

Loneliness virus: Douglas Coupland's world

by [J. Brent Bill](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

All the lonely people, where do they all come from? That question from “Eleanor Rigby” might serve as the epigraph for the works of Douglas Coupland. Coupland is the Canadian writer who burst on the scene in 1991 with *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, thereby coining the term for his generation. His books have been translated into 22 languages and have sold more than a million copies in the U.S. alone.

Some reviewers called *Generation X* “a modern-day *Catcher in the Rye*,” and a “field guide” to 20-somethings. It offered up an array of terms that by themselves constitute a social and spiritual critique of our age: “McJobs,” “divorce assumption,” “yuppie wannabes” and “me-ism.” The novel follows the mundane fortunes of Andy, Claire and Dag, who quit “pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause” in order to search for something more significant. They are lonely people looking for meaning in a lonely world—the kind of characters that appear again and again in Coupland’s books.

Coupland followed *Generation X* with *Shampoo Planet* (1992), which is about Tyler Johnson, a 20-year-old whose “memories begin with Ronald Reagan” and who is struggling with life in corporate America. Then came *Life After God* (1995), an account of spiritual yearning in a postreligious age. His next book, *Microserfs* (1996), set on a Microsoft corporate campus, chronicles Dan Underwood’s search for something beyond “Windowsworld.” As a “microserf,” Underwood is one of the indentured servants of the technological age. “Just think about the way high-tech cultures purposefully protract out the adolescence of their employees well into their late 20s,” says one programmer. “And the way tech firms won’t even call work ‘the office,’ but instead, ‘the campus.’ It’s sick and evil.”

A similar sickness pervades the world of pop culture, which is the subject of *Polaroids from the Dead* (1997). Coupland presents a society obsessed with stardom

and death. Loosely organized around the the Grateful Dead and “Deadhead” culture, this collection includes meditations on Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana, Nicole Brown Simpson and Madonna.

In *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), high school senior Karen loses consciousness for two decades and seems to find sleep a satisfying resolution of life’s difficulties. While she sleeps, the narrator and his friends morph from debauched Vancouver teens into somewhat responsible oldsters. When Karen awakes, she finds her loneliness unassuaged.

For his most recent novel, *Miss Wyoming*, Coupland switched publishing houses and editors, hoping to “get better and deeper.” The book is certainly more conventional. Gone are the fragmentary chapters, quirky punctuation, Thurberesque line drawings, Lichtenstein-like pop art and weird formatting that captured attention in his earlier books. *Miss Wyoming* has plot development, complex characters, full-length chapters, punctuation and other trappings of respectable fiction. It’s a grown-up novel, though without some of the quirkiness it also lacks some of the freshness of his other works.

Miss Wyoming features Susan Colgate, a former child beauty pageant participant and television sitcom star who finds herself the sole survivor of a plane crash. Colgate meets John Johnson, a debauched, disillusioned movie producer who has given away all his possessions to start a new life. Both attempt to reinvent themselves, an effort that leads Coupland to some of his strongest articulations of the loneliness theme.

John, worried that his blood carries “microscopic loneliness viruses,” longs for “someone to discuss rugs and raccoons with.” He feels “intact but worthless.”

For Susan and John, “loneliness and the open discussion of loneliness is the most taboo subject in the world. Forget sex or politics or religion. Or even failure. Loneliness is what clears out a room. . . . Loneliness is smothering . . . it stank of hopelessness.”

The effort to escape loneliness leads Coupland’s characters to drug use, casual sex or a preoccupation with work. As the narrator says in *Life After God*, people “put up with halfway relationships so as not to have to worry about loneliness.”

As isolated as his characters are, they are typically love-phobic as well—afraid to extend themselves and be hurt. “Do you think,” asks Vanessa, one of the characters in *Miss Wyoming*, “that I’m capable of—”

“Of what?” says Johnson.

“This is so embarrassing. Okay, I’ll say it: of being loved.” Vanessa looked as if she’d suddenly discovered she was naked in public.

Johnson tries to assure her that she is lovable, but tells her that she has to expose her heart “to the open air, let it get sunburned.” Vanessa responds: “I guess the thing about exposing your heart is that people may not even notice it. Like a flop movie. Or they’ll borrow your heart and forget to return it to you.”

This explicit longing for connection and community sometimes is realized in Coupland’s novels, if only briefly, through unexpected connections with people or encounters with beauty. At the end of *Generation X*, the narrator is attacked by a hungry “cocaine white egret” and says, “Such was the moment’s beauty that I essentially forgot I had been cut.”

He then finds himself surrounded by a group of mentally retarded folks from a group home who are visiting the park. They reach out to him, hoping to heal his hurt.

“Suddenly I was dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace, each member wanting to show their affection more than the other. They began to hug me—too hard—as though I were a doll, unaware of the strength they exerted. I was being winded-crushed-pinched and trampled.

“The man with the beard [their caregiver] came over to yank them away. But how could I explain to him, this well-intentioned gentleman, that this discomfort, no this pain I was experiencing was no problem at all, that in fact, this crush of love was unlike anything I had ever known.”

A 361-page postcard-sized book, *Life After God* contains Coupland’s most explicit discussion of the modern malaise, which includes divorce, the threat of nuclear annihilation, death, and the absence of God. “I think I am a broken person,” the narrator confesses. “My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me

love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

But when it comes to addressing matters of the spirit, Coupland’s characters are at a major disadvantage. None of his characters has any kind of religious upbringing. As he says in *Life After God*, “You are the first generation raised without God.”

Coupland claims that this lack of religious upbringing is not the same as atheism. He said in an interview, “Atheism is nothing new. That’s been going on for thousands of years. What is new, is that for the first time you had parents in the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s who found it was liberating to raise kids without any religion. . . . If you didn’t have those Easter egg hunts or pictures of Jesus when you grew up . . . you have nothing. Ex nihilo.” Coupland says he can’t imagine “what it’d be like to have been raised in a family with church and religious trappings. When you get stuff that young, I think, it always comes back to you when you’re older.”

Coupland himself comes from a “completely secular household,” he told the British journal *Third Way*, “and a completely secular neighborhood.” “That germ of Judeo-Christian thinking wasn’t there to begin with. You can’t imagine it there. It simply wasn’t there. [Don’t presume] that I’m some lapsed Christian. I’m not. I’m working from zero.”

He did have more family stability than many in his generation. “My parents aren’t divorced. It was very stable: the community was amazingly intact.” He was born in 1961 on a Canadian air force base in West Germany, and was raised in Vancouver. “I began kindergarten and finished high school with the exact same group of people.” Nevertheless, he also grew up with an “unbelievable sense of yearning for something,” and began writing to make sense of it.

He works in Vancouver as a designer, a sculptor, and a futurist with Global Business Network. He is also organizing his own film production company and recently met with Steven Spielberg to brainstorm details of life in 2080. But mostly, Coupland says, he’s a writer, even though he started writing by accident.

“I was working as a sculptor and began writing about art. It was a cheap and quick way of paying studio bills. And then I realized I got more out of writing than I did sculpture. So at the age of 28 I started over. I write for a living—and for that matter, writing is my ‘life.’ . . . If you one by one stripped away the things from [my] life, writing would be the last thing. . . . I think that without writing there would be no me.”

One online respondent to *Life After God* wrote that “there is a deep spirituality in this book. . . . this book shows us how we should all be loving one another.” There is indeed a kind of spirituality of longing in the book. It ends with a prayer to God—and with another expression of loneliness: “Please, God, just make me a bird—that’s all I ever really wanted—a white graceful bird free of shame and taint and fear of loneliness, and give me other white birds among which to fly. . . . But instead God gave me these words, and I speak them here.”

Although his religious quest may seem tentative and his God vague, we should remember that Coupland has begun his quest at “ground zero,” trying to understand the very notion of belief. Like his characters, he wants to know how to make long-term loving connections and how to get past the cynicism of our time. “I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God,” Coupland muses.