

LOOKING FOR 'IT' BY THE SEASHORE

Review of *House Inside the Waves* by Tom Abray
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For one year in the late 1990s, Richard Taylor and his family traded the suburbs of Ottawa for the east coast of Australia. The events of that year form the narrative structure of *House Inside the Waves*. The book is marketed as a memoir but it's more of an extended personal essay than a chronological history, for it touches on various subjects, such as, domestic life, surfing, literature, music, history, and the quest for what the author calls *it*.

Since the birth of his first daughter, Taylor has been what he calls a househusband. So much of *House* deals with domestic experiences that, in the end, the book becomes a testimonial and defense for the stay-at-home dad. In one chapter we are taken back to Ottawa, to a neighborhood park frequented by preschoolers, to learn about the day-to-day life of a "he-mom" trying to become accepted by the "real" moms, and succeeding partly because of his mouthwatering chocolate chip cookies. Having entered the world of "motherhood", Taylor sees the larger world from a revealing perspective. In the middle of recounting the atrocities in Hong Kong during WW II, he suggests that "you have to be in charge of small children to realize how vulnerable and helpless women and kids have always felt in the face of men and the violent political agendas of history" (131).

Unfortunately, the househusband point of view often becomes a filtered lens that renders the world in black-and-white. Taylor quickly classifies each person he meets as either house-husband friendly or house-husband hostile. He approaches strangers apprehensive that they will judge him based on his domestic status - of which he quickly informs them. Understandably, his experience has made him defensive about his domestic role. When he unwittingly happens upon a gay beach and reflects on "how tough it must be to be gay in such a cruel, judgemental, straight world," the words seem to be weighted with relevant personal experience. Still, this does not change the fact that, in places, the househusband lens oversimplifies, perhaps even prejudices, Taylor's writing.

Much of the book honours the authors kindred spirits, Romantic travellers on spiritual quests. Taylor's traveling project goes beyond making his own

voyages; he has studied the subject widely and deeply. The fruits of his reading nourish his own travels. He make sense of his trip to Australia by situating it in a long line of similar quests, whether by Captain James Cook or Bruce Chatwin. At times his discussions of Byron, Gauguin, Kerouac and others have a flat tone of an encyclopaedia entry, but the details recounted are often the lesser-known tidbits of the subject's biography. We learn, for instance, that in addition to Byron's famous Hellespont swim, and numerous other dips in famous European waters, the English poet, "accepted a challenge with other rabid swimmers and started from the Lido and then did the entire length of the Grand Canal, stroking casually into his palace stairs after three hours and forty-five minutes in the drink. And he one. (p84)

The discussions about these romantic figures are used, in the end, to justify Taylor's own domestic situation. He says of Bruce Chatwin, who "died unglamorously of AIDS":

If Chatwin and his wife, Elizabeth, had managed to have the kids they had claimed they wanted, and Bruce had stayed at home to look after them and travel the world the way I do, maybe he'd be alive today. And perhaps he'd have written a book similar to this one. Instead, Chatwin's unconventional marriage had probably allowed him to much leash. (p9)

The lives of Gauguin and Kerouac receive similar diagnoses. Henry Miller, on the other hand, gets the househusband stamp of approval for his years of living as a stay-at-home dad in Big Sur, California, and later writing, "That's the hardest thing to ask a man to do - take care of tots from three to five years of age... It was something I'll never forget." (P190) Taylor points out that the difference between the Romantics who died tragically young and Miller, who lived until the age of eighty-nine, is that Miller "discovered the secret to day-to-day happiness." The secret, it is implied, is kids.

Taylor's own day-to-day happiness comes not only from his family, though, but also from his love for the ocean, for swimming, and for surfing. Many sections of the book read like odes to the Pacific. His passion for surfing invigorates a text. The colorful descriptions of waves evoke a sense of the divine, primal fear, and sexual anticipation. The detail that triggers in me the first flash of fig physical helplessness is the oceanic suck that pulls the water off the beach "all the way to South America or Antarctica" (p149) as the sea gathers itself in order to produce the next wave.

The subjects touched on in the memoir foster lively and informative discussion, but they might not be sufficiently interrelated and contained if it were not for the sea. An intimate knowledge of this scene might be - and has been for many seekers before - the closest thing to an intimate knowledge of *it*. Taylor says in the Prologue, "I had always wanted to sit by a window overlooking the Sea and write a book about the Big Mystery. (p5) There have been many books about the sea and the big mystery. This one contributes to the genre by giving us a father's perspective from the home inside the waves.