



# Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom

by Jennifer Haley Begins March 18

The denizens of Jennifer Haley's *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* live in a subdivision where the appearance of control—of manicured lawns, identical houses and suburban serenity—belies a creeping sense of dread. It's the sort of place where families flock in order to move up a level, where parents can choose to believe they've given their kids everything they need. But a gnawing unease has taken hold of the neighborhood: for one thing, some teenagers have become alarmingly addicted to an online horror video game, so obsessed with killing zombies that they barely emerge from their rooms. But even more disturbing is the landscape of the game itself, which sends kids running around a wormhole-ridden suburban neighborhood that looks just like their own. In tense encounters over garden gnomes and expensively upholstered sofas, with foreboding pitted against denial—and a good deal of dark humor—Haley deftly reveals her characters' dawning realization that the boundaries between the suburban world and its virtual mirror may be breaking down.

But are there two neighborhoods here, or just one? In this chilling and slyly genre-bending meditation on addiction, avoidance and the nature of fear, the split between the "real" and the "virtual" isn't so simple. Haley's interest in the pristine veneer and seething dysfunction of the suburbs was an inspiration for the piece, one that dovetailed with her fascination with the cultural phenomenon of online gaming. "I see both suburbia and the video game as carefully constructed realities," explains the playwright. "In a game-playing environment it's clear to see how a reality is built—there are these steps, there are these rules. Suburban settings, I find, are a

kind of 'virtual' environment too. There are neighborhood associations that contractually bar you from putting flamingoes on your lawn." In these controlled aesthetics, Haley sees a connection to the virtual vistas in games like *World of Warcraft*, wherein gamers create an avatar who interacts with other players online, gaining status while advancing through a world. She also points to the pervasive presence of these simulated realms: "I think people would be surprised how much this interaction in virtual reality is part of young adult culture. Millions of people are playing these games. It's amazing how addictive they are."

The specters of addiction and anxiety, roiling beneath a forced calm, haunt the residents of *Neighborhood 3*. While not all the teens in the play are glued to their computers, for those who are ensnared, the compulsion to play is often as great as their parents' denial that anything is wrong. Warnings reverberate through the play's early scenes, creating the sense that something's coming—something that nobody wants to confront. "People will spend years walking on eggshells rather than look at what's really going on," Haley remarks. "So the idea that I was operating with here—and I was watching a lot of horror movies while I was writing the play—was the notion of the unaddressed fear becoming so powerful that it would take on a life of its own."

Haley's suburban nightmare is all the more unnerving because the source of fright is intangible, the approach more psychological. "What I find scariest," says the author, "is when you haven't seen what the monster is yet. What's left to your imagination is so much more powerful than anything that can be shown." The

power of imagination is a recurring motif in *Neighborhood 3*, which generates suspense via ominous exchanges between parents and teens, siblings, and neighbors that ratchet up the tension in each scene—much like advancing through the levels of a video game. This apprehension is enhanced by a sinister sense of humor and a cunning self-awareness about the conventions of horror as a genre. ("I'm dying to play *Neighborhood 3*," says a teenager pining for an Xbox.)

The inventive way that Haley has populated her neighborhood takes a cue from the character types offered as avatars in video games, but is also integral to the play's storytelling. Multiple characters are played by four actors who represent various mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. "You are tracking a single entity through the play, but you're looking at that entity from many different angles," explains Haley, who has intricately mapped the relationships to allow the audience to follow the individual characters. As a result, the play is able to articulate a whole community while it continually intensifies our emotional involvement with these four people—composite images of family members who are almost never in agreement about reality. And this, for Haley, is the crux of this frighteningly imaginative work. "There's humor, there's mystery and there's impending doom," she says, "but ultimately it's about people trying desperately to communicate with each other, and being woefully incapable of it. For me, that's the true horror."

—Amy Wegener

# Jennifer Haley

"The thing about writing is that, no matter how much you write, you start at the beginning every time," Jennifer Haley contends. She's a playwright who doesn't want to have all the answers: "Once I figure something out, I'm not interested in it anymore." Her love for a challenge leads her artistic life as well as more practical pursuits. Take her day job working with computer languages: she graduated from HTML quickly to more exciting aspects of web design, but resisted becoming a programmer. "While I was learning the language, it would have been utterly fascinating. Once I had learned it, I knew I would be dead bored," she shares. "So, I've chosen the thing that will always be an enigma to me."

*Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* has been just the sort of unique puzzle-of-a-play that Haley crafts. The inspiration for the story was a seemingly innocuous change: her family moved to suburbia. She had already gone away to college at The University of Texas at Austin but remembers that time, now more than a decade ago, vividly: "My mom moved to an affluent community at the edge of Houston. My brothers were growing up in this very suburban setting, but I was already outside of it, coming and looking into it." The identical rows of houses would later become a source of unsettling curiosity for her, as would her brother's love for massively multiplayer online role-playing games—the games upon which *Neighborhood 3's* teenagers develop their destructive dependence.

During that time, Austin was more than Haley's college town—she credits the city as her "original stomping ground." Refraction Arts became a first artistic home for Haley



where she developed a reputation for a surprising and highly imaginative aesthetic. *The Austin Chronicle* described her "magical and dark" play *The Butcher's Daughter* as "a fantastic tale that strikes chords on as many levels as the action occupies." Her dual desires to write and perform led to *Edmundo (a musical dalliance)*, a performance piece that intersects vaudevillian theatrics with the atrocities of New World colonialism. "My earlier work involved music and puppets and large-scale casts and cabaret style settings," she reflects about her time in Austin. "I've always been into a certain amount of stylization."

During the late 1990s, Haley lived in Seattle for four years, taking in the city's experimental scene and working with companies like Annex Theatre. The turning point for her was the decision to study playwriting under Paula Vogel at Brown University. Haley acknowledges her mentor's influence: "She's as passionate about her teaching as she is about writing, and not only was the education provided but also the career support. I owe a lot to her." During her time at Brown, she saw her plays produced both in Providence and elsewhere around the country, including Cincinnati and Portland, Oregon.

Throughout Haley's work, there are intersections of different worlds, different realities—much akin to *Neighborhood 3's* interlacing of the logic of video games with the lives of the gamers who play them. Her play *Gingerbreadhouse* is a wild intermingling of fairy tales and myths as refracted through the lives of five women. A writer with Alzheimers starts to lose track of those crumbs that may lead her back to reality. A young girl gets lost talking on a

cell phone, as she sprouts bunny ears. The women all start in real rooms but end up somehow at the River Lethe, the mythical river where memories are lost. For Haley, her work is underpinned by an obsession with "how one navigates the real world when a world of dreams or imagination is also so real—and often isn't encouraging you to make the best choices." Palpable menace claws from beneath the surface of her plays, often tempered with a wicked sense of the comic. She delightedly confides, "When I can make people laugh over something that is extremely uncomfortable or horrifying, that's my sense of humor—right to the T."

A recent recipient of a MacDowell Fellowship, Haley currently lives in Los Angeles, working on theatre projects while beginning to figure out a new puzzle, television. Developing an original pilot—a sci-fi script about the extinction of the human race—and a spec script for a major television show, Haley revels in the challenge of writing for the small screen. "I actually find the formulaic aspect of television quite interesting," she argues. "Telling a story within a given format can be amazingly creative, like a haiku." She believes she'll always keep a hand in theatre, though, for the same reason she'll never get addicted to online video games: "Theatre will always be first in my heart. I love the community aspect of sitting in a room watching live performers. Art from a screen only goes so far for me."

—Charles Haugland