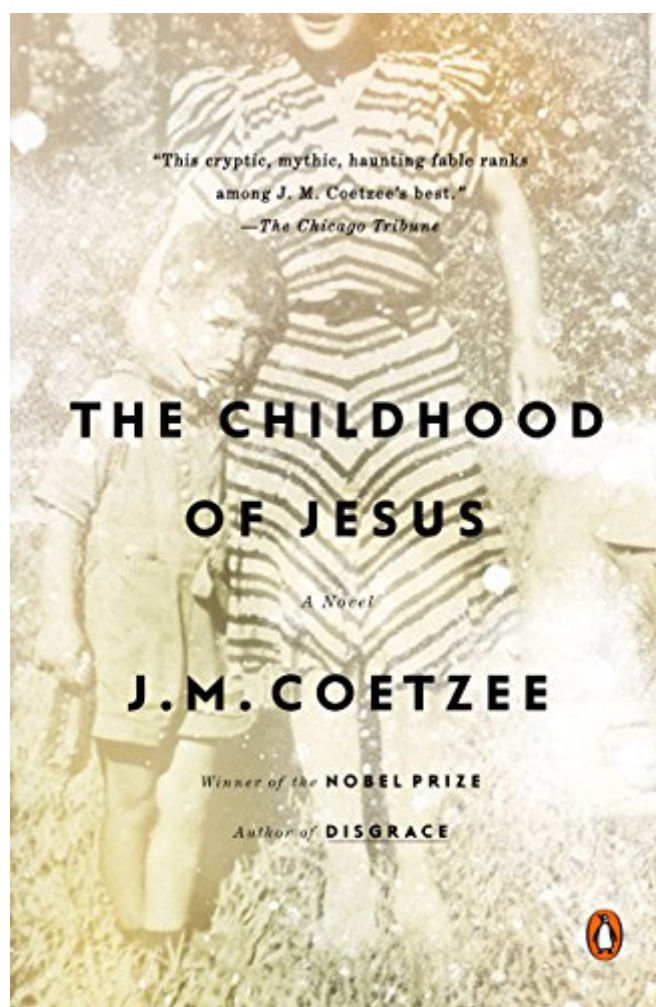


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The Childhood Of Jesus: A Novel



Synopsis

From the Nobel Prize-winning author of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee's latest novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, will soon be available from Viking. Nobel laureate and two-time Booker Prize winner J. M. Coetzee returns with a haunting and surprising novel about childhood and destiny that is sure to rank with his classic novels. Separated from his mother as a passenger on a boat bound for a new land, David is a boy who is quite literally adrift. The piece of paper explaining his situation is lost, but a fellow passenger, Simón, vows to look after the boy. When the boat docks, David and Simón are issued new names, new birthdays, and virtually a whole new life. Strangers in a strange land, knowing nothing of their surroundings, nor the language or customs, they are determined to find David's mother. Though the boy has no memory of her, Simón is certain he will recognize her at first sight. "But after we find her," David asks, "what are we here for?" An eerie allegorical tale told largely through dialogue, *The Childhood of Jesus* is a literary feat—a novel of ideas that is also a tender, compelling narrative. Coetzee's many fans will celebrate his return while new readers will find *The Childhood of Jesus* an intriguing introduction to the work of a true master. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

*** WARNING: NUMEROUS SPOILERS FOLLOW *** If I recall correctly, in Arthur C. Clarke's novel "2001: A Space Odyssey" the astronaut Dave Bowman, having been catapulted through a wormhole in space into the confines of the replica French provincial apartment where he will rapidly age and die, leafs through a phone directory and sees that its text is fuzzy, as if copied imperfectly from afar. The same seems to be true of Novilla, the mysterious city, a Spanish-speaking urban no-man's-land, that seems to have no original residents but only transferees via first a boat trip and then passage through the Belstar relocation camp. The main characters, the adult guardian Simón and the five-year-old David, are among them. Novilla seems to embody an imperfect copy of a city made by a creator whose grasp of human institutions is imperfect. This creator has taken a stab at realizing an ideal version of human existence, possibly in an effort to realize Karl Marx's classless society. But the results don't quite work. In Novilla, there is no want and no economic conflict. But life is bland and largely scripted, as exemplified by the boarding-school-cafeteria food and the uncontroversial classes offered at the adult-education institute. The creator, like the mysterious civilization in "2001," could not plan for nuance, but only brush with broad strokes based on an ideal form absorbed from a distance. The playful and brilliant J.M. Coetzee provides clues to this. I found two mistakes that Coetzee wouldn't make. I say this confidently because his English is impeccable, his Spanish is impeccable, and his novels are, as far as I've read them, flawless in the execution. Not so here, so any errors must be deliberate.

Simón, a man in his forties, arrives at a refugee reception center in a coastal town, accompanied by a small child, David. He is not the boy's father, but met him on the boat taking them to this unnamed Spanish-speaking country. David has lost the papers given him by his mother, and Simón agrees to look after him until his mother can be found, guarding him through several months in a transit camp, and now bringing him along as he looks for work and a place to live. So far, the typical refugee story, though told in a simple direct style that is refreshingly different from some of the postmodern tricks and stylistic obscurities that Coetzee had been practicing in many of his later books. But this one will turn out to be obscure also, in its own way. For this country is not like any other. The people are unfailingly helpful, but what they provide are the minima: a slice of bread, a roof over one's head. Transportation and many services are free, and work is easy to find; Simón takes a job as a stevedore, and his foreman and colleagues are kind and patient as he finds his feet. People seem mostly to live in simple rooms in small apartment blocks; whatever their work, they all seem to have adequate funds to buy the limited range of food and merchandise sold in the

few stores. Conversation (the book is almost entirely in dialogue) is relatively open and easy, but also passionless. When Simón shows an attraction to one woman, she points out the logical absurdity of wishing "to push part of your body inside me"; when he is attracted to another, she permits sex, but only as an irrelevant adjunct to their comradely friendship. What is this place? A socialist-inflected heaven?

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