



PHOTO: MARK GILBERT

ON FAMILIES, FINE ART AND TURNING FORTY

an interview with Douglas Coupland by Sharon Klein



Q. I feel I must start by stating that you are on the cusp of your 40th birthday in December and this time also seems important to you in another way. It is the most productive in your artistic life: your books *Miss Wyoming* and *City of Glass* were released in 2000, and this year you have *All Families Are Psychotic* coming out, as well as an art exhibit, *Spike*. And there's another non-fiction book next year. What is it about turning 40?

A. I think it's maybe more the fact that there's this body of work out there that continues to take on a life of its own without me having anything to do with it any more: books in libraries, bookstores in India. It's all of this stuff that's just . . . out there. It's this thing I've created and never really set out to create, but there it is anyway. It gives me a confidence and it's also . . . odd. It's like learning you have an identical twin after four decades.

Q. And how does it feel turning 40?

A. I'm very grateful to have had such a helluva thirties. But I want the next decade to be different.

Q. Your art exhibit *Spike* opened in May in Vancouver — this same exhibit opened in New York in September, coinciding with the publication of *All Families* in the States. Tell me about what *Spike* means to you.

A. Someone, I don't know who — it could well have been me, because my memory for this kind of thing is so lousy — said that sculpture is like frozen poetry. It's not words any more — just the emotion caught in the act. It comes from the part of me that doesn't use words. *Spike* is that. It's a personal and critical response to a family

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situation that I also dealt with in a different way in *All Families Are Psychotic*.

Q. Readers tend to make the assumption that novels are personal.

A. That's so wrong but so right, too.

Q. But with *All Families*, it's true. It's a more personal book for you. It's significant that Sarah is missing an arm and that her mother eventually takes thalidomide for her illness. Was it harder to write this book because of its themes? And why did you choose AIDS as the illness metaphor?

A. Well, AIDS seemed like the perfect metaphor for intractability in the year 2001 — or a metaphor for a chronic but manageable condition, which is what family life seems to be. It finally dawned on me that every family is a disaster, but when we smile at each other at the mall, we pretend that's not the case. Families are messy and scary and they don't go away — that is, unless you ditch your family, but then you're just a part of the mess, so it's not as if you escaped or anything.

Q. You like to write about chaotic families, such as those in *Miss Wyoming* and *All Families Are Psychotic*. Yet the main characters in your latest book end up loving each other for what they are — and what they aren't.

A. Just because families are bloody horrible amongst themselves doesn't mean they don't love each other. The textbook definition of a psychotic is someone who goes from pretending they're Napoleon, to someone who thinks they *are* Napoleon. An alternate title might have been All Families Think They're



Napoleon — which is a way of saying, most families think they're something which they patently aren't. It gets us through our days.

Q. The titles of your books are wonderful. I have a sneaky suspicion they all come from you. Is this true?

A. Nothing sneaky at all. Of course they do.

Q. When in the process of writing a book does the title come to you? How long does it usually take?

A. You just assume going into it that a title will emerge, and it always does. They present themselves to you, just as this one did. Norm, an incidental character in the novel, at one point says “all families are psychotic,” and I looked at it and said, “Yes, well then, there's the title.”

Q. You write non-fiction as easily as you write fiction. Do you consider yourself a Renaissance man?

A. Not at all. I have lots of ideas, I'm good at getting things done, and ideas feed new ideas. It's been like this since kindergarten. Non-fiction is like talking on paper. Fiction is totally different. They come from different parts of the brain, I'm convinced — or different parts of the soul.

Q. Not only are you an internationally bestselling author, but you are also a sculptor and furniture designer.

A. They're all connected in my mind. It's all just art school to me. I honestly don't see that much ontological difference between any of these activities, other than the fact that they use different facets of the brain to various degrees.

Q. Which love came first and how are the different forms related?

A. The moment I learned to draw, I started making magazines. I was making 'zines in Grade One. My parents kept them. And I was making sculpture. I made a Space Needle-like tower out of wood that made the Park Royal "Art in the Mall" exhibit of 1968. It was my first show.

Q. Very few contemporary writers seem to understand, analyze, synthesize and articulate contemporary culture and society as you do. Where do you get this keen sensibility?

A. My mother, I think. She has a degree in comparative theology and has a fantastically original mind, but she always downplays her intelligence, and in a way I feel like I'm helping her have some of the ideas she never allowed herself to have. From my father I get the need to be working. Always working. But it's not work — I have this motto: If it feels like homework, stop. It's served me well.

Q. Your exhibit *Spike* contains large soldiers holding guns, yet these soldiers don't have any hands. Can you explain the significance of this?



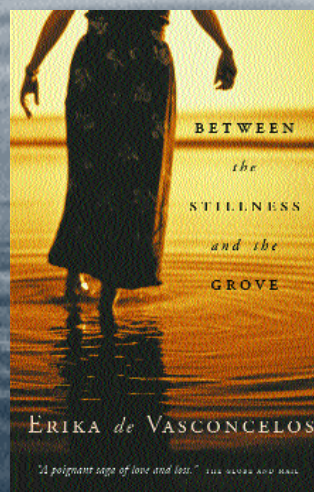
A. Well, obviously it ties into my family's recent crash course in limb anomalies [Coupland's niece was born with only one hand]. There's a wonderful organization called CHAMPS — it used to be called the War Amps, but they're all nearly gone now, and so the organization's focus has shifted to children with congenital and accidental limb anomalies. I don't know how Freudian or deep or shallow you can get in these matters, but it felt to me as if the show was a bridge between what came before me — my father and all of his military history — and what comes after me — environmental chaos and a future that mutates every nineteen seconds. It's a crucial bridge.

To read an excerpt from *All Families Are Psychotic*, visit www.readmagazine.ca

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has wonderful
moments of clarity
and transcendence,
but never loses
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