

Teachin' Books Episode 1.8 – Douglas Coupland's *JPod*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and I'm not gonna lie. This has been a bit of a week. It's definitely been a week. So, I feel much less prepared for recording this episode than I usually do. And honestly, it's usually a little bit of a spontaneous situation anyways. But today, even more so. Not only am I sitting down to record this Monday afternoon, which is somewhat later than I would have liked, I'm also working off of very haphazard notes that are sort of just copy-and-pasted from my teaching notes. And, yeah, we're just gonna wing it even more than I might usually do, so bear with me here today. I guess put this under the category of making the realities of the labor of the podcast, and the teaching and the learning and the research and everything else, visible to you. That's what I'm doing right, just making those things visible right now.

1:25 I guess on that same note I will mention that the next episode of Teachin' Books will be another interview, which I'm very excited for, and then after that, I'm going to be taking a short break, for the holidays -- or not really the holidays, because what are the holidays right now? But just a little bit of a break for me from producing this podcast every week. So I'm not 100% sure when I'll be back -- certainly in January sometime. I'm just not sure about the date yet. So I'll make sure to keep folks updated on that on Instagram and Twitter @TeachinBooksPod. And yeah, you'll see me back in January after next week's interview episode. I'm also working on a holiday special episode that may or may not come out, maybe saying it here on the podcast will help push me to make sure that that happens, but otherwise I will be taking definitely a few weeks break from recording.

02:26 Okay so, luckily enough, today's episode I happen to be talking about something that I know really well. So while it's a very underprepared day for me and I sort of feel like I'm floundering this week more than usual, I feel pretty okay about what I'm going to talk about, which is teaching the 2006 novel *JPod*, written by an author who I happen to have spent about a decade of my life studying: Douglas Coupland.

02:54 So, I did my Master's project on Douglas Coupland, I read his book *Generation X* and then read as many of his books as possible throughout that year, finished my Master's project at the University of Alberta, about *Generation X*. Then I started my PhD and finished my PhD, all on this same author, single-author study on Douglas Coupland.

03:22 The reason why I wanted to talk about Coupland today on this podcast episode is because I am nearing the one year anniversary of my dissertation defense, which was on December 16 2019. That date will forever be burned into my brain because leading up to it I was just totally terrified about that day. And so, I will never forget it.

03:47 My dissertation was a single-author study, as I said, of the spatial politics of Coupland's work. So how he represents different spaces, different spaces across the North American landscape, I should say. And also I looked at what the implications of those representations are. And I essentially argued that studying Coupland's work can help us rethink how we consume landscapes and can provoke us to consider how our give and take relationships with place influence social and environmental justice. That was essentially a sentence just taken from my dissertation. My argument in a nutshell.

04:27 So in the last few months I've actually been returning to this project, my dissertation, as a book project more explicitly, after some time away from it. And this one year anniversary comes at a time when my fire and my drive for this project are actually increasing. You know my drive has sort of been reignited for this project. So that's part of the reason why I wanted to talk about it on the podcast today.

04:53 But also talking about Coupland today on this episode, helps give me an example from my teaching experiences of the way is that for many of the academics who do both of these things, teaching and research are really hard to separate. And for me, they are inseparable. I literally have an article published on the very topic that I'm going to chat about today, I have also taught about it, which is what I'm chatting about today, I've learned a lot from teaching this book alongside this topic in class. And I think that this is just one thing that we're gonna see a lot more of as this podcast goes along, which is how teaching and research and administration and institutional service and mentorship and organizing activism, all of these things, for those who those actions apply to, all of those things are tied together in ways that mean this podcast on teachin' books necessarily is also about researching books and learning with and alongside books and activism around books and all sorts of other ways that the things that we read and teach filter into or influence our professional and personal lives.

So, teaching and research are really connected, and this text is a good example of the ways that is true for me. With all that said, Let me tell you a little bit about teaching Douglas Coupland's JPod.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

06:34 Douglas Coupland is a Vancouver-based writer and visual artist. In both roles, he's incredibly prolific. He has published somewhere around 25 full-length written works. He's been part of more than 30 solo or group exhibitions. His first published novel was Generation X in 1991, the novel that many folks say sort of popularized the public image of that generation, encapsulated it, used that term to circulate ideas about that generation, the term Generation X.

07:09 And from that point on, he has written many many more books, and these are books that tackle questions about things like technology and capitalism, corporate and consumer culture, religion and spirituality (or sometimes the lack thereof or ambivalence around those things), pop culture, apocalypse, Canadian identity, suburbia, the role of storytelling in an accelerating world. And so many more things, so many more topics.

07:43 He is a complicated literary figure in a lot of ways and I won't even be able to touch on a third of those ways here, not even a 10th, but I did want to say sort of the ways that he is complexly situated as a literary figure in space. Coupland's a white settler Canadian born in Germany, but he's tightly associated with the city of Vancouver, and its outskirts and suburbs and landscapes, but he's also very regionally associated with the Pacific Northwest. But then he also writes quite a bit about Canada, specifically in his *Souvenir of Canada* series, which is two photo essay collections and one documentary. But then on the other hand he thinks, and has often said, that he has a contested and ambiguous relationship with the nation, with being a Canadian writer, and that's in part true because he gets taken up a lot as a US-American writer, and he's often categorized more so in relation to North America, especially Anglo North America, rather than just Canada, and he's built international and global readerships and fame.

08:51 So he's a really complicated complex literary figure in those ways, geographically speaking. And in terms of his literary citizenship, which is a term I'm using from Lorraine York, and honestly that's only a bit of the complications that I really could talk about here and I mean, the fact that I've spent a decade studying this writer means I do have a lot to say but I'm going to try to keep this to the usual solo episode time length. So let me move on. If you have any questions, I mean I'm always up for answering questions or talking more about Douglas Coupland and his work, so feel free to email me. Just saying.

09:31 So this particular novel of Coupland's, *JPod* follows a character called Ethan Jarlewski, who works at a gaming company in a group of cubicles that he and his five other neighboring colleagues called "jpod", and they basically created that name as a kind of nod to the fact that some sort of computer glitch resulted in the six of them, whose last names all start with J, being put in the same sort of cubicle pod, even though they have very different roles across the company.

10:01 So one branch of the novel is that it follows these six employees as they sort of while away their time and their work days: they go to meetings, they're developing new games, but then they're also spending their work time in a lot of other creative or imaginative ways, you might say. So for example, they are, they spend some time writing letters to Ronald McDonald to convince him that each of them would be his perfect match. Or they race each other to find the one incorrect number in a string of pi's first 100,000 digits. So they play these sort of games, workday games, along the way, in addition to working. The other branch of the novel follows Ethan and his family, outside of work, and that storyline is much more dramatic. So for example within the first 25 or so pages, Ethan is called to his mother's house to help her get rid of a biker that she has just killed, kind of accidentally. And then over the course

of the book, other events occur in Ethan's life that seem really wild and outlandish but are generally handled by the characters as if they aren't a big deal. So like, murder, smuggling of people, adultery, missing persons, dead bodies concealed in cement and then uncovered later again.

11:22 But the aspect of the book that I'm going to talk about today and that I am going to talk about my teaching of actually doesn't have to do with the plot at all. JPod features a lot of material that appears all throughout the book throughout the pages of the book, but it doesn't really develop the plot. There are at least 78 pages, or roughly one fifth of the book, have this kind of uncategorizable material. I call it interstitial material in an article that I wrote about this very part of the book. And that material, like I say, can't really always be connected back to the plot, though it does tend to link up thematically with the book's focus on technology and corporate culture, labor, and consumerism.

12:07 So just some examples of that kind of material throughout the book we have sort of randomly or regularly, we have pages that feature spam emails sometimes addressed to no character at all. There's pages that include really stream of consciousness lists, you know lists that begin with the word brrr and end with lies, or include items like "shitty old car" and "eyes like Woody Woodpecker." We have a page that just spells "motherfucke" without the final R. And those letters are sort of broadly distributed across the blank page. We have another page that simply says "grind the molten bucket," which I think is a reference to the game, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater three. And we have a whole bunch of other pages like I said 78, at least, pages of interstitial material that in some cases combine in seemingly random ways computer language references to digital culture, mathematical symbols, equations, all sorts of things like that. So those are the pages that feature in the lesson I guess that I'm going to talk about today.

13:26 Let me tell you about the teaching context here because I've actually only taught this novel once. It was in a third-year Canadian literature class where we were looking at Canadian literature from 1950 onward. So we surveyed in that class a variety of literatures from Canada, from the last seven years or so. We dealt with recurring topics like the writing of history, the rewriting of history, space and geography, the whole idea of Canadian identity and the troubles with that term, theories of Canadian literature like Atwood's *Survival* or Frye's garrison mentality. And also the teaching of Canadian literature. So for example, we looked at, Paul Martin's *Sanctioned Ignorance*, which is a scholarly monograph all about the teaching of the literatures of Canada in Canadian universities.

14:22 What I'm going to talk about today comes from the second class of several classes that focused on this particular novel, JPod. The first class that we studied this novel was sort of an introduction to Coupland and an introduction to the book, that sort of thing. The other classes after this one focused on things like the company, you know the workers the games they play leisure versus employment labor issues like that, and also the characters so characterization in the book. So yeah, this was the second lesson in a longer slate of lessons about this novel.

14:56 So on this day in class here's what I did specifically and what I want to talk about today. Um the lesson was called "JPod's Paratexts: Or, What to Do With All the Random Pages in This Book." So, as the title says, we talked about sort of the idea of paratext on this day. I outlined the concept of paratext, a term developed by Gerard Genette, which I've actually talked about, or has come up on this podcast a couple of times. Once with Cathy, or Catherine Nygren, when she was talking about the opening screen of *The Stanley Parable* and the title of the game itself. And I also mentioned paratext briefly as an aspect I discussed in relation to *Never Let Me Go* in that episode, but just to remind you, paratext as I say, is a term to describe materials that accompany or present a written work like a book a play a collection of poems, but are not part of the main text. So for example, some paratexts include the title, cover art, copyright page, introductions, about the author notes, epigraphs, chapter titles review excerpts, synopses on the back cover, all of that sort of accompanying material that presents a work to us.

16:16 So in this particular lesson on JPod, and these pages all throughout JPod that I was proposing we might call paratext, because simply they're not actually part of the storyline -- however, that gets more complicated I hope you'll see as I go along talking here. In this particular class, we started with the specific and then went broad. So for this specific part of this class, I photocopied a bunch of examples from the text of the interstitial material. I photocopied a bunch of these random pages that are inserted throughout the book. And then I put the students into groups where the groups would focus on two of the pages each, and then basically I asked them to in each group, focus on the pages they were given and try to do a kind of close reading of the pages.

17:08 So it was a bit of an active learning exercise, obviously, because a lot of groups needed to Google things, look things up, sometimes they were equations or computer references or pop culture references in these random pages that needed to be looked up. It required collaboration because some folks might have had knowledge of something in the pages but not of other things in the pages, so through conversation, students could come to a fuller understanding of what these pages might be references to.

17:37 And it was also just a practice in or yeah it was a practice in testing out familiar reading strategies we had used all year, like close reading, to see if they really worked on this unfamiliar material. So the idea of stretching our analytical capabilities to see if close reading as a method worked on these random pages that seemed to be kind of nonsensical and certainly were not plot-driven.

18:02 And because I realize that it's sort of hard to keep in mind these pages if you haven't read the book, maybe I can figure out a way to, I don't know, maybe I'll make a Boomerang or something of of the pages of me flipping through the pages on Instagram. And then you can see what I'm talking about if you don't have the novel or if you haven't read the novel, you'll see the sort of haphazard random nature of some of the pages.

18:26 So after students were sort of led out of their small groups where they tried to close read a couple of specific examples of the pages, we debriefed as a whole group, and this is where the class moved from specific to broad. When we debriefed as a whole class, first of all, of course I offered any group who wanted to talk about their specific paratext and what they thought of it and if close reading helped them to access more meanings behind their particular page or pages that they were given. That was the first step, but the second step was once everybody who wanted to had talked, we talked about, and had a whole-class discussion about, the purpose or the effect of all of these pages as a whole. So, in short, why the H, are these pages in this book? What are they doing in this book if they're not advancing the plot, if they have nothing to do sometimes with the characters that we've seen? Why are these here? Especially, why are these here because so many of us, as we learned in that class, skipped over a lot of them. I think I did like a hands-up poll about who skipped over what aspects of this book and which pages of the book did folks feel like they didn't need to read but got the gist of, and there was a lot of hands up for that because of course, this material is not readable in the same way that we might read a more linear plot, like a traditional novel right, so it's it's definitely potentially skippable material, and that's part of what we were grappling with here.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

20:07 So we had a whole class discussion about what the purpose or the effect or the implications of this interstitial material is for the book, and some of the ideas that I highlighted were these. So, this is material that really activates the reader, these pages, because even in the very question of asking yourself when you encounter one of these random interruptive pages, even in the process of asking yourself "Is this text? Is this paratext? Should I be reading this, can I skip this?" that is a sort of active process of reading. So there's a kind of activation of the reader that happens when you encounter these interstitial interruptive pages.

20:48 It's a novel that sort of deliberately makes you question if you are meant to read part of it, and that kind of wakes up the reader. It's almost like choosing between what is a commercial and what is a television program, like, the book is making you as the reader, make this choice and the boundaries between those two things are not clear to you in this book, you're not really spoon-fed what is meaningful versus trivial in the book, but instead the reader has to decide for themselves what is meaningful and what is trivial? Can I skip this or is this meaningful to my interpretation of the text? And that's a really powerful skill and a powerful task in this particular contemporary moment of course: you have to construct your own hierarchies of meaning. What material, what textual material in this book, is meaningful to you?

21:39 So, this material causes the reader to really have to decide what is the text here, almost like a Choose Your Own Adventure reading situation. You decide what material is significant to your

comprehension your enjoyment your analysis of the book work, which text will you read and which will you skip. And of course we're always distinguishing between meaningful and not meaningful material as readers. And these pages that interrupt our reading experience really just exaggerate or make obvious that process that we're often doing. It's a novel that really brings to light the possibility that there is meaningless or filler material in texts, that there is skippable material in texts. So that's part of this process of waking up from a kind of any sort of passive reading experience -- and I don't see reading as passive anyway -- but this is a novel that sort of actively tries to help the reader or provoke the reader to determine the meaning hierarchies that will shape the reader's reading experience.

22:42 It also forces you to continue to flip your reading strategies because the reading strategies that you might use for the plot portions of the novel are not the same for the interruptive pages. So in that very flipping there's a kind of activity, a kind of energy. Even the book's physical presence, if you have this book by chance or again maybe I'll try to put a video to speak to this on Instagram, but the book's big physical presence and the fact that you sometimes have to rotate the book in order to read the pages correctly especially these interstitial pages. Even that kind of activates the reader because it really foregrounds how reading is a bodily physical experience. So on one hand this this lesson came down to the idea that these are pages and this is a dimension of the text that's meant to activate the reader.

23:36 Another aspect of these pages that I talked about in class was that it's also -- these are pages that really mimic the look of a digital text, the format of a digital text, and that have you mimic digital reading practices. So if you think about the process of sort of sifting through email to take out the spam or scrolling through a feed where there's advertisements or things that don't apply to you in the same way, any sort of online junk that might interrupt the the feeds that you've curated or have imagined that you've curated for yourself, those same reading practices and maybe consumption practices are at work here in this physical book, this physical object. So JPod really turns this heavy print novel into a kind of digital text by doing that, by having that same email style text and spam, and links that infiltrate all throughout the plot of the novel.

24:36 Another thing that these pages do is they really incorporate a kind of on-the-go interrupted distracted tempo into the stationary reading experience, or what some of us may be historically considered to be a stationary reading experience. So in that way the novel, through these interruptions, really mimics the tempo of contemporary life, this idea of encountering texts on different screens, texts that doesn't always look the same way, being pulled away from one narrative to another, being pulled away from one screen to another, one app to another. These pages are essentially pauses or interruptions in the main content in the plot. And so, JPod really presents interruption as a kind of organizing feature of the contemporary reading experience. It does that in its very form.

25:28 I also thought and commented on this, on that day, the day I taught this particular lesson, that there's something about JPod that's really playing with a kind of reading elitism. It's resisting calls of inattentive or unfocused reading, the idea of distraction in the digital age, by actually building

distraction into its very form. So the novel sort of legitimizes distracted reading as a valid form of reading, as a valid technique for analysis. And then me by including this novel and talking about this reading practice in my class, I'm trying to do the same right? I'm trying to talk about valid and invalid reading practices and, and where we draw the line between the two.

26:14 So, there were a lot of challenges in teaching this book. Like I said I've only taught it once in one class last year. And, you know, some people really didn't like this book and that's a challenge in itself and it's always something that we have to grapple with, and there is a lot of things in the book that folks have taken issue with: problematic characterization, and a really outlandish storyline, characters who sort of blur together. But part of the task, I felt as the instructor, was to try to think about why those things might be. So for example in another lesson on JPod that I'm not talking about today, we did talk about the concept of flat and round characters and why this particular novel about consumer culture, corporate culture, capitalism, labor, why this novel would create characters that to some readers blur together, or seem one dimensional.

27:07 But despite those sort of challenges or reactions to reading this and teaching it in class. I thought it was a really good book for this particular context, a third-year Canadian literature class, because it really allowed me and all of us to grapple with confusing material, seemingly nonsensical material, hard to navigate material. It really put at the fore of our minds the question of what do we do with the parts of a text that don't really make sense to us? that don't seem to fit within the larger whole of the text? And it really brought up the question of how do we navigate difficult readings as emerging scholars and learners and English majors? How do we navigate difficult materials? We were able to sort of "go meta" about our reading practices. We talked quite frankly about what are the reading practices that we use to navigate this material that seems, like I said, nonsensical, that seems hard to study, that seems like something like close reading doesn't help us understand these pages, that seems to defy our expectations about what a novel should be and also how some of us read novels.

28:20 So, again, it kind of offered us a good discussion about which reading methods are valid and are validated in the classroom in classroom spaces in teaching and learning spaces. Like is skimming is skipping is scrolling, a valid reading method? Where are these methods valid and why? If they're not valid then, who has made that decision, and why?

28:47 So this is a book that in a third-year teaching and learning context, English literature class. I think it really helped... it allowed us to push the boundaries of our reading practices because by that point of course students often have a good toolkit of skills they can bring to reading and skills that they can use to read a text to analyze it, but this is a book that sort of presses up against some of the traditional literary skills or analytical skills that you might learn in a first or second years, kind of foundations class in literary study. So that's why I found this book so helpful and provocative and energizing in this particular teaching context.

29:34 If you've taught with JPod or with actually any of Douglas Coupland's books, I would love to hear more about it so feel free to send me an email and tell me about that at teachinbookspod@gmail.com.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

29:55 Today's episode was recorded on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Metis. I want to share with you a Land Acknowledgement that I wrote about a year ago, around the time that I defended my dissertation, and I used it in my PhD defense and elsewhere afterwards. And then I also want to share with you some video blogs that since then have helped shape my Land Acknowledgement practice. So let me read it out first.

30:23 "When I was thinking about how I wanted to begin this talk on a project that is about the relationship between space and text. I considered how land acknowledgments are themselves complicated contested spatial texts. For non-Indigenous white settlers like myself, land acknowledgments can serve as a public disruption of the everyday machinery of the settler-colonial state, as Chelsea Vowel under the handle *âpihtawikosisân* says -- because they are an explicit call to name and therefore construct the geography around us in a particular way. That is, as Indigenous land. As land bound to Indigenous histories that have not received explicit recognition in settler colonial publics and spaces. But, like the spatial texts I've been studying in my work, land acknowledgments can also obscure the lived troubling violent realities of the lands they describe. Obscure because, in my experience, land acknowledgments spoken by settlers frequently operate in language that is euphemistic rather than explicit. I've heard more about settler speakers having quote unquote "gratitude" for their place as a quote unquote "guest" on the land than I've heard something like: I acknowledge that this is stolen land. I acknowledge that we are in a room and an institution made possible by genocide. Land acknowledgments then help me think through the urgent, socially and politically momentous ways that texts can obscure relations to and around space as much as they can reveal something important about those relations texts orchestrate the world in specific ways, for better or worse, through language."

32:18 My own Land Acknowledgement practice continues to develop and to change since I wrote that a year ago, in part because of the very generous work of Stryker Calvez and Rose Roberts, at University of Saskatchewan's Gwenna Moss Center for Teaching and Learning. Stryker and Rose have developed and offered a series of video blogs that are meant to help folks write their own individual Land Acknowledgments, and with permission. I am going to share the link to their module in the show notes that they have generously permitted me to share on this podcast.

32:56 Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their music at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at musktrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics.

33:15 You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod. To chat about the podcast use the hashtag, #TeachinBooksPod. You can also get in touch via email at Teachin' books podcast@gmail.com. And if you like what you're hearing, please do rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts or any other podcatcher that allows you to do so.

Okay listeners, goodbye for now, but please join us again next week on Teachin' Books, no "g" in the teachin', although sometimes I do put a "g" in the teachin', but mostly, no "g" in the teachin', when I remember. That's the goal.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>