

*Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* by JM Coetzee (Harvill Secker) R295  
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For some time now, JM Coetzee's most absorbing fictional relation has been with himself, not only in the two fictionalised biographies preceding this one, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), but also in the ostensibly more distanced fiction. The writer Elizabeth Costello, for instance in the novel by that name (2003), and also in her guest appearance in *Slow Man* (2005), is clearly some kind of alter ego for Coetzee, as is JC, the ex-South African novelist living in Australia in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007).

*Summertime*, blurbbed as the last of "the majestic trilogy of fictionalised memoir", is squarely in the autobiographical vein of Coetzee's writing, except that here the autobiography is disguised as biography: "John Coetzee" has died, and a would-be biographer is gathering material for his record of John's life in "the years from Coetzee's return to South Africa in 1971/72 until his first public recognition in 1977". The book in our hands, then, is a collection of interviews with five people who knew its subject in these years, sandwiched between two extracts from John's notebooks of the period. The book is in the first place an exercise in point of view: Coetzee is having fun with the various filters that come into play when he, the novelist, writes an account of somebody else's account of him. What purports to be, say, Julia's recollections of John, is thus in fact Coetzee's attempt to see the young John through Julia's eyes.

The technique varies from interviewee to interviewee. The book's second interviewee, Margot, John's cousin, is reported in the third person: the biographer has incorporated her replies into an unbroken narrative in which she is the central character, whereas the other three sections are more conventional, in being structured in the Question and Answer format of the standard interview.

The writing is, of course, competent, in that low-key Coetzee style that in the past has so lucidly opened up vast questions and quandaries. But in *Summertime* the subject matter has become almost obsessively circumscribed to the problematic sexuality of John Coetzee, with the South African political situation putting in a peripheral and not very well integrated appearance every now and again.

Where this work does partly escape the autobiographical straitjacket, is in its implicit link, not with *Boyhood* and *Youth*, but with *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, through its concern with embodiment, the major theme of those two books. In *Elizabeth Costello* we were told "The notion of embodiment turns out to be pivotal" – in for instance, that book's insistence that African novelists "have not lost touch with the body." In *Diary*, too, JC reflects on the fusion of mind and body that a bird in song, for instance, demonstrates.

In *Summertime* that fusion is located in the activity of dancing, through the Brazilian ballerina, the tediously querulous Adriana, who complains that John couldn't dance: "You know the word *disembodied*? This man was disembodied. He was divorced from his body. To him, the body was like one of those wooden puppets that you move with strings. ... Dance is incarnation. In dance it is not the puppet-master in the head that leads and the body that follows, it is the body itself that leads, the body with its soul, its body-soul."

This statement of theme strikes the keynote of all the charges against John in this work – and thus leads inexorably back to John's shortcomings. Again and again we are told how

lacking he is in physical and emotional warmth : “he was not what most people would call attractive”, “he was not built for love”, “sex with him lacked all thrill”, “his mental capacities, and specifically his ideational faculties, were overdeveloped, at the cost of his animal self”, “John wasn’t made for love, wasn’t constructed that way” , “he is not a real man”, “He was not a sensual being”, “Too lacking in passion.”

This judgement is hardly news: after the dismal sexual encounters described in *Youth* we know that John is no great shakes in the sack. But where, in *Youth*, that fact was part of a much richer account of sensual and intellectual experience, here there is almost nothing but the self-centred whine of the discontented women to listen to. The exception here is Margot, John’s cousin, the only woman not to have had a sexual relation with him, who has access to a much more rewarding shared experience, namely the love they both have for the Karoo farm of their childhood. Partly, too, the presence of John’s father, with whom he had such a troubled relation in *Boyhood*, offers some relief from the subject of John’s sexual shortcomings – but the elder Coetzee, too, is himself too defeated and neutral to provide any very vital spark to lighten up the prevailing gloom.

As a reality check, between two readings of *Summertime*, I reread *Boyhood* and *Youth*: were they as good as I remembered, or were they, too, drained by the relentless self-absorption that saps the energy out of *Summertime*? I was relieved to find them as good as or better than I remembered: what sets them apart from *Summertime* is their responsiveness, both intellectual and emotional, to a whole milieu, way of life, landscape. Even where the landscape is the bleak urban one of London, it provides an engrossing objective correlative to the ponderings of the protagonist.

It seems no coincidence that the emotional centre, such as it is, of *Summertime* is cousin Margot’s section, with its reflections of the Karoo landscape, and its evocation of a family history and way of life. Coetzee has always been a writer of landscape: in *Youth* the young John concluded that “prose ... seems naggingly to demand a specific setting.” *Summertime* does have a specific setting (mainly suburban Cape Town in the seventies), but because it is filtered through the indifferent or hostile perspective of the interviewees, that setting lacks texture and warmth. It seems relevant that all the interviewees, again with the exception of Margot, now live outside South Africa: they cannot see John as a figure in a landscape, merely as an incident in their own lives.

To stray somewhat beyond the purview of this review, it is worth noting that Coetzee’s last two novels have also excluded landscape: the protagonists of both *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are confined to the inside of their homes in Australia, a fact that may be responsible for the loss of intensity and engagement in those novels.

*Summertime*, then, is the weakest of Coetzee’s novels to date. Of course, given the extremely high standard from which this a deviation, that is not saying much; but it is a bit disconcerting that that has been true, in turn, of each of his last three novels. We must believe that the curve has now bottomed out and that the trend will reverse itself. Is it presumptuous to suggest that that might involve Coetzee’s finding a subject other than John Coetzee?

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