

BOOK OF THE WEEK

# Riddled with puzzles

**At the age of 70-plus**, JM Coetzee has gone and done it again: surprised — and puzzled — readers and reviewers alike.

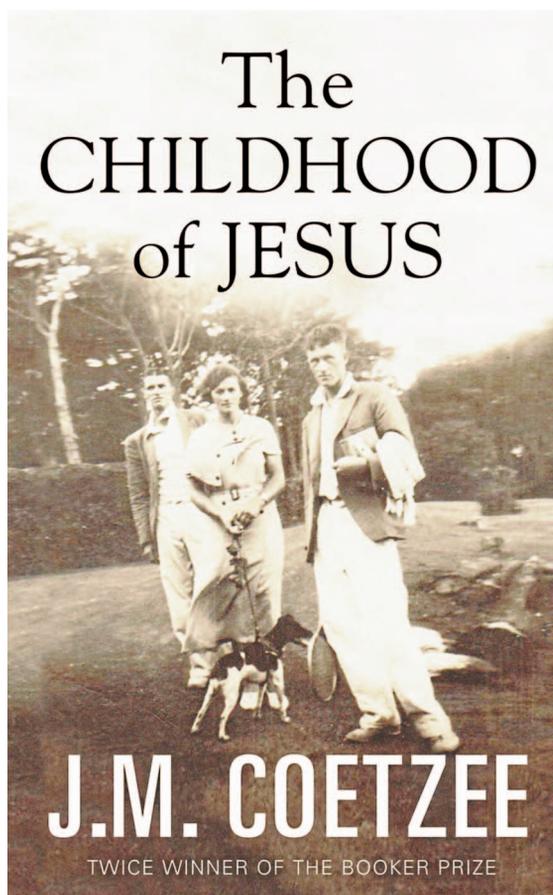
And once more, the jury is out. Is *The Childhood of Jesus* another Coetzee masterpiece, or is it a tentatively circular, pretentious dabble with philosophy in the form of fiction?

The book has hardly appeared, and already I have heard both the above opinions forcefully expressed. Those who love Coetzee's work say it is precisely this capacity to send readers into a spin of confusion with his puzzles within puzzles — and the potential for multiple interpretations — that makes the man such a great writer.

But the detractors, some of them strong academic thinkers, tend to say it's actually all an elaborate ruse, a kind of "philosophy in action" with none of the attendant difficulties of actual philosophical contention. Self-reflexivity as an end in itself, I have heard it said, seems a pretty thin novelistic innovation.

As in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the story takes us to an imagined land of no identifiable location, vividly realised in stark, pared-down prose. Simón (about 45) has assumed responsibility for the child David (about five years old), on a ship en route to a "new land" where everyone speaks Spanish, and where all are "washed clean" of their past.

The unnamed new land is both utopia and dystopia, depending on where you stand. The people are civil but not always helpful. They are communitarian but also antediluvian. (They resist cranes, for example, preferring the manual labour of stevedores at the docks, where Simón finds work.) They are Platonists who resist the salt of appetite (and irony) inherent in Simón's nominalism — his desire to name and tag and improve the world, to spice life up and to eat meat (equated here with eating rats), both literally and figuratively.



**THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS**

By JM Coetzee  
277 pages  
Random House Struik  
R235

Simón magically "finds" the boy's (virgin) mother, Ynes, by knowing her the moment he sees her (conveniently during a hike in the countryside outside the city Novilla), and she too acquiesces in this strange, fantastical revelation of a "son" who has magical "immanence".

All who encounter the boy in love cannot resist his lure, his unique, "chosen" quality. But all who seek to instruct him come up against an obdurate will, a freakish rebelliousness, a blind (and brat-like) refusal to accept the world of forms as handed down to him, that is, Platonism as a way of life.

The boy, so gifted that he teaches

himself to read from an abridged copy of *Don Quixote*, has the devil in him — and he takes especially to the trickster character, the anti-communitarian Señor

Daga, a magician, card-sharp figure, one of Coetzee's most interesting creations in a long time. Here again, a grand contest between Platonism and nominalism is staged, to dramatic effect.

The novel draws on the tradition of alternative Jesus stories in works such as those by José Saramago and Robert Graves in which "humanised" or unorthodox versions of the Christ narrative are presented.

*The Childhood of Jesus* is as entertaining — a series of picaresque adventures — as it is dizzying, with its parables and philosophical exchanges. It is a novel that is full of riddles, playfully recursive leaps and — three cheers for the departure of Elizabeth Costello! — lively, diverse characters.

It has lots of fascinating turns of plot — in fact, a bit of the old Coetzee come back, the one we encountered in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but now wearing a jaunty, *Don Quixote* hat.

I suspect some critics will characterise this novel as strongly redolent of "late style" idiosyncrasies, or worse, indulgences (one thinks of the overbearingly sentimental end-of-career Athol Fugard, for instance, or Philip Roth's attenuated, inward late style).

In my reading, Coetzee here manages — only just, but still — to balance the conjuring marvels of imaginative invention (character-and-plot enchantment) with a subsurface play of ideas reminiscent of some of his best works, specifically, in my reading, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Summertime*.

In the inconclusive end (the story has a fantastic, unreal and parable-like feel), the story recalls most alluringly its grand intertext, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, widely regarded as the founding text of the novel form. And this is no accident. Coetzee takes on, in this novel, the very form itself, and stretches it this way and that: into realism, fabulist tale-telling, allegorical rendering, metadiscursive play, windmill-tilting romps, and deep thought. What can one say? The Coetzee critics will be busy for decades.

**Leon de Kock**