

*City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver*

Douglas Coupland

Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000.

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**W**ANT TO UNDERSTAND Vancouver? Hoping to learn what the city "feels like to someone who lives" there? Anxious to make a purchase that will remind you of the place? Need a gift for a distant relative? Looking for a guidebook that spares you details of museums and galleries, hotels and restaurants? Keen to show that you are up to date in the celebrity stakes? Searching for something to decorate the half-size coffee table in your tiny condominium or Kitsilano suite? Part of the postmodern crowd, a "slacker," a "microserf," or a "mallrat"? Then *City of Glass* is just what you need. Or so, it seems, Douglas Coupland and Douglas and McIntyre would have you believe.

*City of Glass* is a thin, soft-cover, small-format, brightly coloured little book designed to sell. The promise of its subtitle – *Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* – is alluring because Coupland is one of the city's famous young sons, raised in one of its tony north shore suburbs, a graduate of its college of art and design, a noted sculptor, and a prolific author whose most widely known work has earned him recognition as the midwife (if not, indeed, the inventor) of "Generation X." The book's layout is varied and often arresting. Most of its illustrations are fresh, and many have a whimsical quality. The text is short and light. And (in a nicely

ironic twist) there is a Japanese translation of the book available – for sale, no doubt, in what Coupland refers to as "the gravitational warp of souvenir shops" (107).

The premise of the book is simple. Coupland offers a series of short textual commentaries on facets of the city, arranged somewhat quirkily into an alphabetical series. He has trouble with vowels. Although the book begins with "ABC ...," a brief (and alphabetically somewhat forced) meditation on the ignorance of Torontonians who refer to the city as "Van," there are no entries for "I," "O," and "U." Even "E" gets short shrift compared with "C" and "G" (four entries each) and "W" (five). But then "Q," "U," "X," and "Z" are also ignored. Musings on Feng Shui, Fleece, Monster Houses, Salmon, Sushi, Trees, Wreck Beach, "YVR," and some forty other topics are loosely matched with approximately twice as many illustrations, most of them contemporary and in colour. A few of these would not be out of place in more traditional "coffee-table books." But most are sui generis: among them are pictures of houses and streetscapes gone to seed; a stack of containers on a wharf; a close-up of a diner eating sushi, all chopsticks and gaping mouth; a marijuana "grow-op"; and syringe wrappers, tiny plastic bags, and bleach bottles – the detritus left behind by hard drug users. All of this is wrapped

around two short essays reprinted from Coupland's earlier collections, *Life after God* (1994) and *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996).

What then to make of this melange? Striking as some of the illustrations are, they hardly cohere. Too many of them are left to stand alone, unexplained. Coupland's two essays are very different, though both are intensely personal. "My Hotel Year" recalls acquaintances made when Coupland spent time, years ago, living in a cheap, "cold water" hotel downtown and is in some sense a rumination on "the meaning of life." "Lions Gate" – a.k.a. "This Bridge Is Ours" – celebrates the "endlessly renewing, endlessly glorious" view from the bridge (114) and the structure's metaphoric significance as "one last grand gesture of beauty, of charm, and of grace before we enter the hinterlands, before the air becomes too brittle and too cold to breathe" (119). Together these short sketches reveal something of Coupland, of his versatility, even of his Vancouver; but at best they are no more than tiny evanescent fragments.

Much the same is true of the short, vaguely alphabetical, commentaries. Coupland can write, and he is no fool. Occasionally he reminds us of this with an arresting phrase or a thought-provoking metaphor. On Wildlife, the coyotes and raccoons who inhabit the city: "they probably think of us as big, noisy insects that attack without even being provoked" (150). On Mt. Baker: "It's a metaphor for the United States: seductive but distant, powerful and at least temporarily benign" (91). But much of the text is flat, its engagement with the city superficial. Striving for effect, Coupland tumbles occasionally into banality and foolishness: should the question of Native land rights

"come to a head the same week that various Asian scenarios go critical and the Big One hits, Vancouver is going to be one heck of an interesting place to be" (131). In placing "his" Vancouver on display, Coupland also reveals his ignorance of many parts of the city, and his partial and misunderstandings of many of the things about which he writes. Among many questionable assertions and plain inaccurate statements in the book, perhaps the most obvious and egregious are the repeated claim that the British handed over Hong Kong to China in 1999 (22, 126) and that members of the Sto:lo Nation were the first residents of Vancouver (although most Native communities at the mouth of the Fraser River have elected not to affiliate with this upriver Halkomelem group).

None of this may count for anything. In the end, and for all my criticisms of this book, it can be seen as an almost perfect postmodern reflection of "post-modern Vancouver." It is all about surfaces and effects, appearances and ornaments. Neither context nor coherence matter over much. History ("History ... or lack thereof") is simply a foil against which to indulge the new (the mountains north and east of Vancouver "act as buffers to keep away the taint of the Past" [58]). Pastiche and irony are favoured over systematic analysis and careful inquiry. Who cares if this or that is not quite right (or just plain wrong)? Why bother to separate truth from nonsense, insight from dross? These are only matters of personal opinion. No "grand theories" or "metanarratives" here. Just Coupland's casual, careless view of Vancouver as "a fractal city – a city of no repeats" (151). Thank goodness.