



# SPRAWL

*Danielle Dutton*

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**SPRAWL** Danielle Dutton

Shortlisted for The Believer Book Award

Fiction. 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 entralling 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--this novel takes us deep into the familiar and to its very edge.

## SPRAWL Details

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Author : Danielle Dutton

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## From Reader Review SPRAWL for online ebook

### Mike Puma says

Doing this one justice will be a challenge. I'll try to let Dutton tell you about this one herself.

This is one for fans of the minimal, writ large.

I dramatize small moments of my life on the phone or in a public restroom. I am all sorts of things in themselves. I am in character, I am in mint condition, I am in my head, I am in luck, I am in need, I am in vogue, I am in the red, I am in deep, I am in tune, I am in trouble, I am in control, I am in the way. Meanwhile, there are all kinds of decorative details on the buildings downtown, and we hardly know how to explain them.

And neither do I.

One for fans of the well-said, or the interestingly said:

Later in the day, I set out to place coffee cups in peculiar positions, and then to combine myself, in slow fashion, with objects that are off balance. I stand on the edge of the dining room table, all bathed in light, for nearly twenty minutes, which seems to freeze time.

One for fans of the surprisingly juxtaposed.

Carbon monoxide and ozone are no longer subjects of debate. We are destined to destroy a world characterized by the unrefined. It makes an uneasy, ironic consumption. In turn I prepare an honest dinner, reassuring in all its surfaces.

One for fans of interiority, isolation, listedness :

Carnal motives are signaled by the position of clothing, hats, flowers, the way the interplay of floral patterns, polka dots, and silk scarves hide wifely sorrows.

A story, if there is one, is only implied, suggested, hinted at. She might be going mad, then again, she may hold herself together through unique perspective and observation.

The season, as it progresses, becomes un-collective and un-plural.

Her relationship may be on the rocks, or it may be stable:

What he finally decides is that what we have is a kind of awkwardness worth saving.

Whatever else it is, it's a joy to read. One for readers who don't require a compelling plot, but won't settle for 'not compelling.' It's for fans of the beautiful, which necessarily means 'the beautifully told.'

One for me.

Five enthusiastic stars, to encourage the few who might read it. Thanks to Proustitute for recommending it and to Brian for greasing the wheel.

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## Brad says

S P R A W L is one of my favorite contemporary novels. I desperately need to read more of Dutton. She is a supreme talent. Love this book. I wrote more about it here.

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## Miriam says

After reading this, I can see why, as Mike describes in his excellent review, this author's Attempts at a Life is nearly a book of epigrams and prose poems. That is really where Dutton's strength lies. There are so many great lines in this, especially in the first half. Unfortunately, I don't think that was quite sufficient to sustain the length of the book. Despite taking breaks in my reading (a tad difficult, given the momentum of the prose, but necessary to keep from ODing on the style) I found myself growing bored in the second half. Dutton seemed to have used up the better lines, the more amusing lists of banal objects on her table, the more plausible lists of words spoken in conversation. In the first half we have absurdist but still meaningful passages like this letter (the letters were some of my favorite bits)

*In particular, Mrs Henry, allow me to address you on the subject of nice lawns and nice people, hardworking people, neighbors within a neighborhood, people who take care of their lawns, etc. There are those who believe your front yard is currently implicated in several disruptive notions of "utility, chaos, and a lack of concern for the opinions of others." This is the kind of attitude we prefer reserved for the back yard. In the front yard, Mrs Henry, we aim for a distinctly American, park-like ideological space, a classic composition in which the individual cares for his lawn for the benefit of the connectivity and industriousness of the entire community.*

to lines which merely reflect yet again the pointlessness of the narrator's existence.

*There are dirty dishes in the sink and a rice cooker on the floor. So I decide to count the number of steps from our front door to the first duck standing upright.* Perhaps this decline is intentional, a reflection of the wife's interior state, her marriage, etc but it made reading the final third a bit of a chore.

I don't want to sound like I'm slamming the book, though -- I enjoyed it very much to start and thought it was a clever, well-conceived project.

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## Lee says

Liked its associative, suggestive, quirky plotlessness about a woman's psychogeographical experience of life in the suburbs with husband Haywood -- the best named character in a while. But it became cloyingly clever/cute after twenty or thirty pages. Was always aware I was reading what felt like creative writing, "an interesting approach to narrative." Enjoyed it more when envisioning the narrator as a Fred Armisen character from Portlandia. Not for me, ultimately, but I can see how some may love it.

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## Christina Nicole says

Suburban sprawl is a phenomenon that has the power to overtake landscapes and transform city limits, creating a sense of decentralization, which as a result births discontinuity and uncertainty regarding the boundaries of urban development. In her book *Sprawl*, Danielle Dutton writes toward the space inhabited by the architectural takeover of excessive urban development. Domesticated by Dutton's language, *Sprawl* is an encapsulation of creature comforts, home appliances, household objects and simplistically gestures at mundane relationships. The notion of an adopted materialistic identity arises in the text as a result of residing within the vectors of architectonic construction. *Sprawl* conveys the effects of suburbia on a woman in a failing marriage, highlighting its atmosphere of constant entertainment. The constant sense of distraction acts as a buffer to prevent her from touching her pain deeply and remaining raveled in the cyclical nature of satisfaction, dissatisfaction and consumerism.

The form of *Sprawl* reflects the content matter, running on with no paragraph breaks for one hundred and forty pages to mirror the constant list that festers in the text. The text is entirely comprised of lists of objects and actions which work together to fabricate the life of a middleclass woman contained in an immensely long paragraph. The book itself is a squarish shape which relates to the slang phrase "don't be a square," meaning don't be typical and traditional, which is the primary the content of the book: normality and its confinement. The run-on paragraph that composes the novella is a form of entrapment, making it difficult for readers to escape the text, an individual must read straight through it or they run the risk of not being able to reenter the narrative. The narrator states that "We watch the evening news and learn about weather, competitive ping-pong, hot air balloons, war and the latest scandals," a seemingly simple statement that mirrors exactly how the story is structured, an unending sequence of events and objects which simulates the format of television programming (Dutton 24).

The momentum of the book is contradicting, being both simultaneously leisurely and excessive while building pace overtime to create a reading experience akin to tunnel vision. The lack of paragraph breaks, the fragmented dialogue and topic matter present the reader with a discontinuity that is almost difficult to penetrate. As the text progresses, items seem to surface and disappear and words begin to blur to form a static compilation that portrays how objects accumulate and become amorphous within a collection. The intention of this book pivots on the notion of an object, location or person that always changes and can be viewed in a new light upon each encounter. Stated within the jacket of the book, the novel was "Inspired by a series of domestic still life photographs." This fixation on the normality of life presents an opportunity to meditate on everyday objects and relinquish oneself from functional fixedness. Dutton effectively presents objects and situations in a stream of consciousness style prose that leaves readers drifting within a sea of banality.

Another theme that arose from the text was the identification with yearning and how this sense of a need for more fuels urban living and promotes consumerism. There is no driving force in the narrator's character or a tonality of excessive yearning but she makes subtle observations that recognize an external force of desire present in her surroundings. The narrator states, "The book says pearls, shells and certain precious man-made objects can assist in scenarios of craving," which functions as an acknowledgement of the superficiality that modern society deems as satisfaction (Dutton 20). Jewels, bobbles and materialism function as replacements for the inherent discomfort in life, at least for those who can afford them; the notion of supplementing negative emotions with consumer good is an illusion and false ideal of the middle class that also pervades the minds of the lower class. Additionally the unnamed narrator links herself to her household possessions, verbalizing that "The small boxes glint in the half-light as I place them in specific patterns, as markers of my own personal history" (Dutton 21). Her differentiation between objects being markers of her experiences and

not an embodiment of herself shows a healthy sense of separation, which makes her different from most suburban dwellers, leaving a brief glimmer of in regards to her sense of personhood.

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### **Proustitute says**

Fucking brilliant.

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### **Suzanne says**

Delightfully weird, inexplicably compelling, and laugh-out-loud funny. One single 140-page paragraph that reminded me of nothing so much as an impressionist painting, hundreds of images arranged like dots on a canvas that are just dots but, taken as a whole when you step back, convey a scene of light, color, shadow, and sounds that make a world and a mood. Takes stream-of-consciousness to a whole other level. I almost bailed at page 20, was drawn along almost against my will, and was ultimately glad I stayed with it. I would recommend it, however, to almost no one. Enter at your own risk.

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### **Katia says**

I have to admit that the first reading didn't sit well with me. I found it so unlike anything that I've ever read and couldn't quite wrap my brain around it. I read a second time and sparks flew. I found wit, commentaries, observations, and humor. I enjoyed the here and now of each sentence and the playful use of words. I'll be reading it a third time I think.

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### **Geoff says**

*"Danielle Dutton's S P R A W L reads as if Gertrude Stein channeled Alice B. Toklas writing an Arcades Project set in contemporary suburbia."*

UhWHAT? Okay sold.

Or, more elegantly, from our dear Proustitute:

"A kind of Mrs. Dalloway in objects, a kind of performance piece melding stream-of-consciousness with commentary on photographer Laura Letinsky's domestic still lifes, and at times one of the most philosophical accounts of contemporary suburban American existence and the ever-trenchant fitters of gender roles, Dutton's S P R A W L is a book a reader might read in one sitting, but it will resonate for days to come—if not longer. Dutton is already a promoter of women's writing via Dorothy, a publishing project; however, while some of the writers whom Dorothy has published or reprinted—e.g., Nell Zink, Amina Cain, Barbara Comyns, and 3:AM's own Joanna Walsh—have been receiving deserved praise, to my mind, Dutton's own work has slipped past readers' attentions. S P R A W L is that rare kind of book that will change one's perception of what fiction can do, of what narrative can accomplish, and just how many voices

make up one lone voice: it's a celebration of the incessant interior chorus that is the examined, literary, artistic life."

<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/top-re...>

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### **Ali Lafferty says**

So this book is a 140-page long paragraph of a suburban housewife's life experience. I don't really know what else I can say to describe it or make any assertions about this, but the book is timeless in that everything that happens has no temporal relation to anything else. Literally every "event" that happens in this book is just a description of something and we bounce around between different scenes with no transition. I don't know what to make of this book but I loved it and it left me simultaneously creeped out and contemplative.

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### **Brian says**

*We bulldoze small and inconvenient fields of strawberries or corn and replace them with the increasing complexity of everyday life: promised lands, the right of "choice", boundaries, color-schemes, paper mills, etc.*

Everything about this book screams. The cerulean sky book cover, contrailed and disrupted by lonely airliner shouts for attention. The single paragraph, 140-page narrative told by protagonist Mrs. Robertson is eardrum piercing in its dead-on, compact sentences that combine in a depth charge force. This must be what it is like to read a book in a single sitting in a room immediately after the discharge of a flash grenade. Even the title with its extra spacing between letters is necessary. This is sprawl, after all. We need the room.

I lived for many years in far north Dallas, Texas – a place where suburban sprawl has its own level of personification that feels almost sinister. Driving up the toll road there comes a time where the exits are interchangeable; the mega-malls, chain restaurants and housing developments are a blueprint for cultural death and meth addiction. It nearly killed me to get out of that environment. I would occasionally drive to work in the morning and look at the perfect lawns, the cookie-cutter homes and wonder how the fathers/husbands, wives/mothers that inhabited that environment viewed their lives, because I knew I hated mine. I'm certainly not saying that everyone in Suburban Sprawl experiences the world the way that Danielle Dutton has described in this book. But I have to believe that many have and do.

An American horror story? Yes.

*It's all in the eye, the beauty of the suburbs, its sharp whitish light, the lack of logical relationships...*

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### **Lacey says**

I should make a disclaimer on this review that I am a graduate student engaged in a research project which determines how literary discussions of suburbia engage with postmodern theory on space. So I was reading this book with a pretty specific lens in mind.

And I freaking loved it.

I think this book would appeal to people who couldn't care less about any of the things I mentioned as well, so don't get me wrong. I recommend it. But if you like things like many distinct characters, clarity of plot, sequentiality, or paragraph breaks...go read a different book. Go read *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides, because it's really good in a really similar way, but it has all those things.

I thought the structure of this book was lush for the subject. I feel like any attempt to explain why would ruin the experience of reading the book, though I do suggest taking the one or two hours necessary to read the book in a single sitting. I did that, and I can't imagine have attempting to read it in multiple sittings. So much would be lost.

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### **Angela Stubbs says**

Absolutely amazing! One of the best books I've read this year!

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### **Roz Ito says**

This is a devastatingly funny and brilliant book that would totally destroy my fragile aspiring-writer ego if it weren't so damn pleasurable to read. I was smiling ear to ear the whole time and frequently laughing out loud, especially at the narrator's letters to her fellow suburban citizens. A seamless, prose-poem-dense satire of the American subdivision landscape and the inane, hilarious consumerism it inspires in its inhabitants. Dutton's tone reminds me of the garrulous, affable narrator of Lyn Hejinian's *A Border Comedy* and the intrepid, enthusiastic essay-narrator of Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Works* and *Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*; in *SPRAWL*, the soft architecture of exterior building decoration (reminiscent of the surface images that architect Thomas Sieverts calls for to beautify drab exurban cityscapes) is transformed into post-Eisenhower-era still lifes of tables, countertops, and poolside barbeques spilling over with an absurd plenitude of foodstuffs. Is this a moral allegory of suburban decay, or of infinite suburban repeatability? I think of Jacques Tati and his comedies about citizens clashing with the outsized scale of their modern environments. But Dutton's clash of scale includes time as well, and that is where I agree with the reviewer below about *SPRAWL* being a terrifying book. I read it slowly over two weeks, but absorbed several centuries' worth of sensations & ideas in the process. This book will be pinging around like a tiny silver ball in my intuitive subconscious for a very long time.

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## **Tony says**

A single paragraph of barely-connected images and scenes that capture the slow motion crawl of thousands of tiny flashing things going by your mind's eye in a gently settling flurry of dust motes blown by sun-drenched suburban visions that breathe in security and out anxiety in specific rooms, streets, geospatial coordinates, and varying states of sexual conditions, ranging from forthright to the brutal socialist honesty of power mismanaged and unforgiven, as each period reaches around itself in the cascade of discrete thoughts for connections to any of the sentences before or after, sometimes connecting, but never allowed to gel into stiffness, always encouraged forward like tiny animals new born into startling completion, then displayed, each thought like a tiny jewel, inset in an array of magnificent difference, and as you look closer at sentence after sentence, following each other like a slideshow that fell to the floor and into a heap of lovely accidents, you see each phrase as a small miracle of concise self-contained consciousness, suspended in a dense foam of like sentences that all make perfect sense, that all are easy to get, needing nothing, coming from nowhere, and going anywhere the reader cares to look. Yes, it's better than I can describe, as a book beyond all compare, a nonesuch in the bookshelf of human thought.

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