

## FICTION / NON-FICTION

**Douglas Coupland**, *Player One: What Is to Become of Us: A Novel in Five Hours*, House of Anansi, 2010

**Sarah Leavitt**, *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me*, Freehand Books, 2010

Presented as Douglas Coupland's 2010 Massey Lecture, *Player One* is a portrait of humanity at the brink of change. Set in a perhaps once fabulous but now terribly seedy hotel bar, *Player One* is narrated by five people: Karen, a divorced mother on her way to what she hopes will be a life-changing Internet date; Rick, the recovering alcoholic bartender who has lost everything but hope; Luke, who has within hours made the shift from pastor to atheist, sponsored by money stolen from his flock; Rachel, a gorgeous but emotionally unreachable young woman seeking to be impregnated; and an omniscient voice—a video game avatar—named Player One. These five voices, all collected at the airport bar by varied circumstances, narrate a portion of each hour as the novel counts down to a catastrophic event that will change the course of history.

In *Player One*'s pages, Coupland fans will delight in noticing the words of characters they have loved before; he recycles lines and moments from his previous novels, which lends a sense of déjà vu to the pages. Rather than being distracting, this choice complicates each character, layering his or her identity with the echoes of Coupland's existing canon. The effect is, for the Coupland fan, characters who are richer and come to life more readily, as though the reader has been preparing for their arrival for years. Coupland also returns to themes that have interested him throughout his career, including the impact of technology, the loss of religious faith, the human need to tell stories, and the primacy of interpersonal connections. Because of the return to characterizations and themes he has examined before, *Player One* does occasionally, for those well-versed in Coupland's back catalogue, feel like a career retrospective.

Most important of these revisited themes is Coupland's long interest in autism spectrum disorders. From 1995's *Microserfs* onward, Coupland has been interested in disorders that disconnect people from other humans while perhaps disproportionately connecting them to technologies. In *Microserfs*, the Microsoft employees invented internal worlds for their computers; in *JPod*, game designers found utter relief in a hug machine designed to grant closeness without interpersonal stimulation. In *Player One*, Coupland's exploration of these issues is pushed even further with the character of Rachel.

Rachel describes herself as one who ‘has never fit into the world,’ contrasting herself with those she refers to as ‘neurotypicals.’ Rachel lacks ‘subjective qualities like humour and irony’—this idea of not having access to irony also revisits us from *JPod*—and has arrived in the hotel bar desperate to procreate. Motivated by the sense that her father thinks she is a tragic failure (a failure because she will likely not produce grandchildren, but tragic because she is beautiful), she wants to become pregnant and continue her ongoing research into being human. Despite the differences that mark her, Rachel’s honest confusion at the demands of human social interactions make her the genuinely charming heart of the novel. Her atypicalities emerge not as disabilities, but unique abilities, deepening Coupland’s fascination with the possibilities the increase in autism spectrum disorders offers to a changing and increasingly technologically dependent world.

This is not a standard narrative: Coupland plays with time in interesting ways in order to present readers with a novel that can be read aloud in five hours, as he did in presenting it as 2010’s Massey Lecture. Each chapter is broken into five sections, with each section told from the perspective of one of our narrators. To complicate the versions of events we receive from each character, events are repeated from multiple perspectives, so the voices come to overlap in time. Furthermore, within each section of each chapter, Coupland begins in the present tense but, at the midway point, shifts to past. The overall effect troubles the perspective of the novel and confuses any sense of linear time, which further heightens the sensation of global apocalypse that our characters experience.

*Player One* is Douglas Coupland at his finest. Funny and touching, the novel both critiques and embraces the strangest behaviours of the early 21st century, from Internet dating to self-help gurus. Included at the back of the novel is a series of definitions to help us negotiate our new and changing world; just as Coupland coined terms like McJob for the reality of the early nineties in *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, he now gives us terms like ‘memesphere’ (‘the realm of culturally tangible ideas’) for the dawn of the 21st century. *Player One* reminds us how lucky we are to have Coupland as our tour guide to this brave new world.

In *Player One*, Luke and Karen bond over an all-too-common experience in this era of an aging population: they have both lived through caring for a parent with Alzheimer’s disease. Their conversations about the pain and difficulty of losing a parent in slow motion seem to cry out for more discussion. In *Tangles*, Sarah Leavitt continues

the conversation from her own perspective in a painfully beautiful graphic novel that tackles loss and guilt, anger and sadness, and the moments of humour that emerge from the darkest spaces.

Leavitt's *Tangles* is a staggeringly personal graphic memoir, depicting the experiences of Leavitt, her father, her sister and her extended family as they cope with her mother, Midge, and an Alzheimer's diagnosis at only 52. Leavitt's honest negotiations of personhood and identity in her understanding of her mother are disarming, particularly as the boundaries around personal space and privacy that are taken for granted in health begin to fall away. Leavitt's attempts to decide whether and how to groom her mother, for example, become moments of meditation on autonomy and selfhood. These questions are more and more pressing as the memoir continues toward the inevitable end of Midge's life, where Leavitt's honesty extends to thoughts of anger and frustration at the way her father and sister cope and very real questions about the legitimacy of that frustration, given her distance from the situation.

Distance is one of the most affecting concepts in Leavitt's narrative. Leavitt is in Vancouver while her mother, father and sister are in Fredericton; the depictions of distance, demonstrated at one point in the text by a plane that takes an entire row of panels to travel from British Columbia to New Brunswick, heighten the sense of absence in Leavitt's life. She is losing not only her mother, but a major support system and security blanket as she attempts to build a life for herself so far away. It also impacts upon the demands she feels capable of making as she is effectively a drop-in caregiver. But Fredericton is also a place Leavitt feels she cannot live, a place stifling in its heteronormative expectations and homophobic outlook. Leavitt's realization of herself as a lesbian, though totally supported by her family, cannot emerge until she has left New Brunswick behind. And yet, even in this clash of values that keeps her separated from her family, Leavitt has moments in the text where Fredericton is quite lovingly represented. This contrast becomes a metaphor for her family; being away from her parents and sister is simultaneously liberating and painful, just like the place they come from, and both sensations become more acute as Midge's illness escalates.

Leavitt's story is not simply accompanied by images but strengthened and deepened by these sparse drawings. The graphic aspect of this memoir is deceptively simple, rendered in black and white line art. The scantily executed images underline the loss and hopelessness and grief that underscore the memoir, and make all the more striking those moments when very specific details do emerge. Choosing to tell this story in images allows Leavitt to include her mother's doo-

dles and insensible notes, her father's letters, and her own attempts to stave off her fear of Alzheimer's by writing with her left hand to challenge her brain; these reproduced images all make the people and events even more hauntingly real, and in the case of Midge, allow her to emerge from the narrative separately from her daughter's representation. Midge is whole and real in these moments, which intensifies the reader's own experience of loss by the memoir's end.

Midway through the novel, Midge confesses, 'I've lost all my sweetness.' Frightened by her own sudden outbursts and violent mood swings, she fears she is losing the part of herself that her family loves. But, as Leavitt notes, 'It might have been easier if that had been true.' Indeed, the strength of this memoir is in Leavitt's ability to balance real anger and frustration with her mother with true tenderness. She allows both ranges of emotions to rise to the surface and be voiced; by not attempting to silence the negative emotions, she allows the loving relationship with her mother to be the true central character of this story.

*Tangles* is personal, tragic, bittersweet, and also ideally situated to be a comfort as increasing numbers of Canadians cope with parents, friends and family members with dementia. By treating Midge's story softly and tenderly, but still with haunting honesty, Leavitt offers a personal memoir for the reality of family life in the early 21st century. And this is where *Tangles* and *Player One* cross paths: at the core of each is a narrative of how to love and be loved at the dawn of a new era. The shape of each is different, but their ability to guide the way we as readers understand a shifting reality is very much the same.

—Brenna Clarke Gray