

J.C. Kannemeyer

J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing



The first comprehensive biography of the Nobel laureate

Biographer J.C. Kannemeyer had the cooperation of Coetzee himself who provided him with private papers and gave him access to his manuscripts.

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In spite of his world-wide eminence as a novelist and a literary scholar, the Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee has not thus far been the subject of a comprehensive biography. For *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, J.C. Kannemeyer, well-known for his two-volume history of Afrikaans literature, and the author of six extensive biographies of Afrikaans authors, had the cooperation of Coetzee himself, who granted him interviews and put him in touch with family, friends and colleagues who could supply information about events in the author's life. Coetzee also provided him with copies of comprehensive documentation in his private possession, and granted him access to the manuscripts of his novels that are due to be permanently lodged at the University of Texas at Austin later this year. Apart from the information gathered through these channels, Kannemeyer also made a study of the enormous body of literature on Coetzee, and through archival research unearthed further information not hitherto accessed.



John Coetzee with brother David and mother

The book starts on an exploration of Coetzee's genealogy, followed by a chronicling of his childhood in Cape Town and Worcester and his visits to the family farm Voëlfontein belonging to his grandfather, where his love of the barren expanses of the Great Karoo was born. After an account of his schooling, the biography traces Coetzee's career through his student days at the University of Cape Town and his years as a computer programmer in Britain. After this, he studied for his doctorate at the University of Texas in Austin, followed by three years as a lecturer at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Here he enjoyed an excellent relationship with his colleagues and students, but was also, through nightly newscasts on television, exposed to the daily horrors of the United States' involvement in Vietnam. His participation in a peaceful protest against the presence of police on the Buffalo campus led to the refusal of his application for a visa for an extended stay in the country, obliging him to return to the country of his birth.

Upon his return in 1971, Coetzee was appointed as a lecturer in English at the University of Cape Town, where for the next thirty years he enjoyed an illustrious academic career, encompassing also repeated spells as a visiting professor at American universities, and many lectures and readings at a

wide variety of conferences and institutions. In 1974 his debut novel, *Dusklands*, appeared, followed by a number of novels that established him as a leading English-language novelist, inspiring a whole industry of critical commentaries and studies. His novels were not limited to a specifically South African set of issues, but did draw attention, among other themes, to the iniquities of apartheid and the perpetuation of colonialism in constricting master-slave relationships. Coetzee's novels are written in a crystalline, stripped prose, lending themselves to translation and critical recognition in all known and many unknown languages.



John Coetzee with his mother and brother David

The biography for the first time introduces into the public domain information about an author known for only very exceptionally granting interviews to journalists, and not readily discussing his private life. The biographer had the opportunity to correct many of the misconceptions still prevailing on the internet and elsewhere, and to provide information shedding light on the genesis and implications of the novels. All in all, this biography is an indispensable source for everybody concerned with the work of J.M. Coetzee.

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Clockwise, from left to right: John Coetzee with his father in Johannesburg (1943), John Coetzee as a boy scout (1949), John Coetzee in Cape Town (1963), John Coetzee with his wife Philippa Jubber in Cambridge (1964).



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