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J.M. Coetzee

Booker Prize-winning author of *Disgrace*
and *Elizabeth Costello*



SCENES FROM PROVINCIAL LIFE II



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Youth

J.M. Coetzee

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Youth

J.M. Coetzee

Youth J.M. Coetzee

The second installment of J. M. Coetzee's fictionalized "memoir" explores a young man's struggle to experience life to its full intensity and transform it into art. The narrator of *Youth* has long been plotting an escape-from the stifling love of his overbearing mother, a father whose failures haunt him, and what he is sure is impending revolution in his native country of South Africa. Arriving at last in London in the 1960s, however, he finds neither poetry nor romance and instead begins a dark pilgrimage into adulthood. *Youth* is a remarkable portrait of a consciousness, isolated and adrift, turning in on itself, of a young man struggling to find his way in the world, written with tenderness and a fierce clarity.

Youth Details

Date : Published October 7th 2003 by Penguin Books (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780142002001

Author : J.M. Coetzee

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Southern Africa, South Africa, Literature, Nobel Prize, Novels, Literary Fiction, Contemporary, 21st Century, African Literature

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From Reader Review Youth for online ebook

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Youth (Scenes from Provincial Life #2), J.M. Coetzee

Youth (or Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II) (2002) is a semi-fictionalised autobiographical novel by J. M. Coetzee, recounting his struggles in 1960s London after fleeing the political unrest of Cape Town. The story begins with the narrator living in Mowbray and studying at the University of Cape Town. After graduating in mathematics and English and in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre he moves to London in the hope of finding inspiration of becoming a poet and finding the woman of his dreams. However he finds none of this and instead, takes up a tedious job as a computer programmer working for IBM his work including checking punched cards submitted to an IBM 7090 for the TSR-2 project. He seeks refuge in the Third Programme and cinema, falling in love with Monica Vitti. He feels alienated from the natives and never settles down, always aware of the scorn they see him with. He engages in a series of affairs, none of them fulfilling to him in the slightest. He scorns people's inability to see through his dull exterior into the 'flame' inside him; none of the women he meets evokes in him the passion that, according to him, would allow his artistry to flourish and thus produce great poetry. By the end of the book he is working for International Computers on the Atlas project.

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Nurul Nadzirin says

Ah, I think I can never dislike J.M. Coetzee's work. There are exceptional depths in his characters that make me feel like I've known them all my life - the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, Magda in In the Heart of the Country, the professor in Disgrace. They are all extremely different characters, from extremely different circumstances, locations, ages, and time. But written by Coetzee they seem to speak in voices that you can relate to, no matter how un-relatable they should be. Coetzee is a master storyteller. He puts in a lot of detail not just through his prolific description, but through the words the characters choose to use, the opinions, likings and dislikings they have; the first-person narratives he writes seem to embody those very people to perfection.

And of course *Youth* is an autobiography - so how much more accurate can an author like Coetzee be, if he is speaking in his own voice from the past?

The book is brutally honest, like diary entries the writer knows would be read by thousands of people; people

who would judge and berate him for simply being a human being. Like everyone else, the author is selfish, arrogant, insecure, often lonely, often ambitious, but most of the time, he is just fine. He is doing okay. He rejects and is rejected, he ignores and he is ignored, he is lonely but has encountered a lonelier friend, he is considerably intelligent but realizes he's no match to the genuine geniuses at work. He wanted to avoid mediocrity his whole youth, but he embraced it in the end, quite contented to just be alive and be okay. He is like many of us.

As to how much I would recommend a reading of this book, I would say, it's Coetzee, read him! You will both hate and love his characters, but more than that, you will never be able to forget them.

Velvetink says

"Youth" is a portrait of an artist as a young man - struggling to find his way.
Maybe I will just start with a quote;

"At 18 he might have been a poet. Now he is not a poet, not a writer, not an artist. He is a computer programmer, a 24 year old computer programmer in a world where there are (yet) no 30 year old computer programmers. At 31 he is too old to be a programmer: one turns oneself into something else - some kind of businessman - or shoots oneself" Coetzee.

Darn. I have 7 foolscap pages of handwritten notes I made while reading. Somehow have to condense it. I will return to this.

Review in progress / feeling too sick to write reviews too fast between coughing. This was excellent though. Want to read more of Coetzee. Recommend this for would be writers, poets or anyone really who is sucking on their misery / dark night of the soul stuff.

btw excuse slashes / as punctuation, my keyboard is cracking up in sympathy with my lungs. Delete, hyphen and various other keys not working.

Library borrow. Just discovered this author last night and found this slim volume on my college library shelves today. I am trying to expand the range of authors I'm reading so this is kind of like a test drive.

Caroline says

By page 115 of this slim fictional memoir, Coetzee had convinced me that he's a beautiful writer. He manages to avoid corniness, even though he's describing the inner narrative of an ex-pat wannabe poet (recipe for sappy disaster). There are some ethical musings in here which are quite good and I like the whole construct of an author describing a fictional character's interaction with other authors. It achieves a distance between Coetzee and his pathetic, miserable hero that is compelling. There is a lot of pitiful self-mockery involved here that may be depressing for some, but which for me was a breath of fresh air after reading so many novels in which the characters pretend to psychologically self-flagellating just to garner the sympathy

of the reader. Here the narrator's self-disgust is genuine and not particularly unwarranted, mean as that may sound.

Sidharth Vardhan says

This is really a portrait of an artist as a young man (pun intended). The stupid motivational speakers make it sound too easy - when they ask one to chose between passion and money as one's career goal. Money here sounds some kind of luxury which one can live without. But really, money is what is going to pay the bills. And pursuit of arts almost always have a big gestation period before it earns one money. And the artist must struggle in poverty in meantime - may be live as a financially dependent. John struggles to maintain a balance between what he does to earn and pursuit of his own art. The choice he has is between being a bored programmer or a starving artist. And he finds himself gradually tilting towards the last.

Like any young artist, he is visited by doubts - how come he hasn't written anything great yet? Is he a failure then? It is this eternal wait for some muse to take petty on him which forms the main theme of novel.

Meanwhile he is also young man - and feels frustrated like any young person who is learning to see the world for what it is and not finding it in anyway the bed of roses it was supposed to be. Plus like any young man, he grumbles at problem if getting sex regularly. In fact, that is one of the attractions of being an artist. The women are supposed to just fell in love with and quarrel to be taken by one. So sad, it doesn't seem to happen.

Plus John's conscience is troubled by the political evil around him and, to which, he steadily seems to be contributing more and more - of unwillingly made to contribute to cold war, of politics in Africa etc.

There is so much to relate in this novel. Unfortunately, this wait for muse is such a passive thing and so the novel lacks action. There is trouble of memoirs shaped into novels - so often they are chaotic like real life and lacks necessary symmetry to make a good novel. What is more Coetzee seems too harsh on himself (or the protagonist) - so often the narrative seems to laughing at the protagonist. While once can easily find so many faults with John, the music of inspiration which drives himself seems to have been killed by the cynic narrative.

Jo says

This is the most autobiographical book i related to on so many levels, however reluctant i am to admit that. Its a rather bleak book with such raw honesty and rhetoric questions. This is my first book by Coetzee, and i absolutely love it, his way of exploring so much striking truth in this short sentences, going straight into the consciousness of the 19 year old in London. I find myself enjoying it and finishing it fast, probably the fastest i have ever finished a book. The pretentiousness of an artist wannabe in london, debating what it means and takes to be an artist, wondering how others do it, being in london yet not living within it and what it offers, drifting and justifying what he is doing, secretly desiring the torture of being an artist - only superficially, the relation between being a good lover/artist, lots of contemplation and doubts delivered in a rather casual way. Im not sure if the title is apt, is this what being young is all about, is this what everyone can relate to in their youth? and ultimately settle into a job, car and family? Gone is the passion and intensity of being young? or does it just manifest in different ways?

Anne says

What first struck me about *Youth* is how extremely unlikeable the narrator is. John is a young white man from South Africa, who relocates to London in the early 1960s, inspired as he is by his favourite authors. He hopes to find culture, art, and overall *joie de vivre*, but he is completely unable to find any of this because he is an uptight, judgmental, narrow-minded turd.

So why did I even finish this book? Well, because it was an interesting sketch of that time and place - you feel that change is in the air in the early '60s, especially when seen through the eyes of this non-European outsider in London. And also because *Youth* plays with your expectations a lot: you expect a "becoming an artist and discovering Real Life and Exalted Love" type of story, but Coetzee instead gives you this tragically boring man who fails at everything, especially in being true to himself (which to me is the most tragic thing of all).

Although I don't regret reading *Youth*, if you were only to read one Coetzee novel in your life, by all means, don't read this one. Read *Disgrace*, which is amazing in so many ways. But be warned: that novel's narrator is also a turd.

Herbie says

How to tell the story of a life? Life is: books, art, sex, moving, school and institutions, and the interior life: fear of ignominy, hierarchies of learning (pure math over applied math; scorning the authors that authors you admire disdain), the feeling of belonging or lack thereof.

Is the narrator aware of the limits of "his" 3rd person main character? The narrowness of some of that character's views on life and women and art? Are we meant to take John's analyses at face value? Or is *Youth* a self knowing allegory of a maturity that seems full but is actually only part? John contemplates the greatest art but is still as lost as one can be about how to live.

However narrow and single-minded John's worldview, the novel is a reminder that worldviews are tended, like plants in a garden. They're planted with art and reading and teachings of all kinds and fertilized with experience. I can look down on John for being overly deterministic and foolish about both poetry and women; and yet I admire him for actively tending to coherent theories about any part of the world, and giving real import to what his working theories say about his own life. This kind of interior moral life which is all wrapped up in an artistic life - it's familiar to me. And my own tendency is toward nihilistic chaos to soothe me from even trying to be moral or be an artist. When I reflect quietly, I don't believe in nihilism. When I flip the channels and swiftly scroll through the feeds, I let it run me.

notgettingenough says

How do bitter and twisted, lonely, emotionally crippled older men start out? Men whose relationships, if any, have always soured early, men whose jobs are all that sustain them, mediocre jobs with colleagues who never become friends. Men whose strict weekend routines stop loneliness from being more than an uneasy

feeling which never quite comes to the surface. Never quite acknowledged.

They start out as bitter and twisted *Youth*. In this novel by Coetzee, we see the establishment of such a being, a young man who thinks somehow that his cold alienating ways will make him a poet. When it turns out that he has nothing more in him than the capacity to be a computer programmer, and an undistinguished one of those, he sees his future as a hollow meaningless thing. We do not find out if his life remained the mean and nasty existence he portended.

Enter *Nagasaki*. Here we meet a man who might be the person *Youth* foresaw. Towards the end of his nondescript career he is alone, as far as we know he has never had a meaningful relationship with anybody, including his relations. When not at work he is at home, when at home, the person he talks to is himself. He has no friends, no interests, nothing about him justifies his carbon footprint. Like *Youth*, he is given the opportunity to live, to behave with largesse, to give. Like *Youth* he cannot do that. Both of them experience discomfort, unease at their utter meanness of spirit, but neither is capable of being a new person.

Is this inevitable? Enter Mr Stone of *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*.

rest here: <https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress.com>

I. says

Just reread it. The ending was pretty devastating. The whole book was really. I don't generally care for coming-of-age stories but Coetzee is such a fascinating individual to me (maybe because I'm a fellow uber-rational, emotional cripple)...

"She writes every week but he does not write every week in return. That would be too much like reciprocation."

"He has a horror of spilling mere emotion on to the page. Once it has begun to spill out he would not know how to stop it. It would be like severing an artery and watching one's lifeblood gush out."

"They might as well get married, he and Astrid, then spend the rest of their lives looking after each other like invalids."

"He is chagrined to see how well the reality principle operates, how, under the prod of loneliness, the boy with spots settles for the girl with the dull hair and the heavy legs, how everyone, no matter how unlikely, finds, in the end, a partner."

"Without descending into the depths one cannot be an artist. But what exactly are the depths? He had thought that trudging down icy streets, his heart numb with loneliness, was the depths. But perhaps the real depths are different, and come in unexpected form: in a flare-up of nastiness against a girl in the early hours of the morning, for instance. Perhaps the depths that he has wanted to plumb have been within him all the time, closed up in his chest: depths of coldness, callousness, caddishness."

"Sorry: the word comes heavily out of his mouth, like a stone. Does a single word of indeterminate class count as speech? Has what occurred between himself and the old man been an instance of human contact, or is it better described as mere social interaction, like the touching of feelers between ants? To the old man,

certainly, it was nothing. All day long the old man stands there with his stacks of papers, muttering angrily to himself; he is always waiting for a chance to abuse some passer-by. Whereas in his own case the memory of that single words will persist for weeks, perhaps for the rest of his life. Bumping into people, saying "Sorry!", getting abused: a ruse, a cheap way of forcing a conversation. How to trick loneliness."

"What is wrong with him is that he is not prepared to fail."

Ariya says

Reading J.M. Coetzee's work is somewhat exhausting. No matter how you're psyched to think you're in the same current stage in life to master reading a masterpiece, you'll eventually left dumbfounded and coerced to rethink what's come to the life of the character that is hard to articulate. Or maybe their life, even so much different than yours, can be terrifyingly comprehensible and it's unbearable not to weight on their decisions as if they were yours to bear. Writing such wonderful characters is truly Coetzee's purest gift.

The main character in this book is arrogant, idealistic, ignorant and self-absorbed as may him be called out. He is desperately trying to escape from whose life he is living in by over-analysing everything comes between who he is and the definition of what he wants to be -- the great poet. His existence depends on the ideal meaning he's craving to trap himself into. The belief that his life is destined for something much greater than he is at the moment manifests him and fosters his ignorance. While, so many conditions: racial and historical influence hinder his dreams, or what he believes that he could acquire; the ability to write, love and care for the other human beings. All those are missing throughout the flood of social dilemma, racial bias, xenophobia, and most of all concluded as the sense of alienation by leaving for the motherland to live in the foreign country with the heart full of false hope.

Yep, it's pretty much like reading about a white man's delusional crippled mind with the psychoanalysis approach and so many literary criticism which, I could say, is the major fondness I have for this book. His taste for poetry is pretty much the same as mine. Lol.

Stephen P says

Ah, to be welcomed back into the eloquent polished sheen of Coetzee's prose. So quickly I join the young man leaving the smothering mother's grasp, himself now grasping to evolve into the blossom of poetry. From South Africa to London where culture thrives and he sees himself entering.

What he finds is a wait. He awaits. Waiting is what he does. His performance. A woman will notice him and see all the magic of his creativity locked within his stiff posture and muffled gestures. She will unlock what he knows is there but is knotted.

The knot cinched tight consists of strands of webbing. He has cultured the art of self criticism locking himself in while locking others out. This leaves him protected but passive. In effect keeping himself safe by keeping others out. He is a pro. No one enters justifying his beliefs of self criticism completing the circle of his diving further down into his passive withdrawal.

I couldn't wait to follow Coetzee removing strand by strand, the ups and downs, John staging the battle to

free himself. But...But...But... it didn't happen. A set piece. A concert where the same note is played over and over again, at the end no one sure whether to stand and applaud or walk out. I found the aisle and walked out. John continued in his self constructed rut. This short novel gave the experience of what it is like to be trapped by one's own undoing but nothing more. The fact that our protagonist has the same name as the author, for me now looking back, shows Coetzee's own battle writing this piece. The piece becoming a piece about itself?

Tommie says

I am all for flawed protagonists, but not perhaps, for insufferable ones. And John, center of this story, is obnoxious. Women are objects, it's their fault they can't see into his inner flame of poetry, his mother likes him too much, blah blah blah pretention. I like to think Coetzee wrote this with self awareness, but it is still a frustrating read. Anyways, he still has a way with words.

The one saving grace are the passages on loneliness in a new city. Most remarkable is counting the days in which he does not speak to another soul. At one point, he considers bumping into people on purpose so that he can say "sorry", so that words come out of his mouth.

Ettore1207 says

Seguito di Infanzia, Coetzee in questa opera prosegue l'autobiografia scritta in terza persona. Anche qui lo scrittore espone senza nessun ritegno le parti più recondite dei suoi pensieri e dei suoi sentimenti. Si sdrai sul tavolo d'acciaio dell'anatomopatologo e procede ad una minuziosa dissezione del suo Io.

Gli eventi lo hanno portato a Londra, dove trova lavoro, ma nel cuore persiste l'aspirazione a divenire poeta. Il Sudafrica è una ferita dentro di lui che non smette di sanguinare. Non sa a cosa credere, non sa qual è il suo posto nella vita, lui che *"ha talento solo per l'infelicità"*. Ci presenta i suoi sentimenti con una prosa semplice, diretta, riflessioni profonde, parole allineate come stelle in cielo e fredde come cristalli di ghiaccio. E' questa la forza del libro.

Isaac VR says

Una de las novelas más ñoñas jamás escritas. Los escritores suelen hacerlo en sus memorias, pero tiene sentido: no todos los escritores son Burroughs ni todos se pasaron la mitad de su vida enajenados con una bolsa de correspondencia al hombro. Las confesiones de juventud (ficticias o reales, no me importa) suelen ser una ñoñería, sin embargo esto no significa que no estén escritas con una prosa bien lograda, como de una persona que ha trabajado en su voz narrativa (tiene un Nobel, coño).

Juventud es la narración en segunda persona de la vida de un joven escritor sudafricano que vive en Londres, luchando contra la rutina que puede convertirse en la enemiga de sus ambiciones literarias y explorando el mundo más allá de los límites de su colonia. En otras palabras, es el comodín de la novela del escritor poscolonial, sin embargo no llega a los niveles poéticos de Naipaul.

Así pues, recomiendo este libro de Coetzee como "lectura de anteojos" (para descansar entre libros densos). Y, a pesar de mis reservas, tiene párrafos sublimes como este:

"Así es como se hace, así es como funciona el mundo. Y un día, estos hombres, estos poetas, estos amantes, tendrán suerte: la chica, no importa la excelencia de su belleza, les responderá, y una cosa llevará a la otra y sus vidas se transformarán, las de ambos, y punto. ¿Qué más hace falta sino una especie de obstinación estúpida e insensata como amante y escritor unida a la buena disposición para fracasar una y otra vez?"

Pablo says

Primera vez que leo a Coetzee, más por azar que por voluntad. A pesar de ser una obra menor, parte de su autobiografía novelizada, disfruté bastante el libro. Espero volver por una de sus grandes obras.

Ravi Gangwani says

I LOVE Coetzee.

No more words are there to express my feelings for him. :)

BellaGBear says

This is a book about a boy who flees his home country in the hope of finding a wild life as a poet with a never-ending string of fabulous no-strings-attached lovers. This sounds like the introduction to a young adult book, except for two facts: the country the boy flees from is South Africa at the time of the Sharpeville massacre, which means Apartheid was still raving. And the place he flees to is London in the 60s, where he becomes a computer programmer, hardly a glamorous profession.

He is torn between figuring out the kind of English person he could be: a worker, or maybe a gentleman or still pursue his poetry dream. He does not seem to be able to settle on a persona. This is also visible in his changing taste of authors and poets he admires. Instead of finding who he wants to be, he changes between different authors he aspires to mimic. The boy is constantly torn between different questions, never settling on any answers. This makes his life meaningless, something he suffers from greatly. These feelings of loneliness are connected with the question of belonging. He left his despised homeland to be free of its attitude, but he has not found the new homeland he hoped for. Ultimately he did not manage to get loose of South-Africa at all, because he still writes about the country. Which makes one wonder if a person can ever cut itself off from cultural or national ties, they do not want to belong to anymore.

This is only part of the review, read the full review here: <https://bookwormsshallruletheworld.wordpress.com/2014/07/10/the-disaparition-by-j. M. Coetzee/>

Lisa says

Ehum...

Well...

What can I say? This is the tenth novel (or so, I just made a quick calculation in my head) by Coetzee that I have read, and it leaves me puzzled in a way that the others do not, even though they may be less approachable, more brutal and enigmatic. This one is clear-cut, with simple language and a typical coming-of-age plot. It is very easy to read, and in fact, I finished it in an afternoon. But it has left me agonising over its content in a way I did not anticipate at all.

There are autobiographical elements in the story of the young man who leaves Cape Town in 1962 to start a new life in London. The character is called John, and aspires to become a poet, or writer in general, while trying to fit in by taking a job as a computer programmer. So far, so good. It is the search of the poet for the right modus vivendi to develop his creativity.

Where is the problem?

I absolutely loathed the main character. There is no other way to describe what I felt, page after page, digging deeper into his psyche filled with pretentious nothingness and arrogance. This makes me wonder what the character meant to the author. Does he reflect Coetzee's own development? If so, there is a huge amount of prejudice and misogyny in his world view, almost painfully evident in every sentence. Or is it a critical analysis of the mindset of the early 1960s, showing the reality of that time ruthlessly in order to make a subtle statement on the era without embracing those attitudes in 2002, when the novel was published?

I don't know.

Apart from the problematic relationship of 1960s South Africa to the rest of the world, I was appalled by the stereotypical description of women from Provence, London, small towns in England or Sweden.

“Spiritually, he would feel at home in Stockholm, he suspects. But what about Swedish?”

I hate when people assume by hearsay that they know exactly what Sweden is like, and what they can expect of it. There seems to be a consensus in the world how to categorise Swedes, and the general common denominator between the analysts is that they have never lived in Sweden or talked to a Swede, or read a Swedish author. Yet, they “spiritually” identify with Stockholm.

Swedish women, of course, are useful to young poets-in-the-making with patriarchal instincts and ancient attitudes towards women's roles as muses and sexual objects:

“Because they are creators, artists possess the secret of love. The fire that burns in artists is visible to women, by means of an instinctive faculty. Women themselves do not have the sacred fire (there are exceptions: Sappho, Emily Bronte). It is in quest of the fire they lack, the fire of love, that women pursue artists and give themselves to them.”

Good artists can hope for Swedish or French muses, while boring poets have to take a local girl, a pert little something from the countryside...

Judging by the butcher approach of the main character when it comes to all encounters with women, he does not have the creative spark himself, despite his conviction to the contrary.

He is literally caught between two worlds: the respectable middle class and the bohemian artist life, and he is equally hopeless in both:

“The right thing is boring. So he is at an impasse: he would rather be bad than boring [note from the furious reviewer: he is BOTH!], has no respect for a person who would rather be bad than boring, and no respect either for the cleverness of being able to put his dilemma neatly into words.”

No respect for anything might be a good summary of the character’s mindset. The outside world only exists to deliver what he needs to fulfil his literary destiny. He offers nothing in return.

Leaves me to form a judgment on the novel. Clearly Mr Coetzee himself is spiritually at home in Stockholm, as he received the Nobel Prize in Literature from the Swedish Academy in 2003, shortly after he wrote this novel. Clearly he has a sharp analytical mind and is able to describe an abject character objectively without raising an eyebrow. The story as such is compelling, and most definitely a mirror of what many young men in 1962 would have thought or done.

It does take a master storyteller to create a portrait of such a man and get the reader to feel so strongly against him, and still want to read on.

I will have to reread my Coetzee collection again in order to make a proper evaluation of why I can’t make up my mind about this one.

The jury is still out. Not expected back anytime soon.

Shovelmonkey1 says

From the book cover:

Set against the background of the 1960's - Sharpeville and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam - Youth is a remarkable portrait of a consciousness, isolated and adrift, turning in on itself. J.M Coetzee explores a young man's struggle to find his way in the world with tenderness and a fierce clarity.

Hmmm.

When I first started reading this book my first thought was, Dawsons Creek, with aspergers set in the 1960's. To much youthful angst and introverted navel gazing highlighted by a tumult of excessive adjectives to describe every thought, every hope, every breath, every aspiration (see what i did there?).

Youth is a study of a man who spends too much time believing that he was destined for better things and over analysing the fact that instead of being born as the 1960's answer Voltaire or Flaubert, he is in fact a computer programmer. A wordy testament to the fact that as we get older most of us realise that we are not going to set the world on fire and get on with simply living. The last four lines of the book were a great summary. Not convinced it deserved a place on the 1001 books list and I've since read other Coetzee books which I liked a lot more.
