



Generation A

Douglas Coupland

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“Now you young twerps want a new name for your generation? Probably not, you just want jobs, right? Well, the media do us all such tremendous favors when they call you Generation X, right? Two clicks from the very end of the alphabet. I hereby declare you Generation A, as much at the beginning of a series of astonishing triumphs and failures as Adam and Eve were so long ago.”

— Kurt Vonnegut, Syracuse University commencement address May 8, 1994

A brilliant, timely and very Couplandesque novel about honey bees and the world we may soon live in. Once again, Douglas Coupland captures the spirit of a generation....

In the near future bees are extinct — until one autumn when five people are stung in different places around the world. This shared experience unites them in a way they never could have imagined.

Generation A mirrors 1991's **Generation X**. It explores new ways of looking at the act of reading and storytelling in a digital world.

Generation A Details

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Author : Douglas Coupland

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From Reader Review Generation A for online ebook

Nate says

I'm coming back to this book somewhere around 2 years and 10 months after I finished it. I made special note of it because, by Goodreads standards, it has the lowest average score of all books on my "favorites" shelf, which is, to be fair, considerably light. Score coming in at time of review as 3.53 and only three hundredths "worse" rated than Less Than Zero.

The story: Five people get stung by bees. Bees are thought to be extinct in this roughly 2020 version of the world. There's a drug that makes time go by faster than everybody's on. Anyway these five twerps get whisked away to tell stories to one another. All the stories kind of build off each other and borrow similar characters and it turns out that going to the Canadian wilderness to tell stories about aliens and Superman and the disintegration of language is not actually just a way to be meta but is kind of conspiracy theory-y and drug related.

Background: I was sort of reclaiming my love of reading, largely channeling Douglas Coupland, at the time of reading this book. Honestly I didn't really want to "expand my horizons." I just wanted Doug to write books as fast as I could read them. I think I have four Coupland books in my favorites list. A list that is constantly checked and revisited. In short, I'm unabashedly biased toward Doug.

Why this book is actually good despite admitted bias: Look it's branded Coupland in that there's a scene that tests the characters' reactions to brandless furniture. They're from all over the world but they all have that same Coupland voice. Yet Doug never writes beyond himself. Does that make sense? He knows what he wants his future and book to be. Imagine if Doug were a fantasy writer or a straight sci-fi writer. Imagine that Coupland books themselves are a genre. They're not out to replicate the world but to kind of re-use the ephemera that inhabits our current world and re-organize it into a world that's more suitable to his fiction. Not dissimilar, but totally different in feel of worlds to what George Saunders does.

The book is ultimately about storytelling. Storytelling as a function of humanity. Isn't that what all dystopia is about? Even if it's only over the proverbial ridge of the present. There's that normal pop-culture armchair philosophizing ever permeating Couplandia, but that's a function of the world, not an intrusion on it. Destruction of narrative and the "inner voice" metaphorized all too often as the Channel 3 News Team. In typical Coupland fashion the plot is kind of shrugged off, but it ties in to the quality of non-narrativeness. Everyone kind of strives for inaction, ultimately in the shape of the drug Solon. Solon is that kind of drug you get after a full eight hour day of reading, except the "Craigs" of Couplandia are just out for the end result, skipping all the plot and action of the story for that special buzz.

I like the book because it's that special one author genre I like. To talk about this book is really to talk about Coupland and his ethos on writing (he comes from art school, where high and low culture truly have no separation as opposed to literature, even postmodernism still has some avant garde bones to pick with how pop-culture-y you can get bla bla bla). For sheer innovation and creating verisimilitude of a world without bees and taking our celebrity, drug-obsessed culture a bit farther on the continuum I love this book. I'm a sucker from those points on. Anything left is just bonus.

Paola says

DC: ma va a prendere per i fondelli qualcun d'altro va.

Questo é un libro scemo, e scema sono io che lo comprai e, giuro, sono arrivata alla fine solo spinta dalla curiosità di vedere fin dove arrivava l'idiozia.

DC: ma va un po' sulle ortiche va, possibilmente con le braghe calate e in quel mentre uno sciame di api incazzate faccia quello che deve fare.

Lindsey says

Though it had been a while since I read Coupland I recognized all the familiar touches within the first few pages. The narrators are young and savvy but jaded characters, seemingly remote from one another but clearly sharing a destiny within the framework of the novel. The setting is classic dystopia with the most modern flourishes; it's definitely the first novel I've read that mentions YouTube, for better or worse. There's that distrust of science, of corporate greed, of governmental authority so characteristic in his body of work. So what, then, makes *Generation A* different? For me, it wasn't actually the writing itself that I found compelling, but rather certain ideas about technology, human interconnectedness, and the power of storytelling that it explores. Through the first part of the novel, we see five disparate characters come together after having been stung by bees, previously thought to be extinct. They are brought to a secluded cabin and instructed to tell each other stories as part of an extended experiment, and while baffled, they jump right in, each of their inventions as cynical as the characters themselves. The half of the book in which they trade these tales seems a little slap-dash compared to the smooth unfurling of plot before it, which gently overlaps the experiences of each narrator. The stories read like half-baked ideas Coupland rejected in the past but didn't want to entirely abandon, and threw into this novel as a way to somehow justify not having done so. But it is not only Coupland's ability to capture what it means to be alive today, having grown up in the shadows of clinical depression and impending environmental doom; connected more than ever by technology and social media yet still somehow detached from one another - but also his willingness to weave hope throughout what is sometimes seen as a very bleak outlook, makes his voice important yet again for another generation of readers.

Darrell Reimer says

"*Generation A* mirrors 1991's *Generation X*." It says so, right there on the back jacket. I read that and figured if Douglas Coupland was returning, in some manner, to the book that inflated him into what he is now, I was keen to read the by-product.

I don't usually mark up my books, but three pages into *Generation A* I felt compelled to take the lid off my Roller-Ball and write, neatly, in the margin: "How can a guy who is almost 50 years old write a book populated by characters so fastidiously stuck in their single 20s?"

I was off to a bad start, but for the first time in years I forced myself to keep going with a book I wasn't enjoying. Unfortunately my mood only got worse.

The proper thing to do is review the book that was written, and not the book I *wish* was written. But man-oh-

man: do I ever wish this was a different book. I picked up Gen A wondering what had happened to those characters I related so strongly to in 1992. Did they finally plug in? Were any of them in a family way? Were they maybe not quite so nervous, smart and medicated? How had they (or characters similar to them) navigated the last 18 years? Now that they, in all likelihood, had the mortgages (etc.) that eluded them in '91, what did they think of their prospects? Let's call this fictional exercise "Coupland channels Updike" — wouldn't *that* be cool?

That's not the book I've got. And I'm realizing, as I finally put this novel to rest, that I'm at a point where I very much prefer Coupland's interviews and non-fiction to his fiction. He's a clever guy, frequently witty and prescient. But he struggles to plumb depth of character, and his fiction just ain't working for me anymore.

Sara Zovko says

Ova knjiga je za mene pun pogodak. Radnja je smještena u budućnost (ne tako daleku) u kojoj su sve pčele na planetu izumrle i nitko ne zna zašto se to dogodilo, a onda, na različitim krajevima svijeta, petero mladih ljudi ubodu pčele i tu sve počinje. Kombinacija Dekameron, Charli-a i tvornice čokolade, Simpsona i moderne kulture, ovo je opomena društvu u kojem živimo. Društvu koje je ovisno o lijekovima za smirenje, ne mari za okoliš, sve manje čita i sve više govori kao što piše sms poruke, u šiframa, skraćeno i bez gramatike.

Duhovito, a istovremeno bolno stvarno i poznato.

Trin says

This book starts out really strongly and made me think I was fortunate enough to be reading an example of Coupland at the top of his game. He introduces five different narrators, each of whom has been stung by a thought-to-be-extinct honeybee, and the story of how they all come together is quirky and fun. However, once all five do land together in the same tiny town, the novel completely disintegrates. The “twists” become so bizarre and nonsensical that I kept expecting there to be some other, real twists right around the corner—I convinced myself, for example, that Diana must be faking her Tourette's, because that was the only way her character made any sense to me. But there were no real revelations. There was nothing. I have no freakin' clue what this book was supposed to be about. In the past, even when Coupland didn't quite get wherever he was going—such as with *Girlfriend in a Coma*—I would have a sense of what he was aiming for, or the book would contain some idea or image that was wonderfully beautiful or strange. But *Generation A* was a relatively empty experience for me. And that *does* sting.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

As I've mentioned here before, about the closest I come to being a literal "completist" of a contemporary author's work is probably Douglas Coupland (I've now read ten of his thirteen novels, and was a pretty obsessive fan at that when I was younger); for those who need a refresher, he's the ~~fifty-something~~ 48-year-

old media expert who originally coined the sociological phrase "Generation X" with his 1991 novel, and which ushered in an extra-snarky, extra-pop-culture-laced style of late Postmodernism, which was at first eagerly eaten up by people my age until collectively getting pretty sick of it by the time September 11th rolled around, and which was the direct cause of such Scooby-Doo navel-gazing hacks as Augusten Burroughs and Chuck Klosterman during the nadir of that particular movement. And now that I've read so much of Coupland, I've come to realize that most of his work essentially fits into one of two molds, although of course with at least a slight overlap in them all: there is the "realistic" Coupland, who pens stories that for the most part could actually happen out in the real world, and which directly comment on the times in which they were written; and then there's the "fairytale" Coupland, exactly as it sounds, who writes speculative and sometimes even outright science-fiction tales, and which generally attempt to speak metaphorically about much more universal issues of the human condition. (And in fact, I think it's no surprise that his most popular novel to date, 1995's dot-com story *Microserfs*, is an ingenious and almost equal blend of the real and surreal, a balance I wish he would find in all the books he writes.)

Examples of the former might include his original *Generation X*, 2001's *All Families Are Psychotic*, and 2007's surprisingly sad look at the crushing defeats that come with middle-age, *The Gum Thief* (which I've also reviewed here in the past); while the latter would definitely include 1998's *Girlfriend in a Coma* (which ends with literally only six people still left on the planet), 2000's *Miss Wyoming* (in which a former child star miraculously survives a plane crash without anyone knowing, and ends up living in hiding for a year with a stranger she randomly meets one day), and now his latest, the head-scratchingly controversial *Generation A*, which since coming out last year has garnered an amount of polar-opposite reactions unusual for even him, with everyone who's now read it seemingly either loving or hating it, and hardly anybody ever saying merely "meh." In fact, I'm not even sure what to think of it myself, which should make today's write-up interesting; because in general I liked it quite a bit, but am still not sure if that's only because I'm assigning it too much undeserved goodwill, because of being such a big fan of his in general for so long now.

Because to be clear, this is a strange story you're entering when you pick up this book, perhaps one of the stranger ones now of Coupland's entire career; set just a few years after our own times, it posits a world where the planet's population of bees has died out for unknown reasons, which through a snowballing chain of reactions has affected the population of other insects, which in turn has caused mass pollination problems, which itself has caused a global food crisis, as well as a growing amount of environmental disasters. So then when it's discovered that five random young people across the planet have all been stung by these supposedly extinct bees within the same month -- including a rave-loving farmer in Iowa, a "Slumdog Millionaire" call-center assistant in Sri Lanka, a World Of Warcraft addict in Paris, an evangelical Christian with Tourette Syndrome in Canada, and a Boing-Boing-reading flash-mob enthusiast in New Zealand -- needless to say that the world pays attention, including the five being whisked off by black helicopters that seem at first to be owned by the Center for Disease Control, until it becomes clear at their new cleanhouse environment that they are to be subjected to a kind of examination never heard of before, with all corporate logos in their locked hospital rooms (including on the bottom of furniture and on mattress tags) deliberately removed in a way so thoroughly that it seems like they never even existed, and with the five subjugated for hours each day by an artificially intelligent computer to the kinds of snarky, pop-culture-laced cocktail-party questions that Coupland is precisely known for. ("Can you imagine a situation where pain might feel good?" "Do you shoplift in your head?")

And yes, as you can already pick up on, this leads to one of the first big problems with the book, and I'm sure is one of the main reasons it garners such opposite reactions in the first place -- because for being five random strangers from different walks of life scattered around the planet, they all seem to share a remarkable amount of interests, to be precise the exact same interests that Coupland himself has, a sort of hyperawareness of tech-based ultra-contemporary pop culture usually only seen in smartass creative-class

Caucasians in North America and Western Europe with way too much time on their hands. And it'd be one thing if this remained the case throughout, but near the end Coupland actually offers up an explanation for why these five characters all seem so similar to each other, which I'll let remain a secret but that does beg two questions: of whether a hasty explanation that close to the end justifies our misunderstanding of the situation during the rest (which let's face it, is a storytelling device that usually only works when the ending is a shocking surprise, like is the case with *Fight Club* or *The Usual Suspects*); and whether the explanation itself even holds water in the first place, which I suspect that many people will argue does not.

This of course is the problem with writing metaphorical fairytales, and why they're trickier to pull off than more realistic storylines -- that since you're deliberately relying on elements that sometimes make no rational sense in the physical world, it requires a much bigger suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader, a much bigger allowance for "artistic license" than some audience members are willing to give. And so it's easy to see *Generation A* as a silly, pretentious mess if you're determined to see it that way -- after all, it features such eye-rolling details as giant obscene crop circles done specifically to piss off Google employees, an aboriginal Southeast Asian who calms himself in stressful situations by repeating mantra-like the unending list of Abercrombie & Fitch sweater colors, and a shadowy corporate conspiracy that apparently relies on hundreds of "Simpsons" references for its success, not to mention an entire last third of the manuscript consisting of not much more than the supposedly extemporaneous short stories that our five heroes are supposedly making up on the spot as they sit around a campfire at an abandoned village off the coast of Alaska (don't ask), but that in reality are way too witty and perfect to have ever been composed whole-cloth on the spur of a moment. To truly enjoy a novel like this, you have to be willing to cede these things, to admit for example that such stories could never be made up on the spot but that Coupland is trying to accomplish something grander by including them, or else otherwise, much like an eight-year-old watching "Road Runner" cartoons, you're going to spend the entire length of the novel grimacing and angrily shouting, "Oh, right, *I'm so sure!*"

Like I said, I in particular ended up really enjoying *Generation A* by the time it was over (which, by the way, has nothing to do with his original *Generation X*, but is rather inspired by a famous quote from Kurt Vonnegut at a college commencement speech in 1994, which at the time was actually his attempt at making fun of Coupland); but also like I said, the book certainly has its problems, and for sure takes a whole lot of liberties to get to the point at the end it eventually reaches, liberties that are harder and harder to swallow the less of an existing fan of his you are. It'll be interesting to see how history treats this particular title, whether it'll be chalked up in the future as a minor experiment or hailed as a brilliant early manifesto of this so-called "Age of Sincerity" we now find ourselves in post-9/11; I find it absolutely worth taking a chance on, but please don't come complaining to me if you end up detesting it, which you very well might.

Out of 10: **7.9**

Idleprimate says

ouch. I'm not sure what to say about this book, and so am going to say very little. coupland has long been devolving into a caricature of his caricatures. there were many elements within this book that might have been developed into different books, but instead they were mashed into each other, cancelling each other out and leaving nothing but the endless drone(no pun intended) of Coupland's smarmy too-hip-too-breathe voice. if the characters had mattered, it would have been dreadful that five distinct people from around the globe all had the same voice--and of course, as the story worries its way to the bitter end, you could defend by saying there was a reason, but no, its just as in any of his books, all the characters are just puppets slipped on over

couplands ego. the plot could have been really interesting and relevant, except it hardly mattered at all either. nothing much mattered but making enigmatic quasi mythological metamutterings about culture. probably exciting to do at 17, but there are firmly no signs of this author maturing.

I feel angry that I really wasted my time with this book, an unusual feeling, even when i don't enjoy a book.

skip it, seriously. even if you are a big fan.

Sam Quixote says

Douglas Coupland's Generation A sees a not-too-distant world of ours devoid of bees and therefore things like fruit and flowers. A strange drug called Solon is sweeping the planet, it's effects rendering the user carefree and unafraid of the future with a deep inner peace that stops them interacting with other humans and makes them seek solitude. Highly addictive, the drug is wiping out human creativity as well as the bees.

Five people, seemingly random, across the planet are stung by bees. They are suddenly whisked away for testing and become instant global celebrities. Shortly after being released back into the world they are recaptured and taken to a remote island off the coast of Canada and made to tell stories, the idea being something in the telling of stories releases a protein into their blood and the mixture could become a cure for Solon.

Well, damn the negative reviews, because I loved it! Generation A mixes two of Coupland's strengths - his humour, like in Microserfs and jPod, and his humanity, like in Eleanor Rigby - together with his semi-realistic visions of futuristic society. The result is his best book to date.

If you've read Coupland before you'll know his love of employing gimmicks into his stories. The reams of numbers in jPod showing pi or the novel within a novel in The Gum Thief or the new dictionary slang of Generation X; in Generation A, the second half is taken up by short stories told by the characters. While this might irritate some readers (short stories are notoriously niche) let me tell you that the stories are brilliant. They not only fit into the themes of the book but are also great stories to be enjoyed for the sake of stories.

I won't go into too much analysis here but what I got from Coupland was his message of humans telling stories to humans is essentially what makes us human. While Solon (so alone?) is a futuristic drug that induces in the user the feeling of having read a thousand books in an hour, telling stories engages the teller and the listener in the present and keeps us together. The overall message is of stories and company and how this is the only antidote to the growing isolation of humans as a result of the tidal wave of technology.

Read without any subtext, the book is a joy for the reader and a masterclass in writing from Coupland. The swift pacing is kept up throughout and the world he portrays, while different, retains an eerie sense of familiarity.

Generation A is accessible for new readers and old and while Coupland has his ups and downs (to be expected from a writer whose approaches and ideas towards fiction changes from one book to the next) this is most certainly a brilliant novel and easily one of his best. Amazing stuff, highly recommended.

Angela says

I must admit I have a soft spot for Coupland. He's one of those author's I discovered in Sixth Form and so far has never disappointed (well, not much). His prose and characterisation's are excellent, alternating between ludicrous scenarios to some deeper philosophical and sociological discussions.

Generation A tells the tale of a near future society where it is believed bees are extinct until five unconnected people get stung. The premise is interesting and Coupland starts the novel well. I've read reviews where they thought the book tapered off when the characters started telling short stories to one another. For me, however, this part of the book was one of the highlights. I love short stories and I really enjoyed reading these.

The only thing that really let this novel down was the ending, which I felt was contrived and provided an easy way out for Coupland to finish his story.

All in all, a good novel, but probably only one I would recommend to people who were familiar with Coupland's work, and enjoyed them.

Daniel Roy says

I haven't read Coupland since *Microserfs* and *Generation X*, and was intrigued by the title's promise that this was somehow a followup to 1991's *Generation X*. Let me tell you up front: it's not.

The book starts intriguingly enough by building five characters from the US, Canada, New Zealand, France and Sri Lanka. These characters were quirky and interesting, and although shallow, they kept me reading thanks to Coupland's prose.

But midway through the novel, the plot comes to an abrupt halt when these characters begin telling each other stories. Now, I guess this is where "Generation A" mirrors "Generation X," but this is where the comparison ends: whereas the stories in "X" brought to life the very contemporary anxieties of a generation, those in "A" kind of meander and don't mean much. It feels like Coupland aping himself, frankly.

When the plot does resume, it is only to end in the most cartoon-villain-revelation you could possibly imagine. And all of the interesting premise - from the disappearing bees to the scientific experiments - turn out to be contrived and uninteresting.

Zach's story, titled 'Superman and the Kryptonite Martinis' was pretty cool, though. Not great, but memorable enough.

Felicity says

In the past I have really enjoyed Douglas Coupland's novels (though I've still never read *Generation X*). He has such a wonderfully dark, bleak sense of humor. This novel, however, was just plain boring--so tedious it put my teeth on edge. Firstly, I'm not sure if Coupland was trying to make a larger social statement through

his narrative about humans and their relationship to earth. I don't think so, because that is not what Coupland does....but, it was difficult to tell. If he was, it was a spectacular failure. More importantly, however, the plot and characterization were woeful. It was difficult to relate to the five main characters in any way at all...typically, you don't empathize with Coupland's characters (that's not his style), but it was hard to care at all about these characters. I couldn't even be bothered summoning the energy to dislike them. The plot focused on the disappearance of bees from the earth, and the rolling effects this had on food production, etc. There is currently a bee crisis (though it relates to honey production, rather than pollen as I understand it) which is why I thought Coupland might be jumping off from current environmental and food production issues as a basis for his novel. Basically, in Coupland's novel, all bees have disappeared from the earth, until five people from around the world get stung in quick succession. What is it about them that has attracted bees? The five are brought together in Serge the scientist's efforts to find what the members of the group share in common. Along the way, Coupland takes shots at capitalism, big pharma, and multinationals. As a basic premise, the plot could be interesting, but the underdevelopment of the characters shortchanges the novel overall.

Giacomo says

Coupland is far from his best here, patching together a cast of forgettable characters that mostly feel as simple narrative devices in an otherwise unpalatable plot. Yes, yes, the social critique, the observation and bla bla bla, but a novel is supposed to deliver characters and plot as well as background, and "Generation A" fails at the former.

The story follows five twentysomethings from all over the world, living in a not-so-distant future where bees are extinct, fruits have all but disappeared, and life is pretty boring. The older generation is longing for a disappeared past (including YouTube, which apparently required bees and fruits in order to run), and people survive on hi-tech antidepressants. When the five are suddenly stung by reborn bees, they are quickly "interned" and examined by the authorities, then briefly released and eventually led to a remote island in order to tell each other new stories and encounter their fate thanks to a couple of unpalatable deus ex-machina (including the almighty Google).

Of the five (eventually six) characters, three are mostly caricatures; the lonely Tourette-suffering spinster, the lonely hepburn-ish NewZealander and the lonely alienated gamer are little more than (you guessed it) lonely figures with nothing much to say or do. It gets a bit better with the wasted American hunk and the clever call-center worker from India, albeit the points about them are hammered into the reader with unseen brutality ("they all think the Indian guy is stupid, but he's clever! and he's smart! did I tell you how clever he is? they call him Apu! But he's clever!"). One senses that Coupland would have wanted to write the entire novel from the Indian point of view, but chickened out (and rightly so, in my humble opinion) and had to go back to his classic anglo-pop settings, where he's more confident. The bad guy is from Europe, he's arrogant, works for Big Pharma, and gives Alan Rickman another job opportunity.

This said, there are a couple of good moments: the final twist about the intentions of "Alan Rickman" is quite horrifying, if completely disjointed from the rest of the novel; the five referring to themselves as "the Wonka children" is funny; the definition of "Craigs" should be added to wikipedia; and there is a lot of trademark Gen-X irony, as you would expect from the Gen-X author par excellence.

All considered, this book is not pulp, but it's hardly the stuff of dreams.

Shane says

An interesting premise that left me somewhat hanging in the end. Set sometime in the future, five people in different parts of the world get stung by bees, during a period in which bees have gone extinct due to the proliferation of a drug called Solon that cures human anxiety.

So begins their odyssey, when the five characters are immediately quarantined and subjected to a barrage of tests to find out what made them attractive to the bees. Following their release a month later, with no conclusions reached, and only having become instant celebrities, they are rounded up again and isolated in a Haida community off the coast of British Columbia and asked to relate stories to keep themselves aloft while more blood samples are taken from them at various times as their impromptu story telling alters their moods.

Ultimately (and without giving the plot away) the five discover the awful secret of their incarceration through their stories. They escape, but the world still remains the same. At the end, we are told that the drug production has stopped but not why and how, we are told that the bees may come back but we don't know when. And the five characters end up becoming "hive minded" as they are inextricably bound to each other by their experiences.

Despite this inconclusiveness, the writing is vibrant and funny, the manufactured stories are pure flights of the imagination, and are told like parables by the five while under house arrest. The stories feed off each other and cover various themes: the shallowness of our glorified super-heroes, the emptiness of a consumer society that takes its cues from branding, the pervasiveness and invasiveness of media (A Channel Three News team appears in almost every story), and the carnage that ensues when people lose their ability to read, write or count. The only saving grace is that reading and story-telling are espoused. One character finds a copy of Finnegans Wake and uses it to cure his addiction to gambling. He even starts to make comparisons of Joyce's work and calls Ulysses "a lower priced house brand of Finnegans Wake."

In the end, the five arrive at the reality of their situation through their stories and the final story is a parallel to the plot behind their incarceration. The villain, who is captured by them, tells his own story in similar fashion, giving us the final piece to this puzzle.

I had one peeve. I wished Coupland had done his research better. He bases Qatar in the United Arab Emirates (wrong!), and he talks about Trincomalee being close to the Bandaranayake Airport in Sri Lanka (wrong again! - they are at opposite ends of that island nation) and finally, he makes Trincomalee the capital of Sri Lanka (absolutely wrong - the capital is Colombo!) Having lived in both these countries for many years, I felt a bit annoyed at this obvious faux pas by such an imminent writer. I was also less than enthused with his character Harj, a Sri Lankan call centre worker who talks and acts like an American. Working for an American company in that part of the world and selling to American mid-west customers via the telephone does not impart that type of a persona - sorry Doug! But, as this is fiction, and just like the parables within the main story, as this novel is set in the future, the novelist has infinite licence to alter names, places, events and reality itself - that is the power and the privilege of the writer. And who are we plebes to dispute that?

Loredana (Bookinista08) says

A very cleverly built book, I loved it! It was a pleasure to read from beginning to end and I really marveled at Coupland's ideas: he's one smart man! His view of humankind's future is a little scary but it also pushes one to think beyond one's safe zone: everything we do has an impact on the world! Once again, Coupland

was a master. Can't wait to read his next books!

Kemper says

I feel like I owe a debt to Douglas Coupland for tagging my age group as Generation X. Yes, it got wildly over hyped in the '90s and led to countless marketing slogans like 'New X-Treme Corn Flakes', but that wasn't Coupland's fault. And Gen X sounds a helluva lot cooler than 'Baby Boomers' or what we would have gotten labeled without it. Probably something like 'The Pre-Millennial Generation' or some other equally crappy phrase.

At first, Generation A seems like it's going to be even grimmer than Generation X. Set in the near future, the world is winding down. The global economy has essentially collapsed and the lack of gasoline has made travel wildly expensive. A new legal drug called Solon has most of the world addicted. Worst of all, the mysterious extinction of all the bees in the world has led to an agricultural disaster.

But when 5 young people in various parts of the world are stung by bees, they are quickly gathered up for study and held for weeks. Upon their eventual release, they find themselves world famous, and drawn to each other in a way they don't understand. Confused by the experiments that seemed to be as much about limiting their stimulation (no books, no TV, no brand logos, etc.) as they were about their blood work, the five people eventually meet and discover that they may be the key to the future.

Coupland uses a couple of wonky sci-fi ideas to explore a couple of really interesting concepts. Much is made of the idea that people who read have brains that tend to make them more individualistic and allows them to enter an almost Zen state that stops them from worrying about the future. But if there's no concern for others or the future, why would anyone try to build anything better? Is the only choice being a consumerist drone or total selfishness?

And for being about the world being in horrible shape, there's some really funny stuff here. We get everything from what a call center worker in Sri Lanka thinks of Americans calling in sweater orders to earth sandwiches in New Zealand to a character's hatred of corn in Iowa to a hilarious short story worked into the plot about Superman getting fed up with ungrateful people.

It never really occurred to me before reading a Kurt Vonnegut quote about Gen X that Coupland uses here for the title that they both had a lot in common. (Calm down. I didn't say he was as good as Kurt.) But both often worked in wild sci-fi ideas with a very humanistic bent and humor, but both also had enough cynicism to prevent sentimentality about the human condition.

I know it's somewhat fashionable to bitch about Coupland, but I still like the guy, and this is one of his most enjoyable reads yet.

Ben Babcock says

I've had *Generation A* sitting on my shelf since Christmas and feel vaguely guilty that I did not read it sooner. On the other hand, now I've gone and read it in a single day, so I kind of wish I had prolonged the experience. Douglas Coupland is one of those authors whose books are a pleasure to read and experience. He

is very aware of the nature of his medium (which, some might say, is also the message), and he likes to play with the structure of his novel and his text. In earlier books, this often resulted in some very bizarre departures (like *JPod*'s pages of random words or digits of pi) from a traditional linear narrative. Recently, Coupland has used stories-within-the story (like in *The Gum Thief*) to emphasize his points. Although *Generation A* is somewhat less meta-fictional than previous novels, it nevertheless deals with many of the same motifs.

So bees are extinct, which is a problem, because now any plants that relied on bees for pollination must be hand-pollinated or will also go extinct. The bee extinction is just the first in a chain of crop shortages, and judging from the other tidbits that Coupland throws us, it's not the only part of the environment that has gone haywire. With a single act, Coupland has introduced a striking sense of *difference* between the real world and the one in which *Generation A* takes place. This is important for any science fiction novel, and it also reinforces the environmental themes that run through many of Coupland's works. *Generation A* turns the world sideways just enough for you to look critically at things that *do* exist, like our growing dependence on mobile communications, our continuously evolving languages, and environmental change.

Generation A is not about a generation so much as it is about the divide (or, to be more nuanced, the continuum) between successive generations. Children today grow up with their brains wired to interact with technology in a way that previous generations never did. More importantly, technology always has a large impact on culture and language. What has the Internet done to the cult of celebrity? How is our increasing dependence on mobile technology affecting language? These are questions that many have already asked and attempted to answer. However, Coupland tackles them from the perspective of storytelling, that attribute so human as to be overlooked. What does storytelling do to our brains, and what does technology's effect on language mean for that?

As with his previous novels, Coupland uses multiple first-person perspectives and stories-within-the-story to give us a candid and frank presentation of his themes. You can criticize his characters for being flat, and you'd be right. Yet that doesn't bother me, because I always see his characters as symbolic, metaphors for certain types of people rather than actual people. Zack is the creative kid who lacks direction; Julien is unchallenged somewhat neglected by his parents; Sam is drifting because she has yet to make a real connection with someone; Diana is the frustrated, middle-aged woman who wishes she could re-invent herself; Harj idealizes a foreign culture because he finds his own society too depressing. Just as the stories-within-the-story are obviously allegories of each character's experiences, despite Serge's stipulation that he didn't want anecdotes, *Generation A* is a broader allegory for contemporary society.

Sure, Coupland could be more subtle in his approach. But part of his appeal for me is how baldly he states truths about society's latent expectations. Coupland captures what we have internalized about society and expresses it with the wit we wish we had. For example, he says, ""Books turn people into isolated individuals, and once that's happened, the road only grows rockier. Books wire you to want to be Steve McQueen, but the world wants you to be SMcQ23667bot@hotmail.com." I can't speak for all bibliophiles, but for me, this statement rings true.

One thing that struck me as new to *Generation A* was an emphasis on empathy as a defining trait of humanity. Reminiscent of Philip K. Dick, Coupland often portrays characters who display a lack of empathy (especially for animals) as less authentic human beings than those who do. In particular, Diana is still distraught over an episode she witnessed where a man killed a dog with his car, and the minister of her church refuses to condemn it because the dog lacks a soul, so "it's not a sin." Several of her stories focus on the consequences of a lack of empathy.

And really, what is storytelling but a search for empathy? Stories are our attempts to communicate who we are, to show others our perspective on the world. Although they can also be meant to entertain, they fulfil this function only by dint of being comprehensible, consisting of a shared language and enough shared experiences—enough empathy—to create common ground.

I'm ignoring the environmental themes, mostly because they're the same as they were in Coupland's other novels, and the literary and cultural aspects of *Generation A* are far more interesting. Although I stand by my advice not to take the book too literally, the ending disappointed me. It was abrupt and unsatisfactory, leaving me with too many loose ends after a very tense climax. Speaking of which, Serge might just have the record for quickest character evolution from annoying keeper to principal antagonist to clichéd evil overlord. As much as I enjoyed the themes behind the work, *Generation A* as a narrative leaves a lot to be desired.

This is a story about stories and experiences, set against the backdrop of a planet where humanity might just have lost sight of the fact that we aren't the Most Important Species Ever. Through the interactions of his five main characters and the somewhat entertaining stories they construct, Coupland exposes some of the interesting changes occurring in our society right now as a generation raised on computers and the Internet begins to take over the reins from the generation that invented and propagated that technology. We are always moving forward and can only look backward in attempts to judge what we have gained (and what we've lost). But in order to make such judgements, Coupland reminds us, first we need to get a handle on what we have right now.

Elizabeth says

I wouldn't consider this Coupland's best, but I was drawn in immediately and stayed up past my bedtime several nights in a row in order to finish. It's been several years since I last read *Generation X*, which this book is supposed to parallel, so forgive me if I make (or miss) overly obvious comparisons between the two.

Oh fiction, how do I even talk about you anymore? I feel like Coupland's earlier work often focused on how our increasingly mediated and culture-saturated lives made us both isolated and connected. When I read *Microserfs* for the first time 13 years ago, this was a revelation. Now it seems passe - for both me and for the characters of *Generation A*. A mediated, culture-saturated life is a given.

What cannot be assumed any longer is real human connection, or the sense-making that takes place when stories are told. Just as in *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Decameron* or *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, story-telling is a major theme, a way of exploring the world, and of connection. At first it felt a little ridiculous, but by the end I was drawn in.

I don't know if this makes any sense, but that's sort of how *Generation A* made me feel - a little confused, a little connected, a little unsure of where my story fits with the rest of my world.

George Dickerson says

Okay, so I should mention that ever since I grabbed *Microserfs* off the shelves of my junior high library about 12 years ago, completely wanting to look through it just because of the cover, and ever since that book enthralled me and regenerated my love of reading, I've carried a deep respect and gratitude toward Douglas

Coupland.

Of course, years and experience change the writer and the reader, but I've continued buying each book as soon as I hear about it. Eleanor Rigby was the one that sparked a sort of unease, a newly skeptical eye that for him I just didn't want to have. Then iPod, which I chose not to read mostly because I didn't want my memories of Microserfs tainted in any way.

Then I stumbled upon *The Gum Thief*, which I read in an afternoon and felt pretty good about, even though elements of his writing were starting to feel tiresome. Worse, the wearying effect of his formula and his repeating themes had reversed in my mind, like when a lover's eccentricities go from endearing to irritating after you break up. Suddenly I was reading lines and rolling my eyes, because he was trying to write against his age. He was trying to project into an age that he wasn't when he wrote his former successes. He was turning into the 30something who hangs out with teenagers, trying to impress them with how novel it is that he's heard of the music they listen to. But still, *The Gum Thief* had enough really stellar moments, and unfolded in interesting enough a way, that it was not a negative experience -- it was a highly flawed book that was still a joy to read.

But fuck, then *Generation A* happened. Here's a book that speaks of a looming unfulfilled book contract, of a desperate bid to stay relevant. Here's someone writing the life you live without really understanding it; someone writing as an outsider and making gross missteps.

Quick: Do you know anyone who plays *World of Warcraft*? Do they refer to it by the full name every time? No. And PDAs? Really? Throughout the book there are dozens of name-drops that felt like they were written as [POPULAR THING:] placeholders.

You could excuse these (plentiful) sort-of dialectic blunders as idiosyncrasies of the haphazardly-fictionalized setting, but that'd be a pretty weak excuse. This is very much a writer who has only ever lived and thrived in the pop culture, who still feels like he has things to say but either no longer feels like he speaks the language of the people he wants to say them to. Worse, he no longer seems to have anything new to say. Here's book number seven all about lonely people meeting serendipitously and being brought together by stress and instantly liking each other quite a lot. One of them is the sexually thrilling alpha male, one (or more) of them is the charming overly verbose supergenius in disguise (this time hidden behind a *Simpsons* reference that would have felt relevant in 1994), one of them has a barely medical profession that allows them to conduct eleventh-hour medical miracles (dental hygienists can expertly excise tracking beacons from deep in human tissue without causing severe damage I guess).

What made me so mad -- albeit irrationally -- while reading this book was seeing that it was just a desperate bid to remain relevant. It is liked scraped fingers grasping the edge of a cliff, and as someone who cares deeply about the man trying to scramble back up, the sight is too harrowing to watch without feeling queasy. Worse still is buying the newest book from the artist most dear to you and feeling for the first time in most of your life like he cheated you out of 25 dollars.

Fuck this book.

Paul Eckert says

By now it's a running cliché to say that Douglas Coupland's books tend to capture the mood of

contemporary culture, and sometimes, are even a bit prophetic. Cliché or not, I still believe it's true.

I think Generation A did a pretty good job of both capturing the irony of the culture of isolation as well as showing us where this isolation can lead us. Unfortunately, I felt that he did a better job of it in his last novel, *The Gum Thief*.

Generation A follows five people that are stung by bees in a world where bees were thought to be extinct. The first half of the book shows us how everyone is put into isolation for a month, and then it examines their post-sting lives. This section was a pretty funny examination of instant fame and its consequences, but then the 'Wonka kids' (as one character dubs them) are all brought together on a remote Canadian island for an experiment: they are asked to tell stories.

This is where the novel seems to reach a disconnect. The stories that the characters tell are often funny and read like Kilgore Trout stories, but they feel very removed from the first half of the book. Once the storytelling begins, it's just one story after another. And all the stories sound like they are told by the same person, not by five individual people from five different countries.

Coupland's themes are often, if not entirely subtle, well contained within the subtext of the story. In *Generation A*, they are often explicitly stated in a way that feels as if the moral of the story is being spoon fed to the reader, without the cleverness that someone like Vonnegut might have used.

The last thirty pages dance a fine line between absurdity and awful. Coupland fans will be reminded of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, but without the necessity and urgency of that story.

For the first time in a Coupland novel, I didn't feel an intense connection to the characters. They seemed thinly drawn with a few broad strokes. For example, we know that Samantha is from New Zealand and that she enjoys making 'Earth sandwiches' with strangers on the internet. She's also a fitness nut, and her parents recently confessed to her that they don't believe in anything. And that's about the extent of her character. Even when the backgrounds of the characters were funny, they didn't seem to add to the story.

Solon, a drug that makes time seem to pass faster, is ubiquitous in the world of Generation A. This is the second time (or maybe third?) that Coupland has mentioned the idea of a drug that makes time pass faster. There was a passing reference in *Eleanor Rigby*, but now Solon is its own thematic element (and a somewhat confusing one at that).

Unfortunately, it contributes to the wacky ending in a strange way.

Overall, I felt Coupland could have done a lot better with this story, especially considering the inspiration was from a great quote from a Kurt Vonnegut speech to a graduating class of students, calling them Generation A so that they had plenty of room for the successes and mistakes every other generation had. Instead, Coupland almost seemed to be doing an impression of Kurt Vonnegut, and the message doesn't hit home like usual.

I was a bit disappointed because the book didn't come together to me very well as a whole, but the individual parts are worth the read.
