

# Could do better

*Hedley Twidle*

**The Schooldays of Jesus**

J M Coetzee

Harvill Secker, 272pp, £17.99

Finding it very hard to muster any reaction whatsoever to J M Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus*, I broke an unspoken rule and quickly clicked through the early reviews. The *Australian* provided a loyal, deferential description of the latest novel by its best-known literary immigrant, but most responses ranged from the cool to the exasperated. Under the heading "J M Coetzee has lost the plot", one reviewer suggested that the most affecting page in the book is the one that lists the 2003 Nobel laureate's previous works.

I had also been pondering this forbidding, vaguely hourglass-shaped litany of literary achievement – flipping back to it repeatedly when coming (generally nonplussed) to the end of the book's short, gnomic chapterlets. At the top of the list, there are the longish early titles, such as *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K*; at the bottom, it widens out again into the recent collaborations with Paul Auster (*Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011*) and Arabella Kurtz (*The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*). In the centre, the one-word narrow waist formed by *Disgrace*: a novel widely lauded abroad but often reviled in Coetzee's native South Africa, and one that seems to have marked the end of a certain kind of risk-taking in his work.

This latest book continues a retreat into more cerebral, disembodied fictional worlds – novels advanced largely by stilted, rather coy Platonic dialogue through which characters emerge less as verbal approximations of people than philosophical propositions, to be tested in a carefully controlled, not to say sterile environment.

The hourglass also shows that Coetzee's oeuvre has been marked by ambitious conceptual jumps. For most of his career, each book seemed to invent a set of rules, or toy with a different genre. Even within the quasi-autobiographical triptych of *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, the individual components vary in tone and technique, as if the slippery enterprise of self-writing needed to be approached anew each time. So it is strange to have an unambiguous sequel from Coetzee, one that picks up where *The Childhood of Jesus* left off, as if this were



**Cerebral worlds: Coetzee**

the latest instalment in a fantasy cycle, or a successful children's book franchise.

"David is the small boy who is always asking questions," the publisher's blurb tells us. "He has the big dog Bolívar to watch over him. But he'll be seven soon." The next bit earned a worried underline from me: "And so, David is enrolled in the Academy of Dance. It's here, in his new golden dancing slippers, that he learns to call down the numbers from the sky. But it's here too that he will make troubling discoveries of what grown-ups are capable of."

The main action of the book surrounds this academy, where the boy is sent by three mysterious benefactors after fleeing more conventional schooling. Here he comes under the influence of the maestro Señor Arroyo and his beautiful "alabaster"

## Characters emerge as philosophical propositions

wife, Ana Magdalena. One of Coetzee's many chilly and remote women, she intrigues not just David's protector Simón, but also the unsavoury Dmitri, a museum attendant who shows the kids dirty pictures and makes no secret of his unrequited obsession for the former ballerina.

Rather than subscribe to an education system that teaches children to use numbers like "ants" (as Arroyo puts it), this extreme version of a Steiner school teaches its pupils to embody them, to understand their soul, to dance geometric dances of metaphysical mathematics. It's all very strange, *el sistema Arroyo*, though perhaps it shows up the arbitrariness of any formalised system used to discipline the young. The encounter between the sheer oddity of private

human imagining and the necessary entry into shared systems of symbolic exchange is perhaps the deep theme of the novel – one dramatised in both its content and, at a further remove, its failure to work as a novel.

As with its prequel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* is written in a prose with a patina of flickering allusion – to Cervantes, Pythagorean mysticism, John's Gospel – all of which tempts allegorical intervention even as it frustrates it. Faced with dotted references to vineyards and olives, repeated meditations on the meaning of "passion", and even an appearance by a farmyard animal called Jeremiah, the reader's mind works, Rubik's cube-like, to try out one kind of interpretation, then another.

Are we perhaps reading the backstory of a religious doctrine, the "real" historical matter from which a gospel will one day be distilled? I thought this a rather smart reading for a while; but nothing in these late Coetzeean tales provides you with the satisfaction of a working hypothesis. In fact, the most interesting hypothesis I have come across is that the world in which these novels unfold is one drained of symbolic charge: a domain of broken, meaningless, non-functional figurative lumber that only the young David (in a version of the Fisher King myth) might one day be able to restore to meaningfulness and fertility, to "signification". "Your son is an exception," Arroyo tells Simón. "He feels with unusual intensity the falsity of his new life. He has not yielded to the pressure to forget."

Between the publication of *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays*, Europe has faced an enormous reckoning, its stable and prosperous democracies becoming a destination for thousands of people fleeing from their old lives. This crisis of strangers can't help but give another unexpected inflection to Coetzee's vaguely Mediterranean geography, where characters arrive from across the water and into the novel with no memory of what came before.

Somewhere else again, there lurks the possibility that within this carefully administered, rather dreary Spanish-speaking world, the novelist might be testing the limits and dimensions of a certain kind of utopia: ascetic, vaguely socialist, inclining towards the vegetarian. When Dmitri is found to be a brutal murderer, the trial scenes are positively Norwegian in their leniency and attempt at rehabilitation. In the town of Estrella, justice seems almost like Kafka in reverse: the crime is in no doubt; it is the punishment that proves elusive.

There is a Louis C K sketch about the deconstructive power of children's relentless questions. By the end, the continual force of the childlike "Why?" has the comedian ►

► screaming about the most fundamental concepts of being and nothingness in the middle of a McDonald's: "Because some things are and some things are not." "Why?" "Well, because things that are not can't be." "Why?" "Because then nothing wouldn't be. You can't have f\*\*\*ing nothing isn't, and everything is!" "Why?" "Because if nothing wasn't, there'd be all kinds of things like giant ants with top hats dancing around, but there's no room for all that s\*\*\*." And so on.

In Coetzee's very different take on all of the above, Simón the father figure answers, or tries to answer, each of David's questions in a measured tone, yet with an increasing exhaustion and lack of conviction: "You say you thirst for answers . . . I, because I am patient, because I love you, offer an answer each time, which you pour away in the sand."

If there is love, comedy, frustration, passion or affection here, it is of only the most recessed, rarefied and attenuated kind. None of the characters emerges as particularly engaging, and so the resulting document is a kind of anti-novel, as wilful and unconcerned with popularity as its proto-messianic boy protagonist. Which is something that can be grudgingly admired, perhaps, but hardly enjoyed.

I won't be waiting with bated breath for *The Adolescence of Jesus*; I'd sooner flip over the hourglass and begin again. ●

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