

Introduction to *Suburban Sprawl*

Roberta Lee

I started writing the series of stories that I eventually decided to call *Suburban Sprawl* with the simplest of goals: I wanted to write honestly. I've read a great deal of fiction that pulls back from human nature and is in essence judgmental of its own cast of characters, where the writer clearly either shied away from or edited-out a lot of the traits that make real people so fascinating . . . and so confusing.

Our own self-destructive habits, contradictions, compulsions--the ultimate mystery of our own hearts and the even more impenetrable secrets of others--those facets make people nuanced and interesting. It seems to me that you can "know" someone for a lifetime, and still be surprised by something they reveal, whether intentionally or by accident. And that's a very cool thing. Therefore, I try my best not to pigeonhole my characters as heroes or villains, as bad or good. And that's my definition of honest writing: allowing your characters to tell their own stories, without imposing moral judgments on them, without censoring them.

Another goal that I set for myself as a writer with these stories was to work within the framework of what are obviously archetypal story lines. The novels in *Suburban Sprawl* have familiar plots; Laura at one point in *The Liar's Guide* points this out to her shrink, Rich, when she summarizes her relationship with Jack by saying. "It's the oldest story in the world, really. Girl meets boy. Boy is married. Boy dumps girl. Girl is crushed."

She then goes on to say, "You must get tired of it, sometimes, hearing the same tired old stories, over and over again."

And Rich replies, "The thing is, it's always a different story, each and every time. It's the details, you see, the details that give life its texture, its nuances, its meaning. And the details are always different."

I agree with him, and would add that those same old plots are used so often for a reason, it's because they resonate with us on a primordial level. So my books use plots that sound trite when described in bare bones fashion, yet (I hope) can also be read as being about deeper matters--or not. I hope my books can be read simply as love stories, ghost stories, murder plot stories; funny stories, erotic stores, creepy stories--just plain old fashioned entertaining stories.

While on this subject, I want to say a few words about the paranormal element that threads through all the books in *Suburban Sprawl*. On one level, I'd say that ghost stories are always metaphoric, which explains their universal appeal. They are stories about being haunted by the past. As such, it seems a natural fit for Laura, who has a whole lot of past to be haunted by. However, within the universe of *Suburban Sprawl*, the ghosts in the books are taken literally and exist as fully formed characters . . . who just happen to be dead.

I should probably also shout out a thank you to the real landscape upon which I have (very loosely) based the world of *Suburban Sprawl*. I live in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, which is a suburb less than an hour north of Philadelphia. I was out running errands today, and as I drove up route 611 from Target to Home Depot, it struck me how transitional this area is. Tucked between the looming new outdoor malls and big box megaplexes are the remaining vestiges of the past: crumbling strip malls as well as skanky strip clubs, businesses housed in low, rambling buildings unchanged since the '60s and a few nasty shot-and-beer bars interspersed among the happy-happy chain McRestaurants.

The Bar Exam--the strip club in my books--belongs there, as does Redbones, the disreputable bar where if you asked for a flavored martini you'd be told you have two choices: gin flavored, and vodka flavored.

But the country club where Jack and Tommy golf also belongs in that landscape, as well as the upscale new development where Debbie lives, and the lost-in-time back road where Laura's crazy old haunted house is hidden.

You'll notice that I marked *Suburban Sprawl* and all the books within it as being explicit. They contain adult language and situations, explicit sexual content, drug use and some violence, as well. All of course justified--going back to that caveat of writing honestly.

As far as deeper meanings and symbolism--all that stuff--it's there, in *Suburban Sprawl*, but hopefully it doesn't smack you upside the head. My characters are all on quests--for self-acceptance, for creative and spiritual awareness. They sense the need to lead more integrated lives, but the habits they've developed often are very much at odds with that worthy goal, so their success in achieving any of that is limited at best. That's also about as honest appraisal of the human condition as I'm capable of stating.

In closing, I want to thank you for your interest in the novels of *Suburban Sprawl*, and hope you enjoy reading them and/or listening to the Podcasts of my books as much as I have enjoyed writing them!