

# NEELK BOOK OF THE MONTH

## ***Diary of a Bad Year* by J.M Coetzee Review by Jan Wilm - March 2008**

*Señor C, an ageing South African novelist living in exile in Australia, has forsaken the art of fiction to contribute to a collection of essays entitled *Strong Opinions*. Because of his age and a case of cramped hands, he hires a young girl as his typist only to fall in love with her.*

J.M. Coetzee's latest novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, is a drastic departure for the author, an attempt to change the nature of the novel. This highly experimental work fuses the portrait of the artist as a solitary animal with the cold world of politics. While Coetzee has always been daring and experimental, for example in successfully rewriting the story of Robinson Crusoe in *Foe* or drastically switching narrators in *Life & Times of Michael K*, here his efforts are more an aggressive experiment than a fortunate effort.

*Diary of a Bad Year* is a hybrid of a book of essays and the story of an ageing university professor and writer. The protagonist, Señor C, is engaged in writing mostly political essays to contribute to a German publisher's book entitled *Strong Opinions*. Coetzee divides each page into three parts. Señor C's essays take up the upper third; the middle is the account of his life and work and his relationship with Anya, the young woman living in his building he lusts after and curtly employs as his typist; and finally, the lower third of each page is Anya's tale and her opinions of Señor C and his writing.

Coetzee is a master stylist, a writer who usually does all the work so the reader doesn't have to. His most famous novels like *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Disgrace* are written in deceptively simple prose, and touch us with their sharp insight and tragic accuracy. Here, the same insight and accuracy are found as well, though primarily in Señor C's essays. These range from Tony Blair and Al Qaeda to Intelligent Design and Dostoevsky. Coetzee is a writer who has something to say and knows how to say it. Unfortunately, it's all an uneven stew of clever ideas that never fully come together.

In his earlier novels it was not only the clear prose he used to tell his tale, but the grandiose tales themselves that gripped us by the throat. Here, the story is as thin as the little lines that divide each page. An ageing Don Juan falls for a young girl, the young girl responds with compassion and Don Juan mistakes it for love. This story reads too much like left-over material from *Disgrace*, where Professor Lurie entices a young student and descends into his own personal and political hell. But in *Disgrace* Coetzee turns it around. What we expect to be a Lolita-like tale of old-man literature becomes a scathing portrait of South Africa and a man's personal tragedy of being alive.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee has South Africa on his mind as well, and it is here where the essay bits come most alive. One feels that this is what burns within him, the throngs of wrath that propel him to write as if his life depended on it. But unfortunately, the meandering nature of the essays reads a bit like dry toast, for example when he lectures on mathematics' resemblance to running. This seems as if Coetzee was running out of strong opinions and was filling the pages with far-fetched treatises, little sketches too incomplete to become essays, too consciously didactic to be fiction.

It must be argued in Coetzee's favor that the book is an enjoyable read. The author studs it with humor, as when Anya writes about Señor C, "He records his opinions (drone drone) which I dutifully type out (clickety clack) and somewhere down the line the Germans buy his book and pore over it (*ja ja*)." Or when he exhibits his remarkable gift for insight: "As long as there is not one of us who has the faintest idea of how to go about constructing a housefly from scratch, how can we disparage as intellectually naïve the conclusion that the housefly must have been put together by an intelligence of a higher order than our own?" But it is solely for the author's ability as a stylist that the book is enjoyable, the experiment of dividing the pages and the story itself are affected and artificial.

The final essay on Dostoevsky at last gives some insight into Señor C's emotions and supplies us with the poetic humanity and simplicity of such a masterful scene as Michael K. drinking a bottle of wine on a peaceful shore in the last pages of *Life & Times of Michael K*. The Dostoevsky connection might inspire further analysis. I wonder if Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* is not a melancholy retelling of an autobiographical bit in Dostoevsky's life: Dostoevsky fell in love with his typist and married her, an anecdote pilfered by Hollywood and made into a saccharine movie starring William Holden. Señor C is not blessed with happiness, he is at the end of life, full of regret and eclipsed by loneliness and incessant thinking. He sees himself as a failure, he even goes so far as to state that the essays we are reading are failed attempts as well.

Maybe what Coetzee is trying to do is show that a writer's life and work are inseparable, and maybe his style matches the content. Or maybe the experiment is supposed to disturb us, maybe he is trying to illustrate that life and work cannot exist next to each other without disturbing one another, recalling Thomas Mann's dictum that a man can either be an artist or a human being, but never both. Maybe the way his essays and stories intertwine is Coetzee's postmodern way to relate to the reader that writing is politics and politics is life, that life is art and love is work and mathematics are, in fact, like running.

The great poet of jazz Miles Davis once remarked: "I have to change. It's like a curse." If Coetzee's experiment implies a similar curse, I hope Coetzee takes it to heart and changes *back*.

**Coetzee, J.M. *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Harvill Secker. 2007. (227 pages)**

Selected Works by J.M. Coetzee:

Dusklands

Waiting for the Barbarians

Life & Times of Michael K.

Foe

Age of Iron

Disgrace

Youth