

Is Stephen Amidon the David Lynch of American fiction? Joanna Briscoe examines the

TALES OF ORDINARY

boundaries of his sinister suburbia

American literature abounds with minimalists and dirty realists, with cherry-pie sentiment and suburban vernacular. It has its slaves of New York and its John-Boy Waltons, its uptown, its downtown and its celebrated small town. And then it has its subdivision.

Its subdivision, way out where the desert meets the airport and the highway leads to nowhere. Fashioned somewhere between geographical location and the imagination, writer Stephen Amidon's suburban satellites coin a new metaphor, a new language of emotional dereliction that has more soul than the speed rides of the city slickers, less schmaltz than the nostalgia trips of the country cousins.

His collection of short stories, *Subdivision*, precisely evokes the place and the feeling. 'A subdivision is like a suburb without the charm,' says Amidon. 'With a suburb, you sort of think of a green, leafy, jumbled quality, whereas a subdivision is a place without recognisable qualities. In post-World War II America, some rich developers, probably Texans, looked at a map and said, "Here is a desolate place", and they took rulers and drew squares, then they put in streets, and went out and built the things. There's nothing organic about them; they're completely artificial, boxy parcels of land which are then given these fraudulent names like Indian Hills or Leafy Meadows.'

Subdivision is 11 stories set in the same time, the same subdivision, some place, USA. It's all middle-ranking executives, quietly despairing wives and suburban swimming pools. Why would the well-heeled American choose to live in such outposts? 'I think there is still a homesteading spirit in America. If a Frenchman or an Englishman had a choice, he'd say, "Thank you, I'll build in the 14th arrondissement", or whatever, whereas Americans with money don't mind moving out, because they still have that strange visionary quality, a vision that this stretch of desert will be a thriving, wonderful place for the kids to play in the streets in ten years' time.'

Cleverly subverting a genre, Amidon

takes a setting that could become as cosy and incestuous as Peyton Place or Garrison Keillor's classic small town Lake Wobegon, and then writes of total anonymity. *Our Town* it is not. 'I started out with this wonderful idea, *Subdivision*, a book of stories about a particular place and a particular time, with Joyce's *Dublin-*

ers in mind. I started out with people knowing each other but, not very far into it, it occurred to me that that was not what it was about. So the only person who has intimate contact with people in other stories is the woman who rides round in the ambulance scraping them off the pavement.'

The chronicler of this all-American vacuum lives in contented paradox amid the boats and rivers and dappled village greens of Richmond. Cat and pram are parked outside the bay windows of his railway worker's cottage, daughter Clementine is effusive in designer knitwear, and red-headed, micro-skirted wife Caryl is the epitome of British groove. 'I love it,' he says of his patch of Home Counties' Elysium. 'It's wonderful. Old timers and yuppies shoe-horned in with three kids. It's just so different from the bland, cosy American suburbs.'

'I'd wanted to get out of America since I was about twelve. I always felt alienated, always pictured myself living in London or Paris. But I don't want to be British at all. I'll always be American, and I like that. I suppose there's a lot of schizophrenia about it.'

Indeed, he espouses a starkly American idiom undiluted by his Bloomsbury literary activities or his review work for the *Times Literary Supplement*. 'There will be a few years' lag, but I'll start writing about here eventually,' he says. 'Right now, I'm still keeping close to the vest.'

Born in Chicago 31 years ago, Stephen Amidon spent his formative years in

nowheresville, USA. He moved from subdivision to subdivision. 'We'd be in a new house in the middle of nowhere, and in five years there'd be a whole community: they were pretty much interchangeable.'

Amidon is not your average creative-writing-programmed Wasp. Half-Greek, half-rebellious, and way outside the brat-

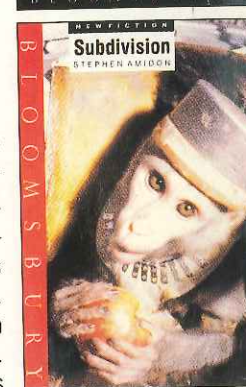
pack mould, he was always something of an outsider. 'I guess that ethnic baggage was a sort of nettle in my side which made me realise I didn't altogether belong in these perfect sanctuaries of security and happiness.' He spent the 80s waiting on tables, bumming around and falling in love. He failed to publish fiction, then got himself snapped up in the UK with *Splitting The Atom*, his brilliant and disturbing exploration of a father-son relationship.

'I had a sort of baptism by fire of American publishing,' he says. 'I sent my writing to an agent, and she called me up one day and said, "I think this is one of the most powerful things I've ever read." A publisher said he would publish it, but he died of AIDS. And my agent disappeared. So at that

point I severed all ties with the US. It was a very easy time to leave America; the mid-80s were not, in my opinion, a really high point in US history. I packed my bags, went to JFK, and haven't been tempted to move back since.'

Of the fabled bratpack—Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz—and their fast-lane novels of the 80s, Amidon says: 'I found the phenomenon quite disturbing. I think in a way they were victimised. They were 24-year-old, 26-year-old kids who were victimised by asinine, salacious publishers. It was all so giddy and Reaganite and designer. Hesitant, charming, perfectly adequate first efforts were ripped from the cradle and thrown under this artificial, stupid spotlight.'

Amidon is post-bratpack, a young



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writer with the weight of 80s minimalism behind him. 'I like a lot of the people who became popular in the 80s, like Raymond Carver and Richard Ford. There was this dirty realist thing that got a lot of attention, but in a way it was a mile wide and an inch deep. You had all these types writing about inexpressive people in

trailer parks in Joplin, Missouri. Now the whole thing seems quite fractured, which is good. The pendulum's swinging back, people are writing picaresque things.'

A voice for the 90s, Amidon is undoubtedly a finer writer than the majority of the whizz kids whose bandwagon he missed. His precise dissections of a

freeze-dried American dream are deeply moving under their clinical facade.

There's a sense of banked-down electricity, of wolves in suburbia; like something out of Saki or Angela Carter, a feral element creeps in. In their attempts to keep their sanctuary regulated, the subdivision dwellers use machinery to zap bugs, electric devices to keep their emotions at bay, only to find their efforts short-circuited with surreal twists. That Amidon manages to convey tragedy beneath the cauterised emotions and non sequiturs is the strength of his peculiar talent.

'The whole idea behind this sort of place is to keep out danger, to keep out the sort of things that would bring character to a place. They try to create these really safe little communities, keeping out the undesirable elements. You build up these tremendously secure fortresses, and there's still cancer, betrayal, things wandering in from the desert.'

Death is omnipresent—sons, grandparents, recalcitrant insects. In *Splitting The Atom*, Matthew's twin, Eddie, dies in a gliding accident on their twenty-second birthday, and Matthew is left to come to terms with both the death and the resulting non-communication between him and his father. The immensely likeable Amidon, quite free from the professional charm and soulful spiel of the average young American artist, betrays nothing of this tragic vision in person.

'There's very little active tragedy in my life, thank God, but I find that I'm only interested in writing about the things that disturb me: that precinct of my imagination where things don't go right is where I tend to create. Unless you're writing comedy, you run the risk of banality if you don't go into the cellar and pull out the nasty bits. And they're there, in everyone. Life in extremes is really where it can find itself. I want to go to this sort of heightened, dangerous place and say, let's talk.'

By doing that, by encapsulating an unsung phenomenon, he may well have created a new American archetype. □

Subdivision is published by Bloomsbury on February 25, price £5.99.



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