

An assemblage of habits: DJ Waldie and Neil Campbell—a suburban conversation.

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## "An Assemblage of Habits": D. J. Waldie and Neil Campbell —A Suburban Conversation

D. J. Waldie, Neil Campbell

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### Abstract

This is a conversation between Californian writer D.J. Waldie and British academic Neil Campbell that took place in Los Angeles in January 2011. The discussion is mainly focused on the memoir *Holy Land* written by Waldie and published in 1996 but ranges across a number of associated and related issues to do with perceptions and revisions of the idea of suburbia. Waldie is explicit about the origins of the memoir and his reasons for wanting to write a book for his "neighbors" that would present a world that was truthful to the multiplicitous and complexly negotiated experiences of contemporary American suburban life.

**“AN ASSEMBLAGE OF HABITS”:  
D. J. WALDIE AND NEIL CAMPBELL—  
A SUBURBAN CONVERSATION**

Los Angeles, January 5, 2011

D. J. Waldie is a contributing writer at *Los Angeles* magazine and a contributing editor for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He also blogs for Los Angeles public television at [www.kcet.org](http://www.kcet.org). Waldie is the author of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996) and other books on the cultural history of Southern California. He was formerly the deputy city manager of Lakewood.

Neil Campbell: I want to start with what I call “the emotional weight” of *Holy Land* and specifically its movement from what you might call the almost documentary account of Lakewood to the interspersed and more obviously personal moments and family history. I think it is the contrast between those two tones that readers respond to which gives the book an affective quality. I know writers don’t like talking about intentions as such, but I am interested in your thoughts about these points.

D. J. Waldie: *Holy Land* began initially in 1990 as a series of connected short stories. I thought I would write about my place using stories as the vehicle for reflecting on the character of the suburb in which I’ve lived my entire life. That plan didn’t work out very well. I eventually discovered I wasn’t much of a fiction writer. But I had by then assembled a fair amount of documentary material about the making of Lakewood and the evolution of my community. As Lakewood’s public information officer, I had access to what little historical material is available at City Hall, and I had done some modest research of my own. As I continued to gather these materials, I discovered that the materials themselves—the anecdotes, the bits and pieces of local history, and my own story—suggested an approach that might be far more fruitful and more interesting than some short stories that didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

Initially, then, *Holy Land* began as a mass of fragments drawn from distant memory, newspaper morgues, my own experience, library research, and the stories passed on from the earliest residents. Throwing these het-

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