

Summertime

By JM Coetzee
(Harvill Secker)

To me it is always a treat when JM Coetzee publishes a new book. His latest, *Summertime*, is a further instalment of his fictionalised memoirs that began with *Boyhood* and *Youth*, and is of particular interest to me because of my love for his novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *In the Heart of the Country*, which were written during the period the story covers.

The book begins after Coetzee's (fictional) death, as a biographer travels to South Africa to find stories from those who were close to the writer during the 1970s. He speaks to some of Coetzee's lovers, to a woman that he seems to have been obsessed with, a cousin that he was particularly close with and a work colleague – and it is these interviews, along with notebook fragments, that make up the bulk of the story.

What develops is a fairly sad portrait of a person who never seemed to have fit in anywhere. Coetzee is painted as a painfully socially inept creature, or as one



interviewee puts it: "He moved as though his body were a horse that he was riding, a horse that did not like its rider and was resisting."

As if that wasn't enough, she later proclaims that he was "a little man, an unimportant man." And even those who do have a sense of admiration or respect for Coetzee seem to get frustrated with his inabilities.

Coetzee seems to take some perverse pleasure in debasing his fictional self, ensuring that we not mistake him for some kind of hero. Rather, he makes sure to emphasise his barely (or very) human traits.

So why does he do this to himself? Does he not, in his present late age, feel comfortable with the person he

was in the '70s? Does he think he was too caught up in immature ideas of creativity?

One of his former lovers explains his attempts "to catch the fleetingness of feelings", and his arguments with her about writing books as an attempt to cheat mortality. She retorts that books will go the same way as everything else on Earth, that nothing will survive forever.

However, her argument also leaves a sliver of hope, when she explains how writing is important, as it can give meaning to people.

Summertime is a daring attempt to look at oneself towards the autumn of one's life. Yet while I still eagerly await further instalments in Coetzee's life's work, I must also admit that the books he wrote in the '70s, in all their youthful swagger, come closer to answering the issues he wrestles with now. But then again, that might have more to do with my own age than his.



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More information about her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at irishwritersexchange.com