

# arts

## Head and shoulders above

by Robert Currie

Anxiety about a writer's second novel is one of the reviewer's most well-worn clichés. When Douglas Coupland's first novel, *Generation X*, was published, critics hailed its mix of humour and perspicacity, and Coupland was established as one of the most acute observers of this decade. Now, with *Generation X* still high on the best-seller charts, comes *Shampoo Planet*, Coupland's follow-up work. And with it ends the anxiety, because while *Generation X* proved Coupland's powers of observation, *Shampoo Planet* proves his power as a writer.

*Shampoo Planet* picks up the story of Tyler Johnson, a minor character from *Generation X*. His greatest desire is to land a job with Bechtol Corp., the multinational whose offices his ex-radical mother once tried to firebomb.

Tyler's home is Lancaster, an anonymous West-coast town struggling with the Plants, its radioactive legacy of the Cold War arms race. Supremely confident in his superiority over the macrame and hash brownies lifestyle of his baby boomer mother, and the blind striving of his wealthy, retired grandparents, Tyler trusts only his own ambition. Together with his friends, he lives a life of divine, insular self-assurance, biding his time while he waits for fame and fortune to descend on him.

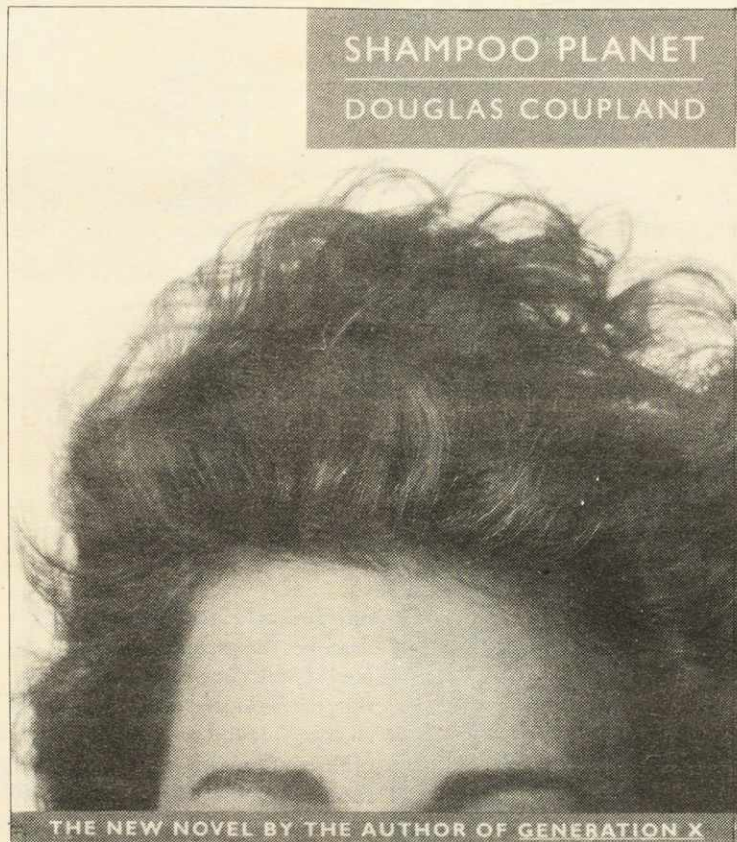
Tyler revels in the disposable culture that envelops him. He boasts a collection of shampoo bottles, enjoys shopping malls for their sheer ambiance, and trusts that advertising conveys a real virtue on the products.

"I have a plan. I have a brother and sister. I have a good car and a wide assortment of excellent hair-care products. I know what I want from life; I have ambition."

**Tyler revels in the disposable culture that envelops him.**

Wearing, as Tyler does, his flaws so close to the surface, we can expect that things will soon go gloriously wrong. When the sophisticated Stephanie, who Tyler met on a trip to Europe, reappears in Lancaster, the engine of his downfall begins to turn. Stephanie's ambition far outclasses Tyler's, and is matched by a bitter ruthlessness, a combination which moves the plot into the realm of betrayal, loss and desolation.

There's no escaping the comparison with *Generation X*, and *Shampoo Planet* compares favorably. Characters are more fully drawn, the plot more developed, the narrative more captivating. Compared to the flat



*tion X*, *Shampoo Planet*'s inhabitants are more complex, the narrator's attitude toward them more ambiguous. The pop culture commentary is not as fresh as in Coupland's previous book, but this is only a minor detraction. Coupland's emphasis has shifted from documenting an existing reality to creating a fictional one. Tack-

ling the perpetual themes of loss and redemption, Coupland has crafted a coming-of-age story which evades most of the pitfalls of the genre. *Shampoo Planet* resembles F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* more than *Catcher in the Rye* or *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, or any of their imitators. *Shampoo Planet* is in good company.

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Music: Willan, Mathias, Franck

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