

PARADISE LEVERAGED

Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles

D.J. Waldie

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Reviewed by Mark Sarvas

That many of us would consider the title “Bard of Suburbia” to be a dubious distinction is precisely the sort of thinking that drives D.J. Waldie (a man who can lay fair claim to that title) crazy. In the 28 essays that comprise his new collection *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles*, Waldie, a public official with the City of Lakewood who doesn’t drive a car and has lived in the same 957 square-foot house his parents bought there in 1946, stands poised against grandiose, overblown dreams, a patron saint of modest expectations.

This bracing if uneven volume has been assembled from pieces that originally ran in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *L.A. Weekly*, *Salon* and others, and they are linked at their core by Waldie’s steadfast belief in the restorative power of community. That Los Angeles seems perversely designed to undermine that sense of community is what gives Waldie his fire.

Waldie’s vision of Los Angeles is that of Paradise Leveraged, a series of spent dreams and promises paved over to install newer dreams and newer promises, an endless cycle of reinvention. It’s a city that’s unique in “its ability to manufacture snake oil and simultaneously buy it.” Many of the familiar L.A. narratives are here from the infamous water grabs to the police corruption scandals. His essay “All in the Family,” which looks at the Chandler family’s role in forging Los Angeles, is an elegant miracle of compression. And “The City and the River” is one of the best explanations of the history and value of this misunderstood waterway that you are likely to find.

But although he’s not afraid to tackle the large scale, one suspects Waldie is a miniaturist at heart. He’s at his poetic, moving best when working at close quarters, describing the joys and vagaries of a life away from L.A.’s centers of power.

Lakewood’s modesty keep me here. When I stand at the head of my block and look north, I see a pattern of sidewalk, driveway and lawn, set between parallel low walls of house fronts that aspires to be no more than harmless. We are living in times of great harm now, and I wish that I had acquired all the graces my neighborhood gives.

Waldie brings light to these small, quiet moments again and again. The wonderful essay “Fallout” describes a childhood spent in the shadow of defense factories, a childhood mixed with equal measures of Rod Serling and prefabricated fallout shelters. In “On the Bus,” he perfectly captures the disregard with which motorists and bus passengers treat one another. The motorist will never see “the civil gesture of the tall, young black man toward the old white man whose leg he must brush aside to pass down

the aisle of the packed bus ...” Bus passengers are equally oblivious to cocooned motorists as they await the arrival of their buses, straining under the weight of plastic shopping bags – “that red line across a numbed hand is the pedestrian stigmata.” Waldie is insistent that L.A. be considered in its entirety, that the vital lives of the suburbs not be lost against the glare of Hollywood klieg lights.

The complaints about the collection are minor. Because these essays were run in separate publications there is a certain amount of repetition of ideas and even turns of phrase, and a keener editorial eye might have eliminated some duplication. And some of the shortest essays – as little as a page and a half – are unsatisfying. (“The Golden Dream Goes Dark” itself goes dark as abruptly as a plug yanked from a socket, and “L.A. Literature” is little more than a tantalizing blurb of what might have been.) And when will publishers learn to identify each essay with its publication name and date? Finally, the collection is ill-served by Patt Morrison’s self-indulgent, tedious foreword.

But the cumulative force of Waldie’s passion and arguments is undeniable. Which leads me to a confession. I am Waldie’s worst nightmare, the sort of resident he dismisses as a “tourist.” Living a narrow life essentially bounded by the 10, 110, 101 and the ocean, I’d never even really studied an L.A. map (without seeking a specific destination) before reading these essays. Now, standing before a wall-sized Thomas Guide, I located Lakewood, nestled on the flats between the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers, just as Waldie describes. I took in the names of places I’d never ventured into: Cypress. La Mirada. Norwalk. Artesia.

And so on a recent overcast Saturday morning, I got into my car and drove to see Waldie’s city for myself, which is a more cheerful place than his essays suggest. As I drove through the uniform grid of well-tended streets, I was struck by how much is hidden behind freeway retaining walls. Mayfair Park advertised an upcoming Patriot Day concert. Families with children enjoyed a friendly public pool. I saw garage sales, kids on scooters, and open houses. I saw a community living its life quietly in shadows of the freeways, not looking “for more, only for enough.” And although I inevitably made my way back to the familiarity of the Westside, it may be - to paraphrase Oliver Wendell Holmes - that a Thomas Guide once stretched by an idea will never regain its former shape.