

Book tells tale of discovery in alien world

"Far-Seer"
Robert J. Sawyer
Ace Science Fiction

Robert J. Sawyer is one of science fiction's newer voices. And if "Far-Seer" (Sawyer's second book) is any indication, it's one voice that will be around and winning awards for some time to come.

Sawyer manages to do, in "Far-Seer" what many attempt and only a

few actually accomplish in a credible manner. He creates an alien society — culture, physiology, religion, science, politics — and brings it to life in fewer than three hundred pages and without going into tedious detail.

The Quintaglio home world orbits a star called the Face of God. The Quintaglos are a saurian race, similar to what we would call tyrannosaurs (judging from the cover art). The level of Quintaglio civilization is



roughly where humanity was about the year 1500.

Afsan, the central character, is an apprentice to the court astrologer. As part of a coming-of-age ceremony, he must journey by sea to the other side of his world and look upon the Face of God, which is visible only on the night side of the planet.

Afsan sails with his best friend Crown Prince Dybo and a captain known for his courage and journeys. The captain has a "far-seer," a crude telescope, to aid in navigation and stargazing.

Afsan uses the telescope to make discoveries that parallel those of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton. The home world is not a planet, and the Face of God is not a star; rather the home world is a moon orbiting a larger, gas-giant planet that orbits a bluish-white star.

Afsan calculates that the moon will be destroyed by tidal forces from the planet in a matter of five hundred years.

Afsan persuades captain Var-Keenir to circumnavigate the globe, instead of making a U-turn and heading back to port. The voyage proves that the world is not flat, but round.

Convincing the royal astrologer and the ruler of the planet isn't easy, however, and Afsan is branded a heretic even after his friend, the crown prince, becomes emperor. Afsan refuses to

recant his beliefs and is blinded as punishment.

All is not lost, as Afsan is drafted by a rebel group wanting to throw off the religious authoritarianism of the court astrologer. He agrees, and reason triumphs over superstition in the end.

"Far-Seer" is a fascinating look at one world's journey from medievalism to modernism. The plot is deceptively straightforward, yet Sawyer conveys the wonders of discovery superbly. Though alien, the characters are sympathetic or detestable, having recognizable human analogs (which may tell us that "human nature" is not unique to humans).

Sawyer concludes his tale with a teaser, leaving open the possibility of a sequel. "Far-Seer" is a yarn that almost demands a sequel.

— Sam S. Kepfield

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Author tells of lost, empty generation by portraying life of 1990s 20-year-old



Shampoo Planet
Douglas Coupland
Pocket Books

Douglas Coupland broke into the 1990s last year with "Generation X," a novel portraying the disillusioned post-80s youth.

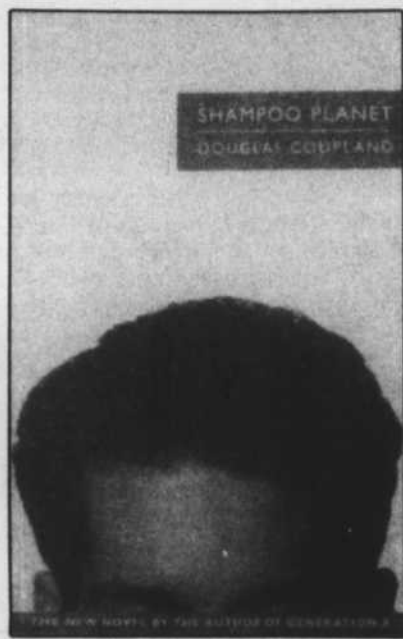
The same generation is still lost and wandering in Coupland's second novel "Shampoo Planet," which gives a glimmer of hope for the lost.

Self-styled modernist Tyler Johnson, 20, initially has little to offer the reader. He lacks purpose, patterns himself after a millionaire and surrounds himself with more technological gadgets than people.

The reader witnesses the rise of Tyler's ambitions as well as their fall, and by the end, wants to share in his resurgence.

Tyler was a boy who, at age 11, wanted a document shredder for his birthday and who spends his idle time spinning the planets in his collection of globes.

But the same young man is responsive to a seemingly random assort-



Courtesy of Pocket Books
"Shampoo Planet"

ment of people and events that break through his detached exterior.

Something is wrong in the world, and Tyler and his generation know it. This thing is beyond protests and movements and stretches across all barriers of person and place.

Coupland is adept at capturing and presenting small paradoxes that point

to something that runs much more deeply. Some of the book's most interesting passages are those that juxtapose two apparently unrelated extremes, finding in that placement the openings to Tyler's character as well as to the reader's interest.

Tyler travels to a now-overgrown commune in Canada to visit his doperancher father and to find his still-hippie mother.

Tyler's family dynamics are more fluid and entertaining than most of his travels, but both contribute to an unwinding of his person. The inevitable collapse follows, as does the recovery that offers hope in the midst of the despair of his generation.

Like Fitzgerald at his best, Coupland operates on two levels, offering a social picture of a generation lost in time and place, and working beneath the surface descriptions to find deeper, connecting structures.

Liberated by technology that enhances travel, communications, labor and leisure, Coupland's generation is presented in searing, sarcastic detail.

At the same time, Tyler's life is held before the reader in a depiction that suggests something greater may emerge from the wanderings of an individual or a generation.

— Bryan Peterson

Science fiction book mixes humor, gadgetry and retirees into adventurous space opera

"Codgerspace"
Alan Dean Foster
Ace Science Fiction

Alan Dean Foster is no newcomer to science fiction — he first made it big with "Icerigger" and his Pip and Flinx series back in the early 1970s. Since then, his list of publications has grown and even ventured into the



horror and historical novel genres.

"Codgerspace" is not his best effort, but it's far from his worst. It blends humor with gadgetry and grand peril for the planet Earth — necessary ingredients for any space opera worthy of the name.

It opens with a narrative reminiscent of Douglas Adams' "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." A leftover cheese sandwich drips into a complicated piece of computer equipment that controls production of household appliances, causing a "photonic short."

As a result, the computer begins seeking answers for questions normally not asked by computers, such as "How can I alter programming to increase production?" and "Is humankind truly the most advanced form of life in the universe?" It begins cranking out appliances to begin a quest for the Ultimate Truth.

Enter five elderly residents of a retirement community on a future Earth

that has been cleansed of pollution and turned into a — well, a big retirement home. A kitchen robot, searching for the Ultimate Truth, discovers a huge city underlying the retirement home.

Only it's not a city, it's a 100-kilometer-long spaceship inhabited by an alien called the Autothor, who controls the ship but isn't exactly sure what its purpose is, and a Drex, one of the race who built the ship a million years ago.

A 100-kilometer-long star ship is bound to attract attention. Several attempts are made to hijack it for the use of one of several planetary alliances, before readers learn that the true purpose of the ship was to fight an enemy who may or may not still exist.

"Codgerspace" is not great literature, but it's not meant to be. It's a rarity these days — an enjoyable romp by a capable author. The characterizations are masterful, especially those of the elderly space travelers, and utterly believable. The humor is wry, occasionally Monty Pythonesque in delivery. Best of all, it has a happy resolution and a last line that is a brilliant conclusion.

— Sam S. Kepfield

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