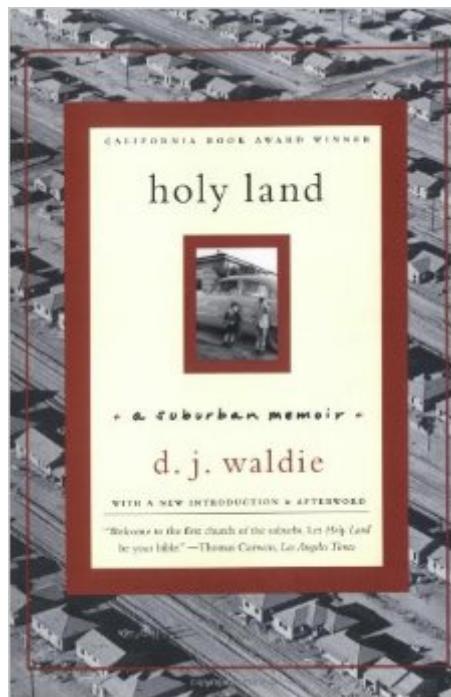


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Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir



Synopsis

"Infinitely moving and powerful, just dead-on right, and absolutely original." •Joan Didion Since its publication in 1996, *Holy Land* has become an American classic. In "quick, translucent prose" (Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*) that is at once lyrical and unsentimental, D. J. Waldie recounts growing up in Lakewood, California, a prototypical post-World War II suburb. Laid out in 316 sections as carefully measured as a grid of tract houses, *Holy Land* is by turns touching, eerie, funny, and encyclopedic in its handling of what was gained and lost when thousands of blue-collar families were thrown together in the suburbs of the 1950s. An intensely realized and wholly original memoir about the way in which a place can shape a life, *Holy Land*; is ultimately about the resonance of choices—how wide a street should be, what to name a park—and the hopes that are realized in the habits of everyday life. 20 illustrations and a new introduction for this paperback edition. 20 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Though subtitled "a suburban memoir", D.J. Waldie's *Holy Land* is a lot more than that. It is a history of the concept of suburbia, a portrait of a specific place, a chronicle of one man's relationship to that place. Formally, it is a collection of 316 prose poems, plus photographs. There is no other book like it. You don't have to be a suburbanite or a suburban exile to appreciate Waldie's incisive and insightful writing, nor do you need to be particularly interested in the tale being told. Like most truly great books, *Holy Land* fuses itself to your mind regardless of what is already there. The tiny chapters accumulate, and once you have read a few, reverberations begin, harmonies and

discords, and soon the whole becomes much greater than the single parts. It is a thrilling reading experience.

I taught this book as the last reading in an undergraduate course on Western suburban history. The students responded with tremendous enthusiasm. They recognized much that was familiar in Waldie's strange hometown (a strangeness common to suburbs all over the West). This book crystallized a feeling of loss for many students. Suburbs like Lakewood, or like the tract house developments going up today all over the region and nation, feel emptied of history for the children who grow up there. Their names (Lakewood?) like their green lawns are imposed, divorced from the land's human and natural history. Children feel this and they know something is missing. This book opened up the opportunity for students to express their own feelings and experiences of suburban life. Note I also recommend you see the wonderful poetry of Kevin Hearle, *Each Thing We Know is Changed Because We Know It* (1994)

I can't be nearly as eloquent as the other reviewers but I found this to be a truly powerful book. My WWII-generation parents bought their first house in Lakewood in 1952 and lived there for 15 years. I have always had a fascination with Lakewood, and as corny as it may seem, always felt a kind of spiritual connection to the place. While certainly an in-depth look at the history of "my city", Waldie just as expertly explores issues such as existence and mortality. I cannot recommend this book highly enough.

Holy Land is a work which reflects. Like a mirror, it reflects those of us who have grown up in suburbia. It shows how the planned community has shaped our lives and our identities. Who we are is largely defined by those who have laid out the grid work of our neighborhoods. It also reflects the historical accidents which brought suburbs into being. Would suburbs have been necessary without the Great Depression, World War II, the automobile or the dust bowl? It is emotionally reflective because the writing style and the content causes the reader to pause and reflect upon the neighborhood grids, and patterns which have shaped and defined the reader. It is spiritually reflective because the content forces the spiritual questions, "Is there anything more to life?" "Is life really nothing more than surviving in a landscape which is a grid designed by a developer who's primary purpose was to make a profit?" If the reader's answer is "no" then I suppose Holy Land is a depressing piece of non-fiction. It is also spiritually reflective because it illustrates how humans define space. Through human definition some space becomes sacred, other space becomes

desirable and other space becomes functional. The reader is forced to reflect upon how the space in which their life is experienced is defined. In its very size and shape Holy Land is reflective of suburbia. A book that can be read before the 8:00 p.m. prime time begins. A book without strings attached. A book of poignant memories to which all veterans of suburbia can relate. This book however should not be read in a single sitting, although that would be very easy to do. I recommend that the reader read passages and then go for a walk or a drive through their neighborhood and reflect upon their own life and neighborhood. Then return back to the book and read some more. If nothing else it will be a reflective experience.

I live in Signal Hill, right next to Lakewood. On Saturday mornings I like to get up early and get a 40 of Olde English and ride my old english 3 speed bicycle around the quiet streets of Lakewood while sipping my beer. There is an eerie sense of peace and contentment that lives in this place. It's foggy usually at this time of year, and big crows caw and flap from street to street and wire to wire. big trees sit silently, there hardly ever seems to be any wind. I ride along sipping my beer, driving right up the middle of seemingly abandoned suburban streets, never bothered by cops as I would if I drove up the street drinking beer from a bottle at 8 in the morning over in Long Beach. Indeed, the only signs of life are the crows and the occasional dog barking from behind a fence. Mr. Waldie has recreated this strange world perfectly in the pages of his book.

D. J. Waldie's *Holy Land: a Suburban Memoir* is so beautifully and carefully written that I found myself reading segments out loud for the simple pleasure of savoring the language. While writing of his life in a housing tract in Lakewood, California, Mr. Waldie, writing in short and interweaving passages and segments, examines his everyday life in an almost commonplace suburb with precision and grace. His family, neighbors and friends emerge as people we may know. His house has a familiarity to many of us, even though we have never been there. Mr. Waldie, however, sees everyday life so clearly and makes even the "how to" of putting together a stucco tract home so interesting that I could not put down this book and felt a great sadness when I had finished. His is a lovely and important story about a very smart and gentle man who cares deeply about aspects of Los Angeles history and is eager to hear stories of our Southern California future.

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