

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Literary biography of a great writer

It is seldom that one can say that a book approaches magisterial status, but JC Kannemeyer's biography of JM Coetzee is such a case.

This 710-page tome is monumental in scope and detail, and it tells its story — a great story about a local boy making good — with modesty, precision and detailed care.

The book's monumentality speaks not only to the stature of Coetzee and his biographer, but also to the passing of an old literary order in which individual greatness was universally revered.

Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer made their names in the twilight of the modernist era. The founding moments of their careers predate the textual swamplands of the postmodernist age, the world of social media in which anyone is potentially a writer.

The new age is impatient with hierarchy and value, "experience" and slow sedimentation. It is digital and flickering, and it flits from one mostly visual feature to the next.

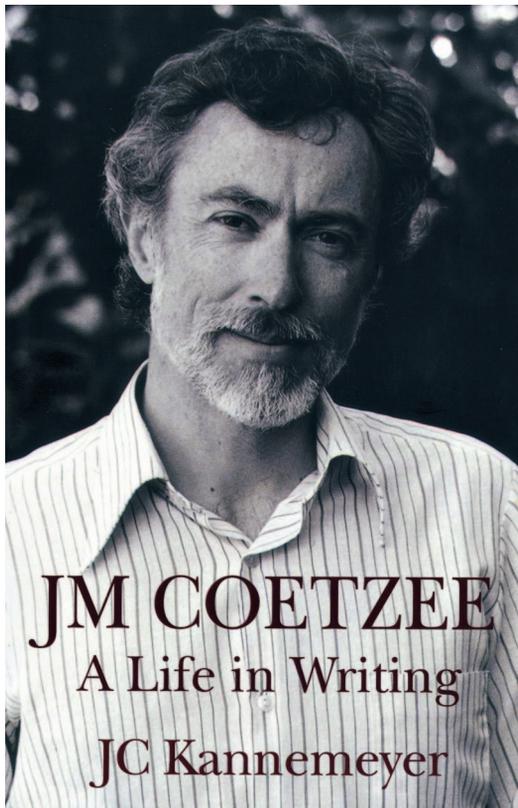
"Greatness" is mostly too deep for the reading spans of digital natives — those born after the 1990s — too slow and, simply, too singular.

The trendy critical theory culture in literary academia doesn't go in too much for "big" books anymore either, though in Coetzee it finds grist to its mill on animal rights, discursive play, and conditions in what scholars call the "postcolony".

Academics are anyway all writers themselves, one way or another, like almost everyone else in the postmodern digital swamp. Writers hardly stand out anymore.

In an important sense, then, Kannemeyer's tome monumentalises the values of an older way of being in the world, of writing and living a "provincial" life, when the book was king and writers in the colonies aspired to make it in the world's literary nerve-centres.

And how Coetzee made it! Despite, or perhaps because of, Kannemeyer's bald



style in recounting Coetzee's chess-like moves, his dazzling but supercareful artistry, the story of local boy making good comes through wonderfully.

It's almost as if Coetzee, the smoke-and-mirrors metafictionist, with one faux-biography, *Summertime*, under his belt — along with several other works in which the line between fact and fiction is deliberately blurred — needed a Mr Plod biographer.

The contrast is perfect, and the pitch of the narration just right, thanks also to Michiel Heyns's fluent and easy-on-the-eye translation (in fact, I found at least one instance in which Heyns simplifies Kannemeyer's sometimes quite Germanic syntax and sentence construction).

Not that Kannemeyer is in any sense unequal to the task.

His style of biography speaks to precisely the older virtues of a literary order

in which (SA) writers could still achieve canonisation and rely on academic critics taking their work seriously. Such virtues include meticulous research, modesty of style and straightforward rigour.

Kannemeyer's fairness towards his subject allows a very different Coetzee to emerge from the image of a cold, heartless bastard we have often been given by any number of writers, including Rian Malan (in *Resident Alien*) and Imraan Coovadia (in *Transformations*).

The Coetzee who emerges in this authoritative biography is a man who is picky, punctilious and remote, yes, but never pusillanimous, and not unkind. Naturally he does not suffer fools gladly, especially bumptious journalists. If you were his friend or student, though, he could be extremely funny in a rather wry way, and he remains generous to a fault with fellow writers.

The other myth that gets shattered in Kannemeyer's biography is that Coetzee left SA for Australia largely in disgust at the Thabo Mbeki-inspired criticism of his novel *Disgrace* at the Human Rights Commission hearings into racism in the media in 2000.

In fact, he left because he liked the city Adelaide, and the country Australia, and had been thinking about such a move long before the HRC hearings. In 1999 already Coetzee was working on his application for immigration.

In what is now a transnational, globalised world, Coetzee remains as much "our" writer as he ever was: a remote, austere patrician who speaks in beautiful riddles to those who will listen carefully to his voice.

This is a serious, specifically literary biography, and it rewards careful reading. As a work of reference to a Nobel-laureate SA author, it is second to none.

It brings together, in a single volume, both a summary of existing views on Coetzee's literary relevance and refreshingly astute readings of all his work.

Finally, it tells as much about Coetzee's life as it is possible, given the nature of this great author, to know. **Leon de Kock**

JM COETZEE: A LIFE IN WRITING

By JC Kannemeyer
710 pages
Jonathan Ball
R325