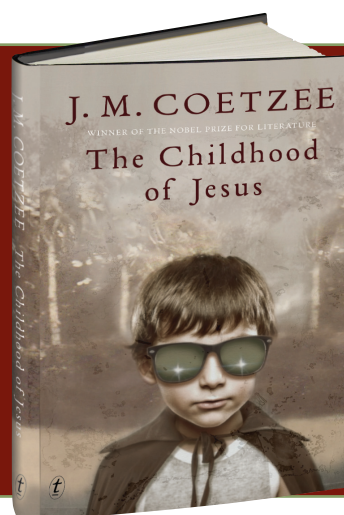
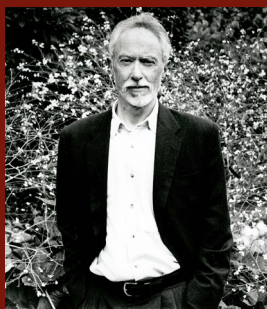


# THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

J.M. COETZEE

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Fiction Hardback



## Praise for J.M. Coetzee

'Coetzee is a master we scarcely deserve.' *Age*

'...Coetzee gradually, with great intelligence and skill, brings to extraordinary – possibly divine – life an ostensibly simple story.' *Weekend Australian*

## About J.M. Coetzee

Born in South Africa, and now living in Adelaide, J. M. Coetzee is widely regarded as one of the world's finest writers. He was the first author to win the Booker Prize twice and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. His writing encompasses novels, autobiography and essays, and the distinctions between these genres are sometimes blurred in his work. His books includes *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Disgrace* and *Diary of a Bad Year*.

## A reader's introduction to *The Childhood of Jesus*

A man and a boy arrive in a foreign land. They have been named Simón and David. Their own names and histories are lost: people arrive in this new land 'washed clean' of the past. Simón and David are treated distantly but benevolently and are given a place to live. Simón finds work with adequate pay; they make friends.

But Simón is dissatisfied. He finds life in this new place 'too placid for his taste, too lacking in ups and downs, in drama and tension' (80). While most people seem content to live free of their old attachments, Simón wants to hold on to the 'shadows' of his memories.

More than that, he wants to find David's mother. On a trip to the countryside, Simón sees a woman he immediately feels is David's 'true' mother. Inés eventually agrees to be David's 'full...one and only mother' (92), and becomes intensely committed to the role.

When David is sent to school, his differences from other children become apparent. He is obviously brilliant, and his understanding of the world is unique. Like Don Quixote, whose story obsesses him, he sometimes seems unable to distinguish reality and fantasy. But

reality in the world of this novel is not always the same as reality in our world.

At the end of the novel, Simón, David and Inés leave Novilla in order to start another 'new life'. We are left wondering whether they will be 'washed clean' again, or whether David's new-found forcefulness will mean a different kind of start.

Many characters, including Simón, discuss philosophical matters as part of everyday conversation. The novel canvasses such topics as the importance of memory, the need for physical pleasure, the role of work in providing fulfilment, and, ultimately, nothing less than the purpose of existence

## Questions for discussion

1. What is the significance of the title? Are there any parallels with the very little we know about the childhood of Jesus, or any of his life? Or is the novel providing a new rendering of his childhood? Or are we to take a less literal interpretation of the title?
2. What kind of place is the country that Simón and David find themselves in? For example, is it a utopia or dystopia? Would you want to live there?
3. After Marciano dies in the fire, Simón tries to comfort David by telling him that Marciano has found peace and is 'looking forward to the next life. It will be a great adventure for him, to start anew, washed clean' (185–6). Is this what has happened to Simón and David? Are we then to think that this new country is an afterlife? How heavenly is it?
4. Why don't we find out the characters' back-stories, especially what happened to David's mother? Are we to agree with Ana who tells Simón that they should be 'wash[ing] themselves clean of old ties ... letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them' (29). Does Simón do this in the end?
5. 'I am not the kind of person who suffers from memories,' (73) Elena tells Simón. Later he responds that he holds onto the shadows of his memories, and would not use the word 'suffer'. Do you think that humans 'suffer' from their memories?
6. Simón often finds the new world and its inhabitants anodyne, and lacking in weight. What is not

anodyne about this new place? Which characters have more passion and substance? How do such people affect Simón and David?

7. In this 'bloodless' world, Daga literally draws blood when he stabs Álvaro. What do you make of his character? Why is David drawn to him?
8. Especially in the early pages of the novel, Simón argues with other characters about the need for passion and the need to satisfy what he sees as an 'ordinary appetite' (41). He cannot understand their lack of yearning and feels that 'only he is the exception, the dissatisfied one, the misfit' (80). Does he ever come to agree with their way of thinking? Does the novel take a position on this debate? What are your opinions?
9. The meaning that work can give life is another subject of the novel. Is Simón's work as a stevedore meaningful, a question he asks himself and his co-workers? Did the scene where the rats are devouring the grain affect your opinion? If it is not meaningful, what work would be more meaningful? If it is meaningful, why?
10. Simón tells David: 'It is a great thing, to live. It is the greatest thing of all' (26). Elena says that one of the important things in life is 'how one lives. How one is to live' (69). How do people live good lives in Novilla? Other than work, as discussed in the previous question, what is seen to give life meaning in the novel?
11. In what ways are David and Simón realistic characters? When they act or speak in ways outside realism, what is the novelistic effect of their actions and dialogue?
12. Simón takes it upon himself to instruct David, not just in reading, writing and arithmetic, but in the practicalities of the world, moral standards and behaving normally. Is he right to do so? Are his lessons correct?
13. Coetzee is known for writing about outsiders. What do you learn about the experience of being an outsider from this novel? Other than David and Simón, who are the outsiders?
14. Why is the story of Don Quixote so important to David? Does he understand it? Why is it placed at the centre of this novel?
15. Simón's insistence that Inés is David's 'true' mother seems absurd at first. But she assumes the role completely. Simón cannot define his relationship with David, but everyone assumes they are father and son. By the end of the novel, David makes a point of denying that Simón and Inés are his parents? What do you think the novel is telling us about what makes a parent? Do you agree?
16. Dr García tells Simón and Inés that David wishes to be seen 'as he really is'. What is he, really?
17. There are many philosophical discussions between characters in the novel. Do you feel that the novel is trying to guide you to a particular viewpoint on these subjects? What does the novel say about philosophy in and of itself?
18. David is scared of falling into a crack. What are these cracks? Simón experiences vertigo when he first begins work as a stevedore, and then later the crane knocks him into the gap between the ship and the dock. What is the symbolism at work here?
19. Does Simón change over the course of the novel? How?