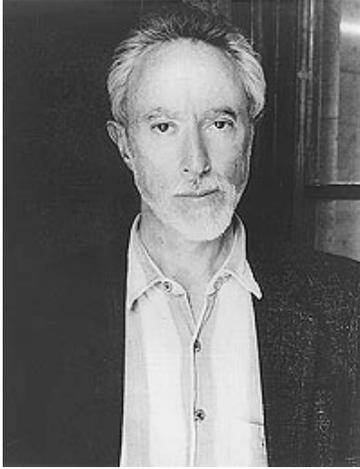


J.M. Coetzee

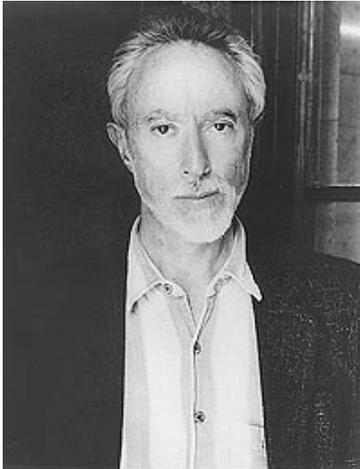


2003 Nobel Prize for Literature

Former UB faculty member J.M. Coetzee won the [2003 Nobel Prize for Literature](#). Coetzee is a renowned South African novelist and literary critic. He read at UB in the fall of 2002 and the Arts and Sciences Libraries' Arts and Humanities Team created physical and online exhibits in his honor and also organized and hosted a panel discussion of his work. Coetzee won the Booker Prize in 1983 for *The Life and Times of Michael K* and in 1999 for *Disgrace*.

Widely regarded as one of South Africa's most accomplished contemporary novelists, J.M. Coetzee examines the effects of racism, oppression, and fear. While addressing the brutalities and contradictions associated with the South African policy of apartheid, Coetzee writes from an apolitical viewpoint that extends beyond geographic and social boundaries to achieve universal significance. This effect is enhanced through his use of such literary devices as allegory, unreliable narrators, and enigmatic symbolic settings. <from [Literature Resource Center](#)>

J.M. Coetzee - Intro



J.M. Coetzee: Voicing the Heart of the Country

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South Africa is a country of many poverties: physically, it is a starkly beautiful, but barren, arid land; socially, it is a nation wracked by poverty, privation and disease. South Africa has bred a violent, hostile culture damaged by a poverty of humanity for more than three centuries. Over the course of three decades, the writings of J.M. Coetzee have ventured further and deeper into that psyche of privation and impoverishment than any other. South Africa's history has been written in the alphabet of turbulence, struggle, trauma, hatred and violent, racial conflict. Coetzee's ruthless, unflinching vision bears witness to the grim legacy we have inherited.

In 1948, South Africa's existing colonial culture of racial segregation became consolidated in the national policy of apartheid, enforcing the separation of Europeans, Africans, Indians, and Coloureds (people of mixed race). The 1950s and 1960s witnessed two decades of intensive racial legislation, fashioning a unique, modern society founded on racial inequality. New technologies of social engineering enabled the rapid "industrialization" of racism. In 1964 Nelson Mandela was jailed for treason. Apartheid ended in 1994, when Nelson Mandela became the first African president of South Africa in the nation's first ever open and democratic elections.

J.M. Coetzee was born in 1940 and grew up under the apartheid regime. His early life was formed by the Karoo, South Africa's arid and dusty heartland. Mike Nicol, another South African author, once wrote, "The Karoo is the heart of the country and the landscape within us." This austere and minimal landscape has left an indelible mark on his work as his early novels show. Coetzee has remarked, "I do believe in spareness.... Spare prose, and a spare, thrifty world." If South Africa is, as white writing's first lady of letters, Lady Anne Barnard declared back in 1798, "a country where objects are thinly scattered," then Coetzee's poetics of thrift seems perfectly adjusted to speak of it. The poverty of this landscape is uncannily doubled by the poverty of humanity that has afflicted South African society.

John Coetzee and the culture of racism matured together in South Africa. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, Coetzee became one of the country's most acute and articulate observers of the stunted and brutalized society to which these policies of segregation and alienation gave rise. Throughout his literary career, directly and obliquely, openly and allegorically, Coetzee has laid open the poverty of spirit with which South Africa has been diseased -- what he has called a "failure of love."

In a culture obsessed with skin color, Coetzee's writings slice beneath the skin, to expose the very nerves and sinews defining those pathologies of power and perversion called 'South Africa.' He has commented, "The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under ... apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life ... South African literature is a literature in bondage ... It is a less than fully human literature ... exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison."

In addition to his novels, Coetzee has published several volumes of critical essays and a recent philosophical fiction on animal rights, *The Lives of Animals* (1999). Once more, it is a lack, the poverty of language in animals that intrigues Coetzee. What distinguishes animals is their silence, their persistent presence as a profound riddle for humans, ironically provoking language and puzzled speculation from us. Coetzee's characters, Michael K and Friday, previously posed versions of this riddle. Animals offer a mute, Sphinxlike existence, teasing us to decipher their identity. Elizabeth Costello, in *The Lives of Animals*, speaks wryly of "the arduous descent from the silence of the beasts to the gabble of reason." Coetzee's curiosity about animal consciousness as embodying a life outside language reaches back at least as far as his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) where his narrator pines to "burst through the screen of names to the goatseye view" and to be reunited with "the mode of being practiced by goats or stones." That suspicion of language led his narrator, Magda, to conclude, "Words alienate." It is a sentiment shared by her author who has crafted a career in precise, "spare prose."

Coetzee's prose is recognizable by one, signature trait -- that 'less is more.' His writing speaks with concision and clarity of the poverties of language and the seasons of silence. Zones of uncertainty beyond knowing, beyond the reach of alphabet and at the very edges of imagination shelter in his fiction. The anorexic social and psychological landscapes of South Africa have provided a canvas on which Coetzee has explored these riddles and silences. Coetzee's prose speaks with an angular, flinty brevity for a world rich in poverties.

J.M. Coetzee - Biography

John M. Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa, on February 9, 1940. He studied first at Cape Town, and later earned a Ph.D. degree in literature from the University of Texas at Austin. He returned to South Africa and joined the faculty of the University of Cape Town in 1972.

His first novel, actually two novellas, *Dusklands*, which examined the parallels between Americans in Vietnam and the early Dutch settlers in South Africa, was published in 1974. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the story of a government magistrate's personal evolution into questioning the government for which he works, won South Africa's highest literary honor, the Central News Agency (CNA) Literary Award in 1980. He won the premier British award, the Booker Prize, for the first time in 1983, for the *Life and Times of Michael K*. In the same year he was appointed Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town, which post he still holds.

On October 25th 1999, Coetzee became the first author to win the prestigious Booker award twice in its 31-year history, for his current novel, *Disgrace* and the *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983).

Today, J.M. Coetzee lives in South Africa. He has published several other novels, the memoirs *Boyhood: Scenes From Provincial Life* and *Youth: Scenes from a Provincial Life II*, and several essay collections. He has won many other literary prizes including the Lannan Award for Fiction, the Jerusalem Prize, and The Irish Times International Fiction Prize.

< more on the author, his work, and literary criticisms can be found at [Literature Resource Center](#) >

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