

ON THE BEACH

House Inside the Waves Reviewed by Ray Robertson
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An Ottawa English prof ponders bliss on Australia's Coast.

Ray Robertson



House Inside the Waves is the sort of book that justifies the existence of the small presses. Where else could a book that is equal parts travelogue, literary criticism, memoir, history, surfing guide and househusband how-to find a home? Imagine such a messily heterogeneous volume being discussed around a sales conference table at one of the bigger houses; one can almost hear the frustrated howls of confusion and complaint. It's the same reason even a steady-selling author such as American Jim Harrison chooses to publish his novels with a larger house but his poetry with a university press. Keep the economic expectations low and concentrate on creating the best literary product one can.

When the job of Ottawa-based author and Carleton University English teacher Richard Taylor's wife offers the couple the opportunity of a house exchange on the east coast of Australia, the family leaps. Not only is Taylor a long-time surfing enthusiast and the surf is rarely up on the Rideau Canal, but he and his wife of 22 years, "wanted to see if it was possible to



Dale Taylor / From *House Inside the Waves*

have one last blazing adventure before who knows what domestic surprises swamped us in the future. For too many years we'd been based in the heart of suburbia with only the smell of Bounce fabric softener in the air, row upon row of beige vinyl-sided houses, very few trees, and our grinding routine of schedules." Mid-life crises are no less real for being so predictably banal. Perhaps that's precisely what makes them crises.

Once ensconced in their new ocean view home on the Queensland-New South Wales border, Taylor gets the

kids their breakfast and off to school, kisses his wife on her way out the door to work, waxes up his surfboard, unpacks his favourite books, and settles into a pleasant routine of alternately searching for the big one and cogitating at his desk overlooking Seven Mile Beach. Here, Taylor sets about doing what he's always wanted to do: "sit by a window overlooking the sea and write a book about the Big Mystery."

Taylor, uncommonly, is as equally enthusiastic about the mysteries of the natural world as he is of the mental, capable of appreciating both "the rolling swells of the Coral Sea...happy paddling out into the glorious surf... after the emotional pistol whipping my two daughters administered to me this morning while I refereed them up through venomous snakes and poisonous spiders to their school bus" and the joyful kick of Henry Miller's prose and Bruce Chatwin's restless intelligence.

Not surprisingly, his personality as manifest in *House Inside The Waves* presents several intriguing dichotomies for consideration: dutiful house-husband and awed ogler of bronzed Australian beach flesh; hard-body surfer dude and new-age sensitive guy; writer and intellectual and expert chocolate chip cookie baker. The only real constant is an earnest passion for whatever his hands find to do. Anyone capable of enthusing, "I always feel like a million bucks when I'm hanging the wash," probably doesn't need to read D.H. Lawrence to crack the Big Mystery of human happiness.



Taylor

The flip side of being all things to all readers is risking that your work will be fully satisfying to one in particular - of potentially sacrificing quality for quantity. Throughout *House Inside The Waves* Taylor provides, among other things, an entertaining and informative history of Australia, a lively gloss on the writers who have helped shape his consciousness and the rudiments of his autobiography, all of which (and more) amount to just what one assumes he intends: a portrait of the middle-aged, married, father-of-two artist taking stock of his life.

To truly enjoy *House Inside The Waves*, however, it's best to focus on the forest and not the trees. Otherwise, taken on their own, the historical gleams derivative (Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* is just one of several histories that Taylor does little more than paraphrase in order to create his

own chronicle), the literary reads superficial (Henry Miller is pronounced "an original," Jack Kerouac as "adored by readers and misunderstood by tight-assed critics") and the autobiographical becomes clumsily self-congratulatory ("Our bank account is always overdrawn, but our soul account is perpetually brimming").

Still, what points Taylor loses in precision he gains in pluck. Any writer who includes, in the same book, a coconut chocolate chip recipe, an appraisal of the worth of Jack London's novels and an account of the proper way to catch a wave cannot be accused of aesthetic anemia. This is no small praise in our present literary climate. As Taylor himself quotes from a character in Alexander Solzenitsyn's *First Circle*: "It's better to drown in the ocean than in a puddle."

Torontonian Ray Robertson's most recent book is the novel Moody Food (Doubleday Canada).