

# The short, short stories of Life After God

by Robert Currie

My Timex Triathlon tells me that reading Douglas Coupland's new book of short stories, *Life After God*, took one hour, one minute and 47 seconds. As to whether it was time well spent, my watch is silent, unless you count the "peep" it made when I hit the Stop button. Which means reviewing it is still up to me.

**BOOK REVIEW**  
*Life After God*  
Douglas Coupland  
Pocket Books

It's hardly necessary to cover the background—how Coupland's first book, *Generation X*, became the bible of the twentysomethings, and how his second book, *Shampoo Planet*, raised a muffled chorus of measured disappointment. Now comes Coupland's third book, no bigger than two boxes of Jello placed end to end, and, sadly, no more satisfying.

*Life After God* is a collection of minimalist short stories of travel and memory, loss and despair, interspersed with Coupland's sketches. Only a few paragraphs of type fill each page; many only have a sentence or two. If a writer is going to skimp this much on quantity, what is there had better be good, but for the

most part, *Life After God* is a little less than good.

"The Dead Speak," in which victims of a nuclear holocaust describe what they were up to when they were unexpectedly incinerated, is the book's low point. There just isn't anything here to read, beyond brief descriptions of imploding shopping malls and melting flesh.

One can't dismiss all of the book as lightly, however. In "Little Creatures," a father tries desperately to amuse his child with animal stories, but ends up telling stories of middle class angst, with characters like frustrated artist Squirrelley the Squirrel, and Doggles, the dog with a drinking problem. It's amusing, wry, a little warped—typical Coupland.

"Patty Hearst," another of the volume's better stories, is saved from banality only by its complexity. Despite its sometimes sophomoric introspection, the intertwining lives of the narrator's friends and family manage to engage the reader, providing passages like this are overlooked:

*This past week has gotten me to wondering about life. Well, not life exactly—but the sequence of life's events...is the storyboard aspect of life just some sort of bookkeeping device we're stuck with as humans to try to make sense of our iffy situation here on Earth?*

Ouch. It sounds like Erica Ehm after reading Sartre.

It's when Coupland tries to step into a more profound voice that he really gets tripped up. In "My Hotel Year," a story told with a cringe-inducing level of contrivance, the narrator is cast among assorted low-lives, who make grandiloquent gestures neatly symbolizing their lives. Or take the "In the Desert's" meditation on an encounter with a drifter:

*It is with these thoughts in mind that I now see the drifter's windburned face when I now consider my world—his face that reminds me they there is still something left to believe in after there is nothing left to believe in. A face for people like who were pushed to the edge of loneliness and who maybe fell off and who when we climbed back on, our world never looked the same.*

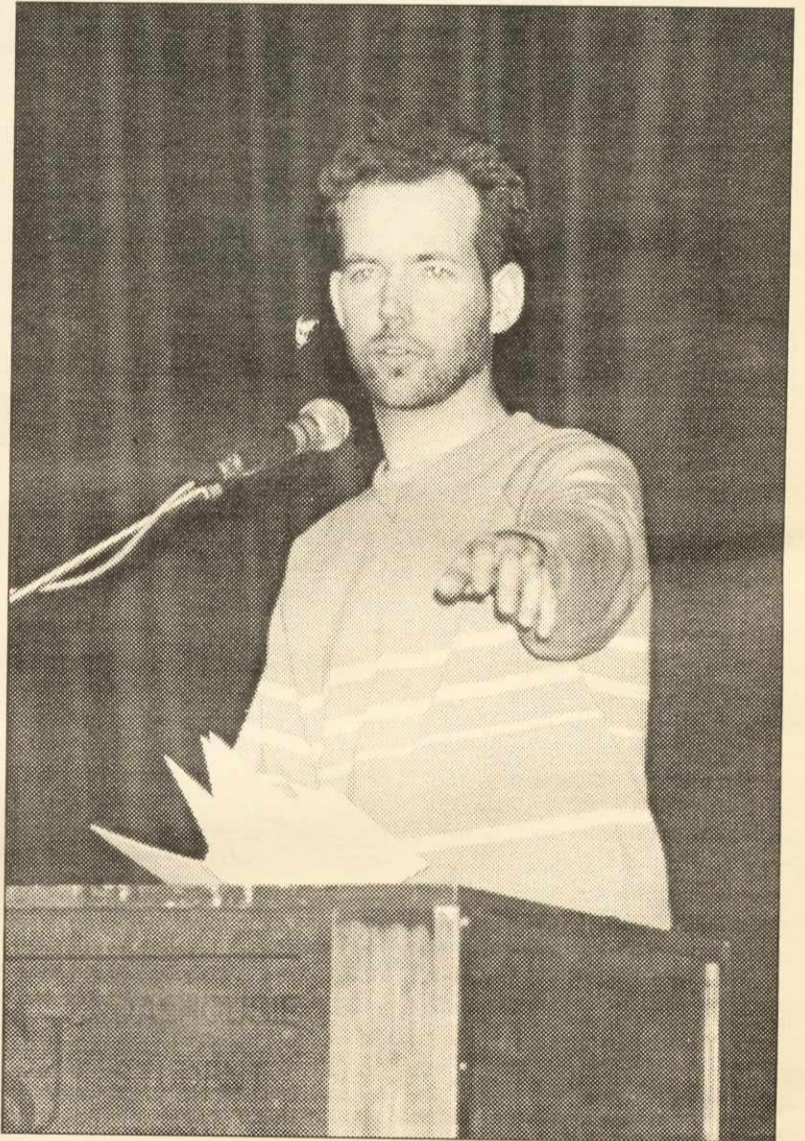
The rest of the stories all follow similar paths—bouncing between too-brief character studies, motions of despair and defiance, and meditations on lost friends, growing older, and—can the word still be used without irony?—alienation.

If at this point you are wondering if Coupland is an author still worth reading, read "Microserfs," Coupland's story in the January issue of *Wired*. Here is Coupland doing what he does well—documenting, cata-

logging and analyzing the lives of a group of young, ready-for-burnout software hackers at Microsoft. It's very funny, hip and more fully developed than anything in "Life After God."

*Life After God* is not a rotten book, just a mediocre one. For twenty bucks,

you are buying yourself an inch less bookshelf space and a diversion that lasts no longer than an episode of *Murder She Wrote*. If you're in the mood for good new Coupland, you're going to have to wait, but I suspect one day the waiting will pay off.



This is Douglas Coupland not being interviewed. DALPHOTO: MIKE DEVONPORT

## Listening to the voice of God

by Robert Currie

"I need to hear the words 'Once upon a time,'" said author Douglas Coupland, reading at the MacInnes room Tuesday night. Hundreds of people listened as Coupland read from *Life After God*, his voice deep and resonant, not in a James Earl Jones "This is CNN" sort of way, but more of a "This is me after just waking up" sort of way.

"The Island," the first piece Coupland read, was a short story in the style of *Life After God*, about a mythical island and its eccentric residents. Then

Coupland switched voices, quite literally. With the help of a "Sony voice transmogrifier, not available on the North American consumer electronics market," he read from transcripts of Patty Hearst's messages to her parents after her kidnapping. The sound of Coupland's voice pitch-shifted down, like a 45 played at 33 1/3, gave a Laurie Anderson feel to the performance, which the audience loved. To wrap up, he read the short

story "Patty Hearst" from *Life After God*, which worked much better as spoken word than it did in print.

The night ended with what Coupland called the "Crusty the Clown-like over-merchandising of myself," with the ritual book selling and signing.

If the world were a happier place, and publicist's press kits had the force of law, there might be an interview in this space. "In addition to his

usual high index of quotability," the press release enthuses, "Douglas Coupland will make for a fascinating interview subject."

A quick call to the publicist, however, revealed that, while realizing how important the *Gazette* was (not my words), the chances of us getting to talk with the man were just about zero. Oh well.

Author's readings can be dull affairs; nothing says a good writer has to be able to read well too. Coupland's informal, ultra-relaxed style made for an entertaining hour, unpretentious and fun.

*Crusty the Clown-like over-merchandising of myself*

## THE FILMS OF YOKO ONO

In conjunction with the exhibition  
**FLUXUS: A Conceptual Country**  
Dalhousie Art Gallery presents

**The Museum of Modern Art Show  
No. 4 Bottoms**

**Wednesday March 30**

**Erection  
Rape**

**Wednesday April 6**

**Walking on Thin Ice  
Imagine**

**Wednesday April 13**

Screenings at 12:30 and 8:00 pm. in the  
Dalhousie Art Gallery  
6101 University Avenue  
494 - 2403

Admission: pay what you can