

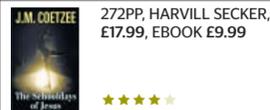
BOOKS

Messiah or naughty boy?

JM Coetzee's 'The Schooldays of Jesus' is opaque, often boring – but ultimately brilliant. *Duncan White* wonders why

THE SCHOOLDAYS OF JESUS

by JM Coetzee



272PP, HARVILL SECKER, £17.99, EBOOK £9.99

★★★★★

Is it possible for a novel to be a series of boring conversations punctuated by silly dancing, but still be good? In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, JM Coetzee pulls it off. This is another opaque book from an ascetic author who finds a way of denying you everything you want while somehow giving you what you need.

When you try to describe Coetzee's novels – bleak, unsparring, experimental – they sound unappetising. You might consume them to make sure your reading diet has enough intellectual roughage. Coetzee is certainly not interested in writing books for escapism or entertainment. His is a philosophical approach to literature. He uses fiction like steel wool to scrub away at himself in the hope of revealing unadorned truths. His aesthetic, too, is suitably parsimonious: every sentence is scraped clean.

To his critics, this makes Coetzee a joyless proposition. Who wants to read abstract or academic ideas expounded in prose that is tasteless and dry? Martin Amis claimed Coetzee had “no talent” and that “his whole style is predicated on transmitting absolutely no pleasure”. How, then, has a writer who refuses so much to his readers been accepted as a literary master?

The Schooldays of Jesus is the sixth of his books to have made a Man Booker Prize longlist. If it wins in October, he will become the first writer to have won the award three times (Hilary Mantel and Peter Carey have both won twice). Coetzee first won it in 1983 for *The Life and Times of Michael K* and then in 1999 for *Disgrace*; in 2003, he was made a Nobel Laureate to boot.

he wondered about a writer's “late style” – to him, it meant “an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death”. If that's so, then Coetzee was born late. But in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), to which *The Schooldays of Jesus* is the sequel, there was definitely something more arresting going on than the expression of late style.

“Confession: I have never understood how [magicians] saw the woman in half,” John Updike wrote in a 1972 review. “And I do not understand Vladimir Nabokov's new novel *Invitation to a Beheading*.” *The Childhood of Jesus* was similarly received two years ago. But, like Updike, the reviewers who couldn't make head or tail of Coetzee's odd book stressed that their bafflement was more of a confession than a complaint. To borrow from Chris Rea, the refrain was: “I don't know what it is – but I love it”.

What was there to “get”? The first problem was Jesus, or, rather, the lack of Jesus. Readers expecting something like Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* or Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary* were disappointed. In Coetzee's novel, a man called Simón takes on the care of a little boy called David, whom he meets on a boat as they sail to a Spanish-speaking town (not in Spain), having been “washed clean” of their previous lives in God-knows-where. With a touch of Kafka, the boy once had a letter explaining who he was, but he'd lost it. We don't meet Jesus.

The blurb of the novel described it as an allegory – but of what? Not very obviously of Christ's childhood. Coetzee gave a reading of the book in Cape Town in which he let slip that he had wanted to leave the cover and title page blank. Perhaps he was worried about the Advertising Standards Authority.

The action (if one might call it that) of *The Childhood of Jesus* takes place in the town of Novilla, a bland socialist utopia, outside conventional history or geography, in which people eat bean paste on crackers, take a functional approach to sex and have little in the way of fun. As immigrants to this bureaucratic city, Simón and David are eventually assigned names and ages, then they go and find a woman, Inés, whom Simón somehow persuades to become David's mother. The boy is unusually gifted, and school becomes a problem. The authorities soon want to ship David off to a special institution. They decide, instead, to do a runner.

This is where *The Schooldays of Jesus* picks up the thread. The assembled family, trying to keep a low profile, have just arrived at a farm outside a town called Estrella. Even if Coetzee had persuaded his publishers, this time around, to leave the cover and title page blank, there could have been no doubt as to the author. Coetzee to the core, the story unfolds in the present tense; adjectives are sparse and carefully deployed.

It doesn't take long for Coetzee to give us a dose of one of his favourite themes, too: cruelty toward animals. On the sixth page, some boys throw stones at a duck and one breaks its wing. On the ninth page, a man puts the duck out

of its misery by breaking its neck. On the 11th page, the “feathered carcass” is buried in a shallow grave. By the 12th page, the grave has been desecrated by scavengers and all that is left is the “head with empty eye sockets and one foot”. Welcome back to Coetzee country.

Horrified by what happens to the duck, David interrogates Simón about why justice isn't done and why the rock-throwing boy seems to show no remorse. The pattern is set: David asks questions, Simón answers with patience, David is dissatisfied. There is a long Socratic dialogue about “sexual intercourse” (“Do you put a balloon on your penis, Simón?”). When Simón and Inés find a man to tutor David in maths, a debate ensues over what numbers are.

This pattern is at first endearing, even amusing, but soon (like real

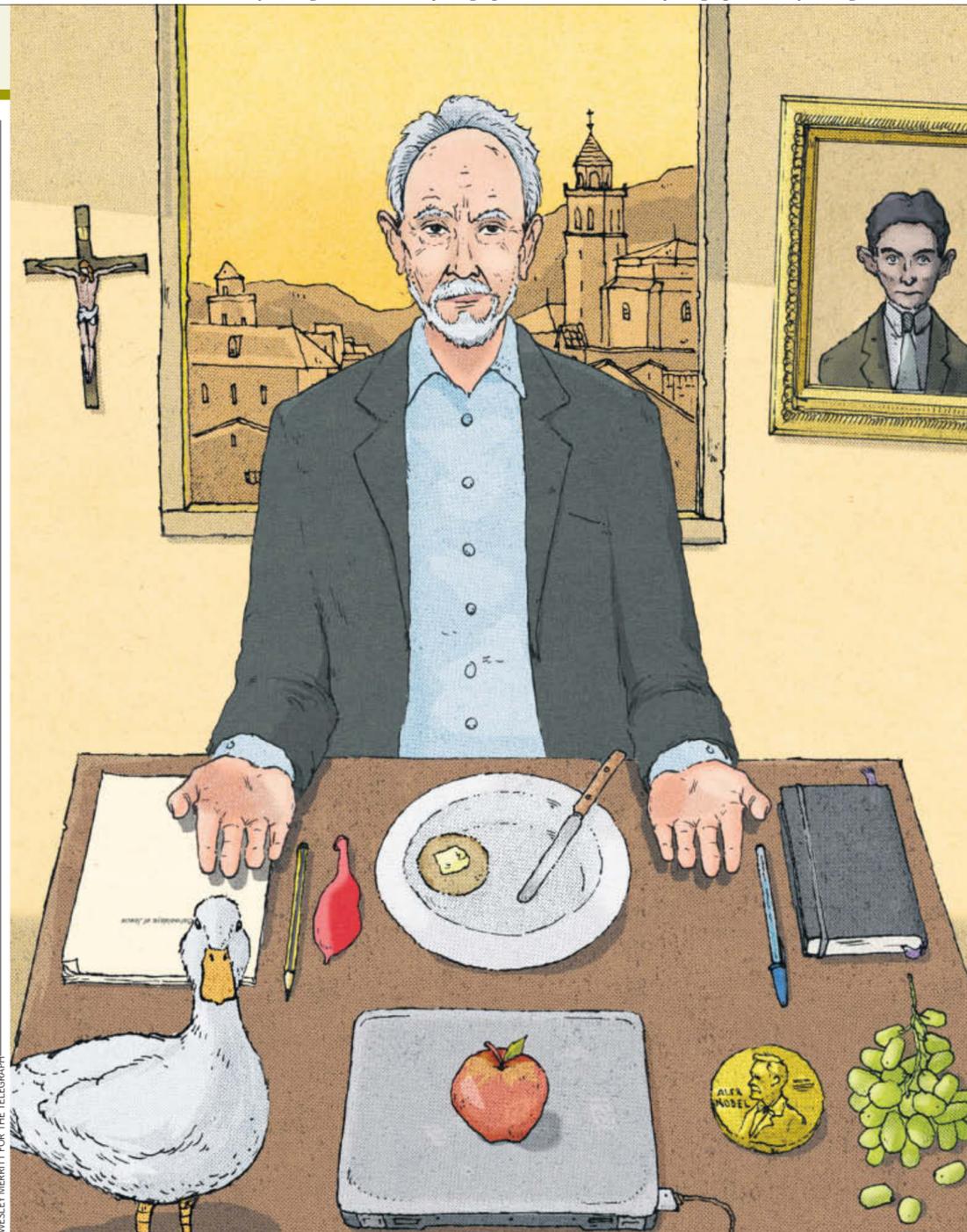
children) pushes your patience. The owners of the farm – the Three Sisters – take an interest in the precocious six-year-old child and suggest he join Señor Arroyo's Academy of Dance, all fees paid. The boy says he does not like dance and Simón confesses to the sisters: “he has tired us out with his willfulness, his mother and me. He is like a bulldozer. He has flattened us. We have been flattened. We have no more resistance.” Hearing this, the boy “smiles to himself”.

Having verged on the irritating, the novel veers alarmingly toward the tedious. David does enrol in the Academy and, wearing his gold slippers, learns all about the metaphysics of pure dance from a beautiful but haughty teacher called Ana Magdalena, wife of Señor Arroyo. There's talk of bringing the “noble numbers”

down from the stars and things like that. David refuses to let Simón watch him practise. When he finally “dances” for him, it involves sitting still in the back of the car with his eyes closed and “a slight smile on his lips”. Simón rather wonders what the boy is being taught.

When the Academy hosts an open night, he sees for himself. First, there is a demonstration of the astrological dances. Then David takes the lead in an “ant dance”, wearing a cap with antennae. It is not enticing to the reader. A scene in which David demonstrates a dance to the Three Sisters encapsulates why this stuff is so off-putting:

“Bravo!” says Valentina. ‘Was that a dance of passion?’ ‘It is a dance to call down Three,’ says the boy. ‘And passion?’ says Valentina.



WESLEY MERRITT FOR THE TELEGRAPH

‘Where does passion come into the picture?’ The boy does not answer but, in a gesture that he, Simón, has not seen before, places three fingers of his right hand over his mouth. ‘Is this a charade?’ asks Consuelo. ‘Must we guess?’ The boy does not stir, but his eyes sparkle mischievously. ‘I understand,’ says Alma. ‘Then perhaps you can explain it to us,’ says Consuelo. ‘There is nothing to explain,’ says Alma.”

Then, just when you're prepared to ditch all this nonsense, there's a murder. (Who would have thought any Coetzee novel needed a spoiler warning, but if you don't want to know who gets it, look away now.) There's a slovenly man called Dmitri who works in the museum next door to the Academy and is popular with the children but, with his lack of decorum, rubs Simón up the wrong way. It turns out that he is in love with Ana Magdalena. When her body is found locked up in a cubicle in the basement, Dmitri claims that he raped and killed her.

This death brings the novel to life. Hindsight fills the duck scene with significance. The children who threw the rocks were also gorging themselves on grapes: “The children stuff their mouths; their hands and faces are sticky with the sweet juice.” David, by contrast, eats one grape at a time, spitting out the seeds and “rinsing his hands fastidiously afterwards”. Following one's appetite, we must conclude, leads to violence.

But what is a life lived without appetite? This is the debate that consumes Simón, increasingly isolated as he tries to be a father to his strange son, who appears above earthly desires and exhibits supernatural powers (he seems able to read some characters' minds). David says that the boy who killed the duck was “shining”, and claims he can “save” both the duck and Ana Magdalena. Later, he says he knows his own “true name”. Could he be Jesus after all? At one point, he even cuddles a lamb.

Phrases that sound like scripture occasionally erupt into the text (“pillar of grace” and “It is just air, air that blows where it listeth”) but they don't give any clarity. Coetzee, of course, is more than capable of being teasingly obscure and one senses that, at his most po-faced, he is wryly undercutting himself.

It is Simón – the Joseph of this scenario – who exhibits more Christian virtue than the lordly David. He is generous, humble and sincere, even when wracked by doubt, and sacrifices almost everything for his adopted son. David's questing takes him increasingly into the abstract. The dances he performs are each named after a number and increase in complexity and mystical power as they go up: first it is dance number two, then three, then five, and then a transcendental seven. He even threatens to turn it up to 11 (“It's one louder, isn't it?”).

Simón's problems are concrete and it is his questions, not the boy's, that captivate. Coetzee has done it again. Through the invocation of a strange and mostly alienating world he sucks you into interrogating the fundamentals: what we live for, and why.

This bug could save your life

Steven Poole on how he learnt to stop worrying and love the microbe

I CONTAIN MULTITUDES

by Ed Yong

368PP, BODLEY HEAD, £20, EBOOK £9.99



★★★★★

It's commonly said that the human body contains 10 times as many microbes as human cells, but the ratio is closer to half and half. Even so, the full importance of that microbial half is only just beginning to be understood. As this densely fascinating and elegant book shows, your bacteria not only help digest your food but might even direct the development of your gut, “craft and tune” your immune system and influence your behaviour. Each one of us, and every other animal, is a whole community of ecosystems.

Ed Yong's book is about the development over the last few decades of this new understanding in biology. Microbes are crucial to nearly all life; and now they are fashionable, too.

Scientists investigate the bacteria that live helpfully inside animals, such as light-emitting squids; or worms, in which it is the bacteria that enable body parts to regenerate. As Yong explains, in a splendid example of the remarkable and somehow amusing facts with which his book is stuffed: “The only bit of the flatworm that can't regenerate is the bacteria-free head. The tail will regrow a brain but the brain alone will not produce a tail.” The female beewolf, on the other hand, a fearsome bee-eating wasp, passes onto its young a strain of bacteria that themselves produce life-saving antibiotics for the young beewolf grubs.

The rhetoric of scientific language, Yong points out, stands in the way of a fuller appreciation of microbial wonders. Labels such as “pathogen” or “parasite” are applied to fixed entities, but what they describe is more like “behaviours”. “Symbiosis”, on the other hand, misleadingly implies thoroughly positive cooperation. Yong is careful to say that it is more complicated than that. And the truth has implications for how we live.

Since only a tiny minority of bacteria cause human illness, the modern overuse of antibiotics and antibacterial everything is harmful to our health. “We have

been tilting at microbes for too long,” Yong writes, “and created a world that's hostile to the ones we need.” It turns out that opening the window of a hospital room is beneficial for the patient (as Florence Nightingale long ago suspected), because it enables pathogenic bacteria to leave and helpful ones to enter. Architects are studying how to build “good” microbes into hospital walls.

One's eyes do occasionally glaze over in the parade of bugs, but in the main Yong's book is vividly enjoyable. He visits scientists in their labs, and they say funny things. (“You can't go wrong with mucus, because mucus is cool.”) He has a favourite bacterium, *Wolbachia*, which hides in insects and other arthropods. It's also an example of how the new microbial science might save lives. One team is deliberately infecting mosquitoes with *Wolbachia*, because it makes them immune to the viruses they usually pass on to humans. If you release enough *Wolbachia*-laden mosquitoes into the wild, you might wipe out dengue fever or even malaria.

Managing the microbial systems in humans themselves, meanwhile, is a new frontier in medicine. There has already been a lot of hype about faecal transplants, in which “doctors take stool from a donor and install it in a patient's guts”.

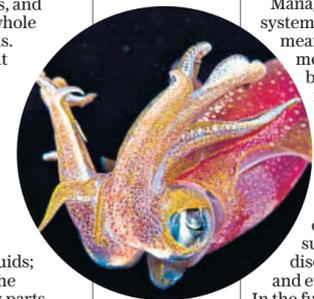
This, it turns out, can quickly cure chronic diarrhoea caused by the C difficile bacterium, but the suggested benefits for other disorders, such as obesity and even autism, are unproven.

In the future, however, scientists may be able to design a microbial ecosystem for each patient from scratch and pack it into a pill, to treat a wider variety of illnesses. Medicine, Yong suggests, may become more like ecology: restoring the ecosystems of the human body to harmony.

One scientist gives out an Overselling the Microbiome Award to colleagues or journalists he feels are exaggerating the importance of all this. Yong hopes he doesn't deserve one, and in the main I agree. His book may contain many disgusting stories from the frontier of microscopic science, but it is strangely comforting.

We all travel through a cushioning cloud of our own bacteria. So, as Yong writes prettily: “A polar bear trundling solo through the Arctic, with nothing but ice in all directions, is completely surrounded.” Even when you think you're alone, you aren't really.

Steven Poole's *Rethink: the Surprising History of New Ideas* is published by Random House



See the light: bacteria help squids glow in the dark



To order this book from the Telegraph for £16.99 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515