

would be so dedicated to preserving the value of a neighborhood that they'd countenance foul play.

It is especially difficult to persuade the reader to suspend disbelief when supernatural elements are introduced since he or she is someone whose logical mind believes everything can be explained and controlled through science and the law. But Little succeeds in making the supernatural believable, if just for a moment, because his characters react the way we all would when confronted with something so outside of our own realm of experience. At first, his characters don't believe in the supernatural; instead, they desperately search for a rational explanation for the truly extraordinary events they've witnessed. By the time these characters are willing to accept the presence of a supernatural agency, it's nearly too late for them to do much about the situation they're in. This is why finally Little is able to transcend the limitations of his plot. *Neighborhood Watch* is simply about an evil neighborhood association, while *The Association* is about what happens when we're willing to give up too many of our liberties, our freedoms to, in exchange for freedoms from, which is an especially powerful message at a time when people are seeing terrorists behind every bush.

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failing to abide by a relatively trifling rule, they discover they've been actively deceived about the nature of their contract. The real estate agent who sold them the house rather sheepishly admits that she had to "undersell" the neighborhood association aspect of the property if she ever wanted to do any business with Bonita Vista subdivision, the biggest game in a relatively small town.

In the beginning, the rules seem to be merely overly concerned with conformity in all things in an effort to preserve property values. For example, residents can't paint their homes unapproved colors; nor can they conduct business in their homes or landscape in a way that doesn't blend in with the natural beauty of the area. And anyone unhappy about the Association, such as the working class townies or people who've had run-ins with this entity, can be dismissed as individuals with a case of sour grapes or an ax to grind. Mind you, the Association at first does seem to genuinely function with the residents' interests at heart. One day while jogging, Maureen is accosted by a drifter who follows her home. The Association security patrol immediately captures said drifter and turns him over to the town authorities, then installs a huge security gate at the community's entrance. Other strange phenomena such as the armless, legless, and tongueless homeless man who "chooses" to live in the woods near Bonita Vista are so bizarre that they can't be incorporated into any mundane version of reality, let alone attributed to the Association. Thus, Barry and Maureen's failing to leave is understandable.

When a particularly vocal opponent of the Association falls to his death from his balcony and Bonita Vista's gay and cohabiting couples suddenly disappear, the Welches become worried and decide to see if they can simply sell their home and move. But they have no such luck. The neighborhood association has put a lien against their property because the Welches have so far refused to pay fines they find unjust. Meanwhile, Bonita Vista's written rules seem to change magically, with reprinted pages suddenly appearing in the Welches' own personal copy of the C C & R's. On one occasion, Barry brings home some residents from nearby Corbin, only to discover the next day that socializing with townies is actually illegal. Barry calls his attorney friends from Los Angeles for help, but even they're outmatched. After a day, one of his friends disappears while walking the woods, and the other is told he cannot remain within the confines of Bonita Vista because his wife is not a Caucasian. Barry's friends soon leave, frightened by the strange things that happen in this small town that seems fully capable of operating outside of the law.

Meanwhile, like all big entities that can operate unchecked, the Association is becoming an unstoppable beast whose goal is to devour or assimilate everyone in its path. The Bonita Vista Neighborhood Association isn't content to remain independent of the outlying town of Corbin and their meager social services and tax base. It wants to incorporate Corbin and its residents, and thus the townies' pets and children begin to disappear. Finally, Barry must confront the Association's mysterious president, whom no one has seen.

Where *Neighborhood Watch* is just competent, *The Association* is masterful. A challenge faced by all horror writers is getting readers to "believe," if just for a little while, in the fantastic beings that plague their characters. This is called suspension of disbelief. *Neighborhood Watch's* plot holes make it difficult for the reader to suspend disbelief even if this weren't a horror novel. Neiderman's main characters are annoyingly gullible, and it's pretty hard to swallow that people

luxurious digs, which perhaps explains why they so quickly sign the final paperwork before reading the fine print. It later comes as a shock to Mrs. Morris who is taking out the garbage when she is chastised by Nikki Stanley, the neighborhood's committee maven, for violating rules about the proper placement of trash for collection. The Morrises are again taken aback when the committee discovers that they've acquired a dog, yet another violation of the rules, and demands they get rid of it. The Morrises soon learn the hard way that the courts tend to uphold rules issued by such communities, no matter how petty or intrusive, and families must comply with the committee's wishes or be fined.

But the creepy conformity of Emerald Lakes isn't just enforced through the C C & R's. A sophisticated system of organized gossip and shunning is also in place to coerce the wayward. Nicki Stanley makes it clear to Mrs. Morris that socializing with people outside of Emerald Lakes is frowned upon, and residents openly resentful of the committee's powers to control are also shunned. Furthermore, residents' personal data is open for public inspection in the form of the Emerald Lakes directory, which publishes information gleaned from her gynecologist about Kristen's recent miscarriage.

Spontaneity is similarly discouraged. A family on the outs with the committee is fined when their children dangle a broken garbage can from the garage roof in order to create a makeshift basketball goal. And children let off the bus after school are reminiscent of the children in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Stepford Children* in the way they quietly walk to their homes. Absent is any mirth at being free for the day.

Inevitably the Morrises have had enough of the committee's reign of terror and opt to fight, and this battle reveals that there are worse fates in Emerald Lakes than being fined or finding oneself the subject of Nikki Stanley's scurrilous gossip. People not wholly enthusiastic about the Emerald Lakes way of life find themselves victims of stillbirths or break-ins by the security guards themselves, or they "decide" to commit suicide. These things can ultimately be laid at the feet of Philip Slater, who will stop at nothing to impose his vision on Emerald Lakes.

Little's *The Association* follows the same plot line of *Neighborhood Watch*, but is a much more effective piece of horror because the author examines the psychology behind these sorts of communities. Neiderman's novel leaves unanswered some important questions: The Morrises are educated people, so why then, did they fail to read the fine print of the contract? And why did the Morrises continue to live in Emerald Lakes after discovering that the neighborhood association had the legal right to enforce these rules? They're not adequately developed as characters who enjoy fighting The Man, so their desire to stay and duke it out with the neighborhood association is puzzling, especially when a house in a location desirable to others could be easily sold at a tidy profit.

Little obviously had these questions in mind when writing his novel. In *The Association*, Barry and Maureen Welch *did* read the fine print when purchasing their house. But Bonita Vista's neighborhood association isn't like any other entity they have ever encountered. Even Maureen, in her capacity as an accountant, has dealt only with corporations and large organizations such as the IRS that, if not known for their commitment to fair play, at least operate according to a set of knowable rules. After Barry and Maureen receive their first citation from the Association for

# Resistance Is Futile! You Will Be Assimilated: A Review of *Neighborhood Watch* by Andrew Neiderman and *The Association* by Bentley Little

by June Pulliam

*Neighborhood Watch*, Andrew Neiderman. New York: Pocket Books, 2001. 326 p.

*The Association*, Bentley Little. New York: Signet, 2001, 436 p.

It's fairly unusual that two horror novels about a very specific theme—gated communities and the often overzealous neighborhood associations that administrate their Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions—should be released within a year of one another, even more unusual that I should unwittingly pull from the *Necropsy* Bookshelf the newer Bentley Little novel immediately after finishing the older Andrew Neiderman novel when I was randomly selecting texts for review. Let's face it: there just aren't that many horror novels written about this subject (Gloria Naylor's 1985 novel *Linden Hills* is the only one that comes to mind).

But when I thought about it, I realized that it shouldn't strike me as surprising that these two writers have recently hit upon this theme, since more people of means are opting to move into gated communities with security guards that keep out the riff raff, and lists of nit picky by-laws requiring residents to decorate with only white Christmas lights and refrain from parking pickup trucks within in plain view are more common. Even rapper Master P, owner of No Limit records, moved into one of these communities rather than live in suburban Baton Rouge. Gated communities themselves hardly need any embellishment or supernatural elements to seem horrific to your average citizen. It's sufficiently frightening that places exist where a neighborhood committee can legislate landscaping and the color a resident is allowed to paint her house, let alone that people pay for the privilege of living in places that take pride in curbing individuality in the name of maintaining high property values.

In *Neighborhood Watch*, Andrew Neiderman doesn't have to do much to transform his fascist Stepford suburbia into something truly sinister. Emerald Lakes is sort of a malignant Celebration, U.S.A. (the hyper-planned community in Orlando, Florida run by the Disney Corporation). The houses, thanks to the vision of the developer Philip Slater, are similar in the most minute details—kitchen pantries in each house are exactly the same, and residents dare not move the furniture that comes with the homes because it was arranged by a decorator and all fits so perfectly. People can leave their keys in their cars because the neighborhood security guards check that doors are locked at night and stop all out-going vehicles to ensure the lawful owner is driving.

The Morris family innocently purchases a home in the exclusive Emerald Lakes subdivision. Although Dr. Morris is a successful physician, he and his wife are surprised they can afford such