

Review: Diary of a Bad Year by J.M. Coetzee

J.M. Coetzee's new novel is adventurous, but does it really succeed as fiction?

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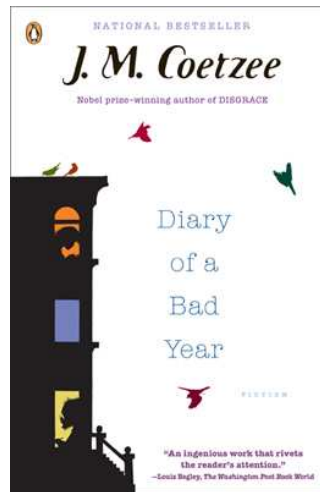
"Why don't you write another novel instead?" Anya asks. "I don't have the endurance any more," Señor C says.

Señor C, 72, a South African writer transplanted in Australia, is the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. Anya, a 29-year-old Filipina beauty, is his typist.

C has coaxed and overpaid Anya, with whom he is obsessed, to transcribe his recorded, mostly political essays for an anthology called *Strong Opinions*, which, along with a calendar date, is the title of the first part of *Diary*. The second part called, ahem, "Second Diary" is composed of what Anya calls C's "soft opinions"—his views

on art, classical music and literature.

Coetzee, the recipient of several literary prizes, including the Nobel, presents *Diary of a Bad Year* in postmodernist fragments that are occasionally distracting, because they force the reader to follow text down, up and across the pages.



First we read C's short essays followed by fragments from C's personal diary. Soon we see Anya's narration in diary-like entries, and the introduction of Alan, her shady boyfriend, an investment consultant. The narratives, short as they are, provide the novel's thin plot, which includes Alan's

implausible scheme to misappropriate part of C's small fortune.

But the essays — there are 31 in the first part of the book, 24 in the second — are the heart of this book, almost overpowering the slight narrative, so much so that I wondered if a novel is what Coetzee really had in mind.

Readers might also be curious whether the opinions are actually Coetzee's. After all, the protagonist, like Coetzee, is a writer from South Africa now living in Australia. His initials are JC, and Alan calls him "Juan" (the J in J.M. is for John). And the two have written the same book, *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

I'll leave it to the reader to speculate whose opinions these really are.

The short political essays (with titles like "On anarchism," "On torture," "On national shame," and "On Left and Right") often read like angry, albeit

intelligent, “Letters to the Editor.”

On democracy, C writes, “(It) does not allow for politics outside the democratic system. In this sense, democracy is totalitarian.” Al-Qaida, he says, “has been more or less destroyed ...” and “... the U.S. administration is, perhaps deliberately, exaggerating the dangers faced by the public.” C calls Osama bin Laden a

bogeyman who “has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams ... driving nations into wholesale panic.” He lambastes President Bush for claiming “he cannot commit a crime, since he is the one who makes the laws defining crimes.”

The “softer” opinions: “On Dostoevsky,” “On J. S. Bach,” “On compassion,” “On the mother tongue” and “On

children,” though somewhat polemic, are less controversial and more palatable.

Despite its weaknesses, *Diary* is a thought-provoking book, but it seems more of an experiment, like Coetzee’s 2003 *Elizabeth Costello*, that tries to meld essay and fiction. I prefer his more traditional narrative, 1987’s *Foe*.

Diary of a Bad Year, by J.M. Coetzee (231 pages; Viking; \$24.95)

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