



NEWS photo Mike Wakefield

FANS award honours Coupland

CANADIAN novelist, visual artist and designer Douglas Coupland accepted the 2012 Distinguished Artist Award at this year's FANS Tribute to the Arts at the Gordon Smith Gallery of Canadian Art on Oct. 25. Past recipients have included Nicola Cavendish, Jay Brazeau and Bryan Adams.

THE GLORY AND THE PITY OF DOUG COUPLAND

Douglas Coupland's **All Families are Psychotic** (Random House \$34.95) is hitting the bookstands just as Coupland's art exhibit, *Spike*, opens in New York this September. His sculptures—larger than life green toy soldiers and spray bottle chemical cleaners—were inspired by heartache over his niece born without a left hand. This was one of several inexplicable birth defects at Lions Gate Hospital in North Vancouver a couple of years ago. Inconclusive hospital investigations have led Coupland and his family to suspect that some type of toxic compound has been the cause of the "spike" in birth defects at the hospital.

JAMES LABOUNTY PHOTO

Douglas Coupland's preoccupation with the hidden influences that lead to disease and heartbreak is evident in *All Families Are Psychotic*, a novel previously titled *All Families Are Dysfunctional*.

The oddball clan is the Drummonds who have converged at Cape Canaveral, Florida to witness the journey of their scientist daughter/sister into space. Sarah, you quickly discover, is the most normal (and traditionally successful) member of the family, despite the fact that she is a Thalidomide baby who is missing an arm.

Due to a series of reckless events involving Wade, the prodigal son, and Ted, the philanthropic father, at least half of the Drummonds suffer from HIV, including Janet, the vulnerable yet strong matriarch, who, at 60-something, has become a proficient 'Net surfer in search of the most effective medications to treat her symptoms.

In the process she discovers that the same harmful drug that disfigured her daughter cures her painful mouth sores. Bryan, the typically neurotic baby of the family who is trying to save his unborn child from the certain fate of abortion, or a black market sale, is along for the bumpy family reunion ride through Disney World and environs.

While waiting for Sarah's launch date, Wade unites his family in one of his shady exploits to score enough money for all their various medications combined. They are employed in the task of delivering to the highest bidder Prince William's private "Mummy" note placed atop his mother's coffin as it trod through London on that mournful September day four years before.

The misadventure that ensues leads to revelations, reconciliations and eventually a miracle cure for all ailments giving them each a chance to redeem their questionable past behaviour—and to morph into a loving, supportive family.

Once again Coupland has rendered imaginary people who live on for days after the last page of the book is turned. Even the most unsympathetic characters are memorable in their true-to-life quirkiness. His ability to pull a pop culture reference or recent news event out of his store to conjure a trait, atmosphere or feeling is becoming familiar. Making the cut in *Psychotic* is '50s Toronto-the-Good, complete with fine dining in the Eaton's cafeteria, and '70s partner-swapping parties in North Van, to the beat of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, and the taste of vodka martinis.

Janet possesses a '50s hostess voice; Ted is a typically uncommunicative father who displays love through name-calling and regular beatings. Coupland's always fascinating interrogatives—voicing the inner truth struggling to break all of our surfaces—are conveyed

through italicized internal monologues of primary characters Wade and Janet, foreshadowing that the body/soul split, so obviously a source of difficulty at present, has a future opportunity to re-attach.

In an annoyingly admirable way, Coupland's reliance on stereotype and pop culture still works for him but it might be interesting to see what he could do with a character or situation without the obvious to fall back on. Still, it remains an entertaining and thought-provoking treat to see what is going on in the brain of one of our most inquisitive and forward-thinking writers.

In ten years, there has never been critical consensus on Douglas Coupland as a writer. Nor, for that matter, on the ideas that occupy his mind and find their homes in his stories. Some believe he is obsessed with documenting his era in art. Others say he is a writer still in search of a voice. Some will never allow him to outlive Generation X, primarily a work of fiction which became the spokes-book for a generation that has since grown out of the moniker.

Closer to the truth, I think, is that everything he creates is filtered through his formative viewpoint—a coming-of-age '70s teen, younger sibling to the baby boomers, straddling Old World sensibilities and New World technologies, with all experience informed by a suburban West Vancouver upbringing, '50s-era parents, and the home invasion of television and advertising.

If you're similar in age, reading him is like having the person who sat beside you in high school telling you stories. Everything is familiar, from the cultural and historical landscape and the character sketches, to the leaps his mind takes into Now. Which is, in the end, the place Coupland's work occupies. The past is his tool, the present his playground, the future is around the corner and a big exciting unknown.

All his endings have a kind of sci-fi / fantasy quality that turns back the clock to allow maximum opportunity to right the regrets of your life, to break through to the other side of self understanding and expression. His work is equal amounts irony and satire, empathy and affection usually involving a crew of misfits who get up to no good and then set it all right in the end.

Coupland's concerns are ageless. His work consistently asks: How do you make sense of a society that increasingly chooses lesser values over the care and compassion for humanity? How can you contribute, and even take advantage of the New World order, without selling out to it?

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