many surfaces, and the idea of surfaceness, of space, of stillness—a stillness that might, at any moment, shift into movement, fracture, explode.

Besides the use of photographs, how does visual art influence your writing?

The honest answer is that I'm not entirely sure. My father studied art history at UCLA and has become, in my opinion, an interesting artist in his own right. I attended art school for my MFA. I suppose some of the thinking behind the contemporary art I've studied or come into contact with has affected the way I think about writing.

My fiction tends to begin more with a desired shape than with any idea for a plot. The exploration of sprawl, for example, seemed to necessitate one long paragraph wherein everything, at a glance, seems the same but isn't. That said, to begin the book I wrote segments, little bursts of language, often working off the photographs, and then I began stitching these segments together, like a quilt. Once I'd stitched together about fifty pages of material, I started working inside that long strip of language, pulling things out, carrying them through, expanding, connecting, spreading. But the fact that photographs were the most influential stimulus to the project is no doubt telling: I think the novel is concerned with seeing, with acts of attention.

In addition to "writing in" the photographs, how did you evoke that world?

While writing S P R A W L, I tended to absorb everything around me and let it filter back into the work: songs on the radio, news on TV, inane conversations I overheard or had, just all the stuff of daily life. I was particularly interested in the ways in which things rub up against each other, in the ways life is at once banal and not. I also had dozens of texts that infiltrated the work, everything from *Walden* and *Moments of Being* to *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Modern Cake Decorating* and *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, from essays on Van Gogh's still lifes to the social implications of the American lawn. I kept a stack of books and magazines nearby and turned to one whenever I got stuck or bored. They served as a kind of ludic curve ball to throw me off track and thus back on.

How do other writers influence your work?

I'm always conscious of being influenced by Virginia Woolf—her attention to form, the painterly beauty of her prose and images, the subtle web her narratives move into or out of. Also, Jane Austen—her politeness, humor, domestic settings; Gertrude Stein—her musical prose and the fact that she seems to do whatever she wants, but with rigor; and George Perec—his love of lists and the quotidian, his respect for play. I was also reading, right before I began the book, Thomas Bernhard, Lyn Hejinian, and Diane Williams. In all my writing I use other writers' texts as material.

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