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What We've Lost Is Nothing by Rachel Louise Snyder
(review)

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To watch the people go to work, to watch my dad get up . . . it was mesmerizing because this was what America was about. This is what we all worked for: to make the corporation their money, so that we could get on with our lives. People tended to their houses. Everyone owned a vehicle. Everyone was a part of the community. Community was home. And it was wholesome. Church was a necessity. You had to belong to a church in order to be a part of the community. And to see this wholesomeness was like, this is life. This is what we lived for. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed going to work. I enjoyed being with my coworkers, because this is what we lived for. . . . And as this was taken away, to see the abandoned houses, packing up, to see the storefronts closing, to see the devastation of the joblessness, because the small shops fed the big shops. It was a ripple effect. It was a domino effect. It was an effect that didn't hurt just me; it hurt the guy in the small shop, the guy in the smaller shop, because we all worked as one. And to see this community start actually going down the tubes and down the drain was devastating. It was devastating because this is what I called home. This is what I still call home. Because I never left. And now, to this day, it's starting to bud again, it's starting to rebuild.

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Rachel Louise Snyder, *What We've Lost Is Nothing*. New York: Scribner, 2014. 302 pp. \$25.00.

Ernest Hemingway reportedly said that Oak Park was a place of broad lawns and narrow minds. Since Hemingway's time, this suburb, whose eastern border looks across Austin Boulevard to Chicago's predominantly African American West Side, has continually worked to refute Hemingway's alleged remark with programs promoting integrated housing and community building under the auspices of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center. In her well crafted debut novel, *What We've Lost is Nothing*, Rachel Louise Snyder interrogates this commitment, thoughtfully examining the complexities that result when the ideal of a multicultural community clashes with the realities of early twentieth century life.

When eight homes on Oak Park's Ilios Lane are burglarized in April 2004, their residents are brought face to face with these complexities, as well as with the ways in which their own prejudices and limitations have contributed to the disconnect between the Oak Park ideal and the quotidian of village life. Through the skillful management of narrative structure in this novel, which takes place over a twenty-four-hour period, Snyder shows us the patterns of isolation, ignorance, prejudice, and failures of communication that have characterized interactions, not only among the residents of Ilios Lane, but within their own families.

Susan McPherson, whose job with the Oak Park Diversity Assurance project involves promoting integration and community on Oak Park's east side apartment complexes, conceives of her duties as "about creating a community even for renters, where you knew who lived next door, and in this way you all kept one another safe and happy and feeling as if you were part of something" (62). Ironically, Susan does not even know her own neighbors; moreover, she and her husband Michael are unaware of their daughter's compulsion to rise socially among her peers, a need that prompts her to skip school, do drugs, and seek out the sexual attentions of Caz, a delinquent schoolmate from a broken home.

Thus, the McPhersons have no idea that Mary Elizabeth is home during the burglaries. She is lying under the dining room table, high on ecstasy with Sofia Oum—a Cambodian classmate and neighbor—who subsequently runs home, hides in the bushes, and abdicates her role as interpreter for her immigrant parents who are struggling through a police interview. Arthur Gardenia, another neighbor, has been living reclusively and venturing out only at night due to a progressive eye disease. Yet another Ilios Lane resident, Etienne Lenoir (real name Edward), has told everyone he is traveling in France while actually hiding out at home and mourning his failing French restaurant that is not a good fit for the community. All of these failures of communication and community among the Ilios Lane residents suggest how far they have fallen short of what Susan believes Oak Park stands for: "progressivism, tolerance, community in idealized form" (60). The two violent incidents that end the novel confront us with the serious consequences that can accompany such a failure of ideals.

The title of the novel invites serious reflection, evidenced by its recurrence at key times during the narrative. Michael, who has assumed the role of neighborhood spokesman, tells the press that "[f]or us, what we've lost is nothing compared to what we in this neighborhood, on this street,

will always have” (13). Yet Michael is quick to suspect people he identifies as foreigners—Sofia’s cousins and also Etienne—despite the lack of any evidence that would implicate them in the burglaries, thus calling into question just what it is that the residents of Ilios Lane will always have. Another neighbor, Dan Kowalski, elaborates on Michael’s comment, telling a reporter that even though what the residents have lost is just stuff, “[w]e’re still the haves. Take our shit and we’ll still *be the haves* . . . We want to meditate and do yoga and eat our vegetables and tell ourselves we aren’t the haves. Or we don’t have to think about being the haves because you only think about *haves* when you’re a *have not*, right?” (234). The words of blogger Candy Kane resonate as the reader proceeds through the novel: “[e]ven the stoic Ilios Lane resident from the news tonight . . . might recognize, in time, that what he’s lost is actually quite something” (88).

As we tease out the multiple ambiguities and ironies in Michael’s statement, we are confronted with Snyder’s point: integration, diversity, and multiculturalism are not the simple matters that liberals and conservatives sometimes make them out to be. The comments of Michael, Dan, Candy and others, as well as key incidents of plot in the novel, induce us to reflect carefully on these ideals and the contemporary context in which they play out. We never find out who perpetrated the Ilios Lane burglaries, but we do find out that the ideals of the sixties and seventies are not so easily put into practice in twenty first century America.

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Diane Johnson, *Flyover Lives: A Memoir*. New York: Viking, 2014.
288 pp. \$26.95.

Diane Johnson points out in the preface to her memoir *Flyover Lives* that “no one writes much about the center part of our country, sometimes called the Flyover, or about the modest pioneers who cleared and peopled this region. Yet their Midwestern stories tell us a lot about American history” (xv). She sets out to correct this elision by writing about her childhood in Moline, Illinois. Johnson also discusses the ancestors about whom she discovered documents after a French friend commented that Americans know nothing about their history. Indeed, although most Americans have a distinct