Post-Colonial Resignification of Domestic Spatiality in Australian Children's Fiction

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I n colonial literature the imperial centre sets the standard of reality, even in literary geography. Post-colonial literature awakens to its own particular geography as the standard of reality. The periphery writes back to the centre—or rather, it discovers itself as a centre.

(Martin Leer,
'Imagined Counterparts')

In early Australian children's fiction, representations of Australian spatiality reflected a monocultural, homogeneous, egalitarian Anglo-Saxon society with its heart and life in the 'bush'.[1] Since the 1980s there has been a strong desire on the part of a few Australian writers to create more appropriate positive representations of contemporary Australian suburban life styles, with their plural cultures and ethnic diversity. This discussion examines some of the changes and tensions in the Australian cultural context which have been influential in altering the ways that domestic settings, or spatial frameworks, are represented in realist children's fiction by writers like Simon French, Nadia Wheatley and Jenny Pausacker.

For more than a century the majority of Australian children have grown up in a suburban landscape[2]; positive representations and significations of this setting are long overdue in Australian children's fiction. Simon French's novel, **All We Know** (1986), which won the Children's Book Council of Australia's Award for Older Readers in 1987, provides the central focus for an exploration of the recent paradigm shift in children's literature. The contention offered here is that French's novel constructs a dialectic which more comprehensively resignifies Australian literary spatiality in children's fiction than the work of any other Australian children's writer. The settings in French's novel effectively subvert the continuing cultural force of images of 'the real Australians' as being people of the land, or the 'bush'.

Understandings derived from post-colonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back :Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989) are used to help explain the continuation of two traditional paradigms of Australian spatiality long after they had become untenable as representations of contemporary Australian society. The pervasive discourses of the traditional literary paradigms of Australian spatiality function primarily by employing sets of images that construct the Australian landscape in terms of binary opposites. Of

particular interest in this study is the opposition created between the city (as a place of commerce and industry) and 'the bush'. The focus on this opposition has meant that the Australian suburbs—'the middle landscape'—have been either ignored in terms of their contribution to national identity, or else depicted negatively as representing the most aesthetically unappealing and underprivileged aspect of the Australian cultural context.

Post-colonial theory offers analyses of the formation of the colonial subject and the patterns and conditions typical of the colonial literary experience which help to explain the ideological conservatism and static number of settings represented in Australian children's fiction. Australia's Anglocentric spatial history has been constructed in terms of appropriation by imperial voices who named and labelled the topography (Carter 1987). This process has been followed by the development of two distinct paradigms of spatiality. The first, and earlier, is mainly the construct of popular culture of the 1890s and the second is the creation of high culture in the mid-twentieth century. Both of these paradigms offered ongoing representations of the landscape in patriarchal discourses. The settings of popular culture, in the Bush

Tradition, offered protagonists like the rugged bushman and long-suffering 'battlers', who survived in the rural landscape because of their code of mateship which was to make them legendary. In high culture, spatial frameworks were the site of the indefatigable combat of man against an indomitable landscape and this created men who were visionaries, martyrs and heroes.

The first colonial paradigm of Australian spatiality emerged during the 1890s, indicating that the process of 'decolonising of the mind'[3] had begun. The marginalised colonial literary voice appeared in poetry, journalism and short stories to create what is now known in Australian literary history as the Bush Tradition (see Ward 1958; Wilkes 1981). The mythology of the Bush Tradition remains a powerful voice in the Australian cultural context today and continues as a strong force in creating national identity because the stories and poems have remained favourites with Australian adults who pass their love of them on to Australian children. Various editions of these texts are always available and children are introduced to the 'bush' and its legendary figures through picture book editions of single or collected works used at home and in Australian

schools. The iconography continues powerfully as an important part of everyday texts like advertising as well as in artistic and literary texts. The Australian national anthem, 'Advance Australia Fair' and our most popular national song, 'Waltzing Matilda' taught to all children at school, are also from this era and tradition.

By the mid-twentieth century the Bush Tradition was clearly an inaccurate description of the spatiality of most Australian subjects but suburbanised, industrialised spatiality was anathema to those whose ideal construction of Australian identity was based on social schemas derived from the landscape of 1890s mythology. The solution to the dilemma emerged with the second traditional paradigm of Australian literary and artistic spatiality. High culture appropriated and transformed the popular nationalist mythology of the Bush Tradition. The elevation of the wild landscape into high culture meant that the bush became the spatial framework where archetypal myths were enacted. The landscape was represented as infernal and became symbolic of the protagonist's agonised psychic landscape. In this paradigm of spatiality the purpose of the protagonist's quest was for spiritual transcendence rather than for physical domination of

the landscape. The work of a writer like Patrick White and visual artists like Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale exemplify this paradigm.

The dialectic of these two contending paradigms of spatiality within the Australian cultural context offers an explanation for the suppression of the suburb as the spatial framework for Australian children's fiction. An analysis of these two literary traditions of representing Australian spatiality will serve to show how important a change resulted from the writing of Simon French. His novels have been influential among those leading children's literature in Australia away from representations of childhood settings as either pastoral idyll/ adventure or outback disaster adventure.

The continued absence in Australian children's fiction of the unique Australian style of suburban development as the usual spatial framework is symptomatic of an implicit ideology, engendered in colonial people by Anglocentric discourses, that everything colonial is inferior.[4] The spatiality of the suburbs was further marginalised by being ideologically encoded in the Australian cultural context as a domestic and feminine space and therefore represented as a disempowered site in terms of

patriarchal discourses. The suburban landscape was so predominant in Australia after 1950 that the suburbs could no longer be ignored in any analysis or representation of the Australian cultural context, but that did not mean that the suburbs received approval. The vast suburban sprawl and ribbon development of the bungalows on quarter acre blocks had been a focus for vitriolic aesthetic disdain from inside and outside the nation even before 1950. Local scholars and internationally acclaimed Australian experts, like the architect Robin Boyd, who wrote a famous work titled *The Australian Ugliness* , regularly denigrated the suburban landscape (see Sowden 1994).

The texts of these influential people show how imperial discourses constructed the Australian suburb as 'other' to British and European housing norms and thereby effectively marginalised and silenced this landscape for more than a century. The two extracts below, one from the novel *Kangaroo* (1922) by D.H. Lawrence and the other from a feature article by Arthur Koestler, are used as epigraphs in a work of architectural social history, *Living and Partly Living: Housing in Australia* (1971) by Ian Mackay, Robin Boyd, John Mant, and Hugh Stretton. As the extracts are epigraphs and therefore not subject to any

form of critique, they reveal the naturalised ideology of denigration of the Australian suburban domestic spaces and demonstrate how discourses from the imperial centre held sway in the minds of colonial subjects. In his novel, *Kangaroo*, set in Australia, Lawrence wrote:

> *Each little bungalow was set in its hand-breadth of ground, surrounded by a little wooden palisade fence. And there went the long street, like a child's drawing, the little square bungalows dot-to-dot, close together and yet apart, like modern democracy, each one fenced round with a square rail fence. The street was wide, and strips of worn grass took the place of kerb-stones. The stretch of macadam in the middle seemed as forsaken as a desert,...* (Lawrence 1922 in Mackay *et al* 1971, p.6)

Lawrence's literary description of the suburban landscape is infused with negative connotations not only in terms of its aesthetic failure but also in terms of the atmosphere evoked which impinges upon the subjectivity of the protagonists in his fiction. The repeated use of the diminutive 'little' combined with the qualifier 'hand-breath' denotes something that is small and, in this context, connotes something which is immature and consequently

unsophisticated, especially when the trope of a child's drawing is added. The repeated mention of the fences connotes separation and that creates the atmosphere of alienation. Alienation and isolation are also the essence of the culminating image of emptiness, with the road described as being 'as forsaken as a desert'. In the current climate of decolonising the encoding of the Australian landscape, Lawrence's Anglocentric encoding of desert as an empty place now appears quite anachronistic because it would seem to be the view of someone who is uninformed.

Arthur Koestler's non-fiction is not as heavily layered with negative ideological implications as Lawrence's literary writing. Koestler's purpose is different, being to describe the landscape in terms of the form and function of the man-made environment and then to judge the construction in terms of his Eurocentric aesthetic framework.

> *So the continent holds two world records: first, in cramming nearly everybody into the towns; second in providing them with such lavish amounts of living space per head that the towns keep bursting and spilling their contents farther and farther away from the centre into the blue yonder. The first process*

precipitates urbanisation, the second suburbanisation; the first concentrates, the second dilutes. If you were to draw a map of Australia in the manner of an astronomical chart, the big towns would not be stars but spiral nebulae.

(Koestler 1969 in Mackay *et al* 1971, p.7)

The negative connotations of Koestler's discourse are quite obvious. Koestler's evaluations are contrastive, with the imperial centre providing the norms against which evaluations were made. It is interesting to see that the concept of 'centre' is uppermost in Koestler's thinking: choosing to be on the periphery is irrational and dangerous. The 'blue yonder' seems to signify the unmapped which in the cultural schema of the centre meant 'wild'. So Koestler found that the Australian suburbs, compared with British cities, were sites of 'cramming', 'bursting' and 'spilling'. The connotations of these words suggest that suburbia is out of control and that it needs to be taken in hand and cleaned up. Koestler's meaning in terms of an ultimate judgement of the built Australian landscape may seem somewhat ambiguous since the final comparison between star and spiral nebulae is one that denotes difference rather than preference: both are natural spectacles and presumably both are visually impressive.

Denigration of human subjects because of the suburban landscape they inhabit is both explicit and implicit in Koestler's text and even more in the literary writing of Lawrence. These texts typify those that created the stereotypes about the effects of suburban spatiality on human subjectivity—alienation, isolation and conformity—which intellectuals and artists continued to incorporate into their analyses of the Australian suburban cultural context or in their literary representations of this setting.

A similar sentiment from the influential and esteemed Australian historian, C.M.H. Clark was recorded just the year before, in his revised edition of *A Short History of Australia*, and is quoted in the *Penguin New Literary History of Australia*:

> *It seemed as though from Darwin to Hobart and from Broome to Brisbane suburbia was to be the last fate of a country which in previous generations had produced...a W.C. Wentworth, a Ned Kelly, a Robert O'Hara Bourke.*
> (Hergenhan 1988, p.283)

Lawrence, Koestler and Clark are operating within a cultural ideology that believes landscape, place, or locality can determine human subjectivity. By then invoking the traditional paradigms of Australian spatiality it followed that those who grew up in the bush would become vital individualists while those who grew up in the suburbs would presumably become the binary opposite of a vital individualist, which is represented as being a very unfortunate destiny. Donald Horne's comment in *The Lucky Country*, (1964) that 'the profusion of life doesn't wither because people live in small brick houses with red tiled roofs', was apparently the cry of a voice in the wilderness (quoted in Hergenhan 1988, p.281).

The post-1980 emergence of a clear paradigm shift in artistic representations of Australian suburban spaces, not only in the depictions in literary settings but also in the pluralising of the significations attributed to these settings, is confirmed by the research of the Australian cultural analysts, Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe in their groundbreaking cultural study, *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs* (1994). The texts of these cultural commentators and the children's novels written by Simon French offer Australian society reflections of itself in discourses that indicate a vital stage has been reached in the Australian post-colonial experience, where 'the process of self-apprehension'[5] is sufficiently developed so that

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our social analyses can now be self-reflexive rather than contrastive with transplanted Anglocentric literary standards and cultural norms as has been the case in the past.

The essays in *Beasts of Suburbia*, to a variable extent, discuss both concepts of 'the suburbs' and 'suburbia' and articulate the 'complexity and diversity' of the suburban domestic spaces. Despite the discourses of power that have operated to impose control over suburban space—whether in suburban planning, building style, or decoration—all the essayists confirm that suburbs are hybridised sites with many cultures. They find the early ideas of town planners erroneous in their belief that 'space was a key factor in determining the physical and metaphysical make-up of the subject', and proceed to argue overwhelmingly that generalisations about human subjectivity should not be drawn from external observations of the built features of the suburban landscape.

In the introduction to *Beasts of Suburbia*, Chris Healy establishes a careful re-definition of the suburbs which draws a useful theoretical distinction between the terms, 'suburb' and 'suburbia'. This allows a recuperation of the word 'suburb', freeing it to

name real contemporary places without the negative aesthetic connotations attached to it by the hegemonic discourse of Anglocentric high culture, the discourse which, throughout the first part of this century, constructed the 'Beasts' of Australian suburban spatiality:

> *Real suburbs are never as they were remembered but are always in a state of transformation. In some ways suburbia does not have a geographical location. Suburbia has been a way of identifying traces which are not, perhaps never were, really present. Thus suburbia has been a way of talking about other things; about change, family, community, childhood, and the tenuous habits we sometimes name as tradition. Suburbia names an imagined place which can hold together and enunciate a sometimes attenuated sense of self in the world.*
> (Healy in Ferber *et al* 1994, p.xvii)

If Helen Tiffin is correct to say that 'Decolonisation is a process, not arrival' (1987, p.17) then the writing of Simon French is a part of the decolonisation of spatio-temporal frameworks in Australian children's literature. All We Know is mostly set in suburban environments which are predominantly encoded as unsignifying. The meanings attributed to suburban places

are determined by the values and attitudes ascribed to them by human subjectivity. Tensions may arise between the protagonists as a result of their valuing spaces and places in significantly different ways. Further, the significance of a place will alter over time, because every place, like every person, is subject to change. In All We Know, the subjectivity of the main protagonist, eleven year old Arkie Gerhardt, evolves as she continually reassesses and reinterprets her everyday experiences in the light of the people and places with whom she interacts.

The novel demonstrates the dual concepts of the suburb as 'actual place' and 'always in a state of transformation', and suburbia as 'an imagined place' largely constructed from memories. The achievement of All We Know is that the narrator largely avoids 'pure hatred or mad love' of any setting and instead establishes a dialectic about issues to do with Australian spatiality which remains genuinely open-ended. The 'suburbia' represented in this text exemplifies the revisionary ideas outlined by *Beasts of Suburbia*. The discourse of the text constructs a dialectic about the meaning of social concepts like family, community and community space, childhood, and change. Change is certainly the predominant issue in the

life of the main focalising protagonists. French represents the plurality of the social context in the Australian suburbs which is a long way from 'stultifying conformity'. In this novel there is a representation of suburban spatiality that demonstrates Chris McAuliffe's concept of 'a fascination with the "minor languages" of suburbia' (McAuliffe in Ferber et al 1994, pp.94-110).

French's All We Know offers readers a wide range of Australian settings, from the inner suburban localities, to the centre of the city of Sydney, to low density and high density suburban localities, to the countryside or 'bush' landscape and country town settings. There are streetscapes, townscapes, panoramic vistas and domestic spaces which represent everything from the characteristic Australian low density suburban bungalow on the quarter acre block to a North Shore mansion in a wealthy and prestigious suburb. All of these settings are constructed by French as places with a range of possible significations which are as varied as the human subjects who encounter them. French's realism maps moments of encounter within spatial frameworks which allow the protagonists to continually reassess and reinterpret their everyday experiences. French's

novel shows the subjectivity of his characters developing as they sense spaces of wholeness as well as engaging emotionally with the inevitability of constant transformation within and without.

French's positive representations of the suburban street detail the ambient sights, sounds and smells of these public suburban thoroughfares which completely subvert the constructions offered by Lawrence in his literary depictions of the 1920s suburban street and by mid-century artists like Charles Blackman in his celebrated painting, *The Shadow* (1953). In this painting a school girl walks alone and defeated in the hot suburban street where 'Suburban bungalows repeated without ostensible variation, rendered in sharp geometric angles and casting menacing shadows, prove a malignant background indeed for Blackman's schoolgirl.' (Sowden 1994, p.85). It is clear that French is resignifying the suburban street because his depiction of Ramsay Street, where Arkie and her family live, is full of warmth. The suburban street has a culturally diverse population who undertake their varied routines of work and leisure freely, impinging upon one another's lives as need or desire determines and thus denying suggestions of alienation and

that the suburbs, as a whole, operate like Michel Foucault's panoptic penal system imposing spatial and temporal entrapment (see Sowden) on its human subjects:

The bedroom windows offered a staggeringly good view of Ramsay Street. From her seat at the work table, Arkie could see directly into the loungeroom of Sean Taylor's flat, because his block of units was on the other side of the vacant block. She could see the large truck that belonged to Adam Black's dad and was always parked in the very same spot. At weekends, she knew whenever Voula's Greek relatives were visiting, because the kerb would be jammed with shiny cars from another suburb, and there would be a dozen or so immaculately dressed children playing in the front yard of the units where Voula lived. Sometimes she spotted Kylie's father arriving at weekends to take her out, and later dropping her off home again. There were groups of high school kids too who sat on the fences on Saturdays and Sundays and paced up and down to the shopping centre and the beach. And right now, there were a couple of kids from Arkie's class at school lazily riding pushbikes in a meandering course down the centre of the road. (pp.35-6)

This literary depiction of the suburban street represents it as a space of sociability; it is both

a playground and meeting ground and a decolonised space in terms of parental control. Far from depicting suburban alienation here, French evokes a strong sense of community in Ramsay Street of which Arkie feels very much a part. The household membership and organisations are varied and predominantly post-nuclear family; the occupations and socio-economic status of families cover a wide range. These households do not have divided domestic responsibilities based on gender or on 'breadwinner' roles. Interests of the householders are detailed: the football games in the street, bike riding in the vacant block or Michael's backyard; the children informally visiting one another's homes; and in the sharing of skills and resources, such as we see with Michael and the mechanics at the local garage. Jo and Ian love the computer games in the take-away food shop while the video shop is considered essential to leisure and entertainment by Kylie and her mother. Arkie and her peers can go roller skating, surfing, see films and go to the zoo. This suburb is clearly a desirable place in which to be living.

French's vibrant depiction of the business area of the suburb in *All We Know* is alive with interest and constant sensory impact which varies according to the time of day. The

descriptions of the night time suburb with Arkie and her family walking home from the restaurant contrast strongly with the sensory impressions of Arkie's early Sunday morning walk to the newsagent. When the family leaves the restaurant,

> *Outside in the night, a blue and white city bus carried a sprinkling of late workers on to their respective bus stops. The shopfront windows were captured brilliantly by their own night lighting and by the illumination of the streetlamps. A brisk salt breeze blew up from the ocean, and mum, Michael, Arkie and Jo walked home in the cool.*

> *'We should've driven to the restaurant,' Jo mumbled, and jogged on ahead, his nylon jacket flapping and rustling.* (p.68)

In this streetscape there is a strong sense of the night as offering an enveloping and calming atmosphere; offering a, now welcome, separation from the warmth and noisy sociability of the restaurant. An atmosphere of the day winding down is encoded in the discourse by words like 'sprinkling', 'late' and 'walked home'. But the setting shows that it is important to appreciate that the suburb is still functioning, with services like the buses and the street lighting available for those who need them.

The scene in the suburb on a Sunday morning when Arkie sets off with Headley, the family's dog, speaks much more of physical activity and of people energetically engaging with their setting:

> *'Anyone'd think we never exercise you,' she grumbled, straining to keep herself at a walking pace and not to go toppling over as she negotiated the steep section of the road between the house and the blocks of home units. Joggers were out and about in their tracksuits, springing along the footpaths on their side of the main road. Their running shoes tapped and clunked on the cement in an almost military rhythm, and their heaving misted in the cold morning air. A couple of high school boys, clasping waxed surfboards waited at the pedestrian crossing next to the lights, casting anticipatory gazes at the waves kicking and spilling on to the nearby beach.*

> *They're kidding; the water'll be freezing. The municipal pool's bad enough, and it's heated.* (p.76)

The discourse encodes energetic activity and enjoyment of physicality on the part of the people in the suburban space with the joggers and surfers described by words like 'springing along', 'running', 'clasping',

'anticipatory gazes'. The most important aspect of the discourse in both the night and the morning streetscapes is the implication that different human subjects have different attitudes to the spaces in which they find themselves. While the narrator's discourse encodes the joggers and surfers, and the dog, as experiencing the joy of physical exertion, Arkie is not able or willing to share their enthusiasm for exercise or being out in the cold. The streetscape outside the restaurant is again focalised by Arkie who is feeling very happy because she has just been told she can have a bedroom of her own. Thus the streetscape seems vibrant and pleasantly cool to Arkie while Jo finds it cold and wishes they had come by car so they could drive home.

The domestic architecture depicted in **All We Know** defies the descriptions of sterile repetitiveness drawn by Lawrence and Koestler. There is the 'weekender' bungalow with its backyard and garden in the beach-side suburb that Arkie shares with her brother, Jo, their mother, Susan and her partner, Michael; there is Nan's very upper middle class, dignified and elegant North Shore home; there are the home units and flats where Arkie's school friends and their families live; there is the mock Spanish style house with its high protective walls sitting

beside the home units and opposite Arkie's home in Ramsay Street. Michael's rented bungalow, Arkie's home, is depicted as a place of reproduction, maintenance and sociability to use the defining terms of literary depictions of everyday life employed by Mike Featherstone (1992, p.161). Just as Michael knew the history of the building which had become the restaurant, he is also able to give Arkie the spatial history of the bungalow, back to the 1920s when it was a beach house surrounded by bush, until the time when he first moved in,

'...The house was exactly as it is now. The street was a little bit different. Where that Spanish villa thing is, across the road from us, there used to be another weatherboard weekender. And next door to where Kylie lives there was another house. They were both demolished, and I guess there were other houses that have been demolished over the years.'

'Will we get demolished?' Jo asked. He had gradually worked his way through a bowl of black olives that had been set on the table as an entree for the four of them.

'I sure hope not,' said Michael with a sigh. 'It's a bummer about the vacant block being built on, but with a bit of luck we'll be left neighbourless for a while, yet.' (pp.64-5)

As Chris Healy says, 'Real suburbs are never as they were remembered but are always in a state of transformation'. They even disappear completely as is the case with Michael's childhood suburb in Melbourne.

There is a definite lack of gendered spaces within Arkie's household and, rather than contestation about territory and space, there is cooperation to ensure that enough suitable space is available to accommodate varying, changing subjectivities. Arkie and her little brother shared an upstairs bedroom because of the expansive views to the ocean. Now that Arkie feels a lack of privacy and study space the family members gradually clean up the spare room and it evolves into Arkie's space, to be shaped by her subjectivity. She is offered a new view:

'What're you doing?' she called to him through the glass.

He held up a pair of secateurs and called back, 'Giving this bush a slight pruning. Giving you a bit of sunlight and a view.'

'No! too much,' she said loudly, remembering too late that her mum probably had the tape recorder going in the loungeroom. 'I don't want everybody stickybeaking in through the window at me.' (p.83)

This is an important moment in the novel where even the power

of caring must stand checked. The view uncovered by Michael's pruning is very beautiful, equal to the vista from the upstairs window and hence the discourse confirms the goodwill and effectiveness of Michael's caring; but ultimately the purpose of the spare room is to allow further growth of Arkie's independent subjectivity and she is determined to increase her agency in her interpersonal relationships even where this requires checking the good deeds of the people who care for her.

All We Know represents the suburban domestic setting as the normal site for Australian children to grow up. The novel depicts the diversity and complexity of the cultures of the suburbs in a most confronting manner. French's novel asserts that spaces are signified in diverse ways by human subjectivity and that consequently the value and characteristics ascribed to any place will vary according to the human subject's cultural background, experiences of the place and aesthetic framework. This novel takes the settings of Australian children's fiction beyond the boundaries that confined it to depictions of spatiality in rural landscapes and localities. Spatiality and temporality are represented as intertwined and it is suggested that every place is invested with joys, sorrows and secrets

by those who have known it both in the past and in the present. Most certainly, too, every place, like every person, will suffer change.

The recuperation of suburban spatiality has involved asserting the rich possibilities for personal emotional, intellectual and aesthetic growth that is provided by the diverse grouping of people that one finds on a suburban street. It has also required representations of the sense of an available community which is not intrusive but can be an invaluable source of support when needed. Conformity as an essence of suburbia is clearly rejected by French. Suburban domestic architecture is presented as varied in style and constructed and furnished by the occupants to reflect aspects of their subjectivity and socioeconomic status. While alienation is certainly present at times for Arkie, it is represented as a problem to do with human subjectivity and interpersonal relationships, not at all to do with places and spaces. French's novels show that in a built environment, places are in a process of slow but constant transformation and that some places disappear completely from the map, and other places are removed from our personal maps for different reasons, just as people remove themselves from our lives for different reasons.

French represents the plurality of domestic spaces in the Australian suburbs which is a long way from D.H. Lawrence's domestic suburb depicted as being 'as forsaken as a desert'. If All We Know is an articulation of the values and beliefs of our culture it may well be an indication that changes are occurring in our national consciousness. Certainly the writing of Simon French is one clear marker that Australian cultural identity can now be constructed as pluralistic, and that new myths of identity will allow for a broader range of places to be represented in our literature as spatial frameworks for fulfilled and creative lives. As Chris McAuliffe says of those artists who are involved in the rewriting of the ideological significance of Australian suburban spatiality ,

The artists seemed to understand themselves not as mythic Australians nor as citizens of the world but rather, to use the suburban term, as locals.
(1994, p.110)

This is exactly the perspective assumed by the implied author of All We Know in constructing the spatial framework for his text. It reveals that the 'process of self-apprehension', which is a part of decolonising the mind, is well under way. If French's novel is a marker, albeit an exemplary one, of how the

Australian suburbs have become an increasingly foregrounded site for representing environments in which Australian children grow up and where their cultural and ideological subjectivity is framed, then suburbia may well have 'come of age' in Australian children's fiction.

Notes

1. Definitions of 'bush' as an Australian term are found in G.A. Wilkes, *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (1978). The first reference appeared in 1803 in the colony's newspaper, *Sydney Gazette*, but the later definition from *Australia Revisited* (1853), Wilkes, suggests that 'bush' now was 'indiscriminately applied to all descriptions of uncleared land, or to any spot away from a settlement' (pp. 65—66). In the domain of children's fiction scholars have found that the term does not include what contemporary minds would think of as 'wilderness'.

2. The lack of the suburbs as a spatial framework is an extraordinary phenomenon when we consider that the Anglo-European settlers lived predominantly in metropolitan areas on the east coast of the continent. In 1947 the official census figures showed 75% of the population living in urban areas with 50% living in the suburbs of the capital cities. By 1981, 85% of the population was urban dwelling and 60% of the population was attached to the capital cities (See J.C.R. Camm and John McQuilton, *Australians: A Historic Atlas*, 1987, p.33)

3. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's coinage quoted in Giovanna Capone (1994), 'Introduction' to *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*, p. x, in a special edition of *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol 15, No 2.

4. Brian Kiernan writes that, 'It had been observed as a paradox, from at least the end of the last century, that, while Australia was amongst the most urbanised of nations its cultural images and literary settings were drawn preponderantly from the life beyond familiar to the majority of its inhabitants. Almost invariably the explanation given was that of T. Inglis Moore when introducing *Best Australian One Act Plays* in 1937: 'in the country, in the life of the bush....the Australian character has been most fully developed and the tone of the national atmosphere set.' See Kiernan's 'Perceptions, 1915—1965' in Hergenhan 1988, p.273 Contemporary cultural commentators point out the importance of these bush myths of identity in providing a focus for social unity and cohesion in the early decades of this century when there was a great deal of political and economic instability. See Hergenhan 1988, p. 273.

5. This expression was coined by Nigerian post-colonial writer, Wole Soyinka and is quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, p. 17.

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Beverley Pennell was Head Teacher of English for seven years in a co-educational comprehensive high school in NSW. Her special interests in literary theory and children's literature grew from her classroom experiences and motivated her further studies leading to an M.A. from Macquarie University, followed by an M.Ed. (Hons) She is currently working towards her Ph.D in Children's Literature.