

JM Coetzee



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Nobel Prize winner JM Coetzee has been lauded by the University of Cape Town (UCT) as one of the authors who has changed the face of South African literature.

Coetzee, 63, was recently awarded the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature, following in the footsteps of Nadine Gordimer, who won the coveted award in 1991. The prize carries a \$1,3 million purse.

The Nobel committee said a fundamental theme in Coetzee's novels involved the 'values and conduct resulting from South Africa's apartheid system, which, in his view, could arise anywhere'.

Coetzee was born on 9 February 1940 and grew up in Worcester and Cape Town. A UCT graduate, Coetzee was appointed a lecturer in the English department in 1972. He rose through the ranks from lecturer to senior lecturer and later became associate professor.

In 1984 Coetzee became professor of general literature and in 1994 he became Arderne professor in English. He was appointed distinguished professor in the faculty of humanities in 1999 and retired in

January 2002. He earned a doctorate in literature from the University of Texas.

Coetzee has a string of international literary awards, including the Booker Prize, which he won twice - in 1984 for **The life and times of Michael K**, and in 1999 for **Disgrace**. He was the first author to win the award twice. He is also a major figure in the development of UCT's creative writing programmes and has contributed generously to the nurturing of South Africa's future authors.

Coetzee is attached to the University of Adelaide in Australia, but is currently spending a term at the University of Chicago. Despite a string of international awards, he is known to shun publicity and even declined to travel to London after making history by being awarded the Booker Prize twice.

How does a librarian, without an English major, write a review of the latest work of the latest Nobel Prize winner for Literature, JM Coetzee? By not consulting any learned critics and taking the easy way out with a personal immediate and emotional response, the very opposite of how this author comes across both in his books and public life.

Coetzee's latest novel, **Elizabeth Costello**, is a collection of papers delivered mostly by a world-renowned Australian novelist, the ageing Elizabeth Costello, to learned audiences around the world, mostly at universities where she is a guest speaker. Costello is disillusioned with the modern world in which she finds herself and is a militant spokesperson for animal

rights. Her talks, on moral and philosophical issues with many references to the works of Kafka and Swift, are presented here, with responses from her audience and some personal background details. And then there are the talks that she attends too, like the one her sister, a nun who works with HIV/AIDS sufferers in KwaZulu-Natal, gives at a graduation ceremony where she is being honoured. Her topic is the origin of the study of the humanities.

The talks presented in this book have all been either delivered by Coetzee himself or adapted from papers he has had published in scholarly journals. For instance, the two chapters on the papers Elizabeth delivers on the rights of animals were first published in **The lives of animals** (1999). This book contains two talks that Coetzee

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delivered at Princeton University as well as responses from scholars in the fields of religion, philosophy and literature.

By using the fictional character of Elizabeth Costello and now this novel, Coetzee is bringing his ideas to a wider novel-reading audience. This novel of ideas is, I suppose, intended for the more sophisticated reader who wants a challenging and thought-provoking read which excites and stimulates the mind. It bears re-reading and intensive study if one is to derive the most out of it. It is not that his style is difficult, it is as crisp and pared as his other work, it is that what he has to say needs to be mulled over. This reader at least wanted time to think about how the themes here relate to his earlier writing, both in his novels, autobiographical writings and academic texts. Despite all this, **Elizabeth Costello** still made me cry.

A number of my friends ask how I can be a fan of Coetzee's writing when his novels are so despairing, depressing and his style so cold. For me, his clean prose and the sharp gaze he turns on our society, with a surgeon's precision, is like a knife that slices open one's mind to let a sharp light shine on both oneself and one's country. It may be unsettling and uncomfortable, but there is also a truth.

Titles in stock

Non-fiction

179.3 COE

The lives of animals. - Princeton U.P., 1999. 323.445 COE

Giving offense: essays on censorship. - Chicago U.P., 1996.

809 COE

Stranger shores: essays, 1986-1999. - Secker, 2001.

809.8968 COE

White writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa. - Radix, 1988.

809.8968 JOL

Jolly, Rosemary Jane. **Colonization,**