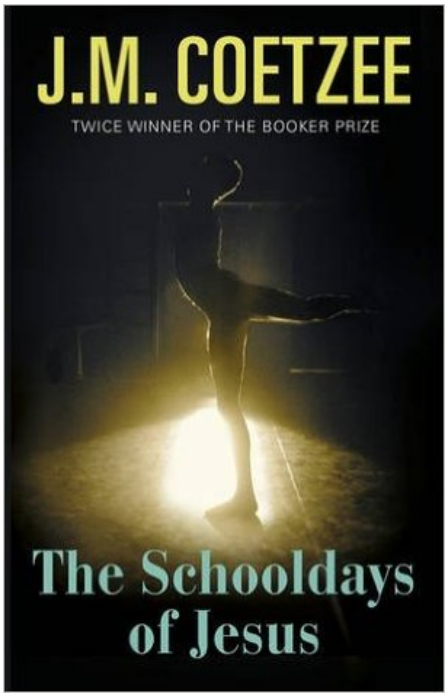


# The Schooldays of Jesus

*J.M. Coetzee*

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**The Schooldays of Jesus** J.M. Coetzee
**LONGLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2016**

*When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life. That is how it is. There is no before. There is no history. The boat docks at the harbour and we climb down the gangplank and we are plunged into the here and now. Time begins.*

Davíd is the small boy who is always asking questions. Simón and Inés take care of him in their new town Estrella. He is learning the language; he has begun to make friends. He has the big dog Bolívar to watch over him. But he'll be seven soon and he should be at school. And so, Davíd is enrolled in the Academy of Dance. It's here, in his new golden dancing slippers, that he learns how to call down the numbers from the sky. But it's here too that he will make troubling discoveries about what grown-ups are capable of.

In this mesmerising allegorical tale, Coetzee deftly grapples with the big questions of growing up, of what it means to be a parent, the constant battle between intellect and emotion, and how we choose to live our lives.

## The Schooldays of Jesus Details

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| Date | : | Published August 18th 2016 by Harvill Secker (first published August 2016) |
| ISBN | : | 9781911215363 |
| Author | : | J.M. Coetzee |
| Format | : | Paperback 260 pages |
| Genre | : | Fiction, Literary Fiction, Literature |

# From Reader Review The Schooldays of Jesus for online ebook

### Holly says

I find these Coetzee novels mesmerizing. I'd taken notes while reading *Childhood of Jesus* last year and never compiled them into a review (too late now), but this second novel was as interesting to me as that one and I feel the same elation and pleasant perplexity that I did after finishing the first. *Schooldays* picks up where *Childhood* left off but its themes are expanded. The city of Estrella allows more expression than Novilla, and the concerns/obsessions of its inhabitants are different. Many discussions allude to Platonism (how many times did I think of Plato's cave?) and the characters Dmitri and Aloysha have the Dostoevskyian names. Then, Jesus (critics can keep saying that the biblical story has nothing to do with the books, but Coetzee has titled the books with deliberation, so it must be considered): Jesus as the irascible student attracted to/repelled by his teachers, and trying the patience of his parents, and his unceasing questions that push the boundaries of the status quo..... Coetzee is an avowed atheist (though raised Protestant and deeply familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition), and the novels contain countless parallels to the teachings of the historical Jesus - enough that I get a little thrill when I detect something - but the parallels are arbitrary and trying to read as a one-to-one allegory is crazy-making. It seems rather that Coetzee is availing himself of parts of the Gospels that intrigue him, and tossing them into a surreal world in which this strange child might incorporate the ideas into an eventual philosophy (but not a theology, which has no place in the universe of these novels). Simón (Joseph?) continues to be the most intriguing character and Simón's evolution in thought, through his "dialogues" with David, his writing teacher, and Dmitri, are fascinating. As a nonbeliever he feels adrift and depressed in a world of people who believe in the "numbers" or follow their passions, but maybe the conclusion of the book (learning to dance) reveals that a nonbeliever does not have to remain outside the realm of transcendence .....

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### Paolo says

Lascio volutamente da parte il 'gioco' delle interpretazioni di questa misteriosa storia (gioco che, tra l'altro, può essere molto interessante).

Il romanzo ripropone gli stessi protagonisti de L'infanzia di Gesù, sbarcati in un'altra città, ma poco cambia. Gli abitanti, come nel romanzo precedente, non ricordano le loro vite precedenti, e sembra che questo non abbia molta importanza per loro.
E poi c'è David. Lui è un bambino 'speciale', che fa domande 'speciali', e ora è un po' cresciuto, e quindi fa domande un po' più 'speciali' di prima.

La sensazione è che oltre i cosiddetti fatti (e la tintura di giallo), poco sia cambiato. Quello che aveva affascinato nel romanzo precedente, il mistero della città e degli abitanti senza passato, di David (chi è davvero David?), il mistero dell'intero genere umano, non ha più la stessa forza.

Che Coetzee vada avanti a colpi di romanzi fino ai 33 anni di David?

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### Ravi Gangwani says

Wow! It was crystal clear liquid moving over rusting surfaces.
Sir Coetzee's writing always floats, deflects and with sly polish of meaning, elevates.
That's why I love Coetzee because of my CONNECTION with his writings.
This book was unexpectedly good.
Detailed review will be soon to come.

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### Text Publishing says

I was really looking forward to diving in to this longlisted Man Booker Prize nominee. It was simple to follow (something I cherish in a novel — at times) and surprisingly funny (mainly when the child David drops a comment into conversation that manages to illuminate some fundamental social aspect of our world, that we take for granted, encouraging everyone present to feel uncomfortable). Allegorical? Absolutely. Although, I am still trying to grasp the allegory and worry about what that illuminates in me.

Here's what reviewers are saying but what did YOU think?

*'An intimacy born from urgency crackles through each of [Coetzee's] books, as if one is not reading a text but being plugged into a brand new form of current—reinvented each time to carry a new and urgent form of narrative information…Coetzee is the most radical shapeshifter alive.'*
**John Freeman, Australian**

'The Childhood of Jesus *represents a return to the allegorical mode that made him famous…a Kafkaesque version of the nativity story…The Childhood of Jesus does ample justice to his giant reputation: it's richly enigmatic, with regular flashes of Coetzee's piercing intelligence.'*
**Guardian**

'The Schooldays of Jesus *by JM Coetzee is maddening, obscure — and brilliant.'*
**Telegraph**

*'Obscurely compelling, often very funny, full of sudden depths…*The Schooldays of Jesus *is a work of many small but significant truths, rather than one central message; a novel stubbornly committed to its own way of doing things.'*
**Guardian**

*'Yet although it is written with the coolness and limpidity that make Coetzee such a master, the story remains almost uninterpretable, certainly no simple allegory, quite an achievement in itself. Frustrating, yes, but not just that. There were moments when I found it almost too affecting to read without pausing to recover myself.'*
**Evening Standard**

*'The way [Coetzee] mixes the enigmatic and almost otherworldly elements of this child with his youthful and innocent questions makes David the perfect mix of endearing, enraging, and enlightening. He's as believable as characters come.'*
**Bookmunch**

*'Freed from literary convention, Mr Coetzee writes not to provide answers, but to ask great questions.'*
**Economist**

*‘Coetzee’s depiction is unlike any other you’ve read. Rather, it’s decidedly ‘Coetzeean’…Eloquent and provocative.’*
**Readings**

*‘The indeterminacy…gives the two Jesus novels their air of unreality and their vaguely allegorical sheen, but it also provides a conveniently stripped-back setting in which to stage philosophical arguments.’*
**Sydney Review of Books**

*‘At sentence level, he [Coetzee] is, of course, a model of clarity – think of the dry and unornamented perspicuity Coetzee brings to bear in his fiction, the fastidiousness of thought that emits from his creations the way a dot matrix printer unspools. Yet the cumulative effect of this approach is not arid intellection but organic feeling: full-fleshed, mysterious and often extreme.’*
**Monthly**

*‘These are novels for our time…They will puzzle you and frustrate you but at the end of Schooldays you will catch a glimpse of the things unseen.’*
**Online Opinion**

*‘The continuation of a masterpiece that is breathtaking and enthralling in its strangeness.’*
**Peter Craven, Australian Book Review, 2016 Books of the Year**

*‘The continuation of a masterpiece that is breathtaking and enthralling in its strangeness.’*
**Peter Craven, Australian Book Review**

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## Cody says

(Lightning Review)

The best thing JMC's done in a long while. While that may not be saying much considering its predecessors, the book delivers on what you want: passionless, idiomatic Coetzee-isms that include the killing of a duck delivered with all the passionate verve of a BINGO caller. That's not a put-down, it's what I like about the man's writing. I just wouldn't want to sleep with him, if ya know what I mean.

Lightning Review rating: Jesus got more interesting after he entered school and became a dancing machine (watch me get down, watch me get down...)

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## Ron Charles says

In 1999, the South African writer J.M. Coetzee topped his already celebrated career by publishing “Disgrace,” an unforgettable novel that earned him a second Man Booker Prize — the first time anyone had done that. Four years later, he won the Nobel Prize in literature. But since then, his published fiction has strained mightily to repel any reader who might be interested.

Perhaps that’s as it should be. If you’re 77 years old, and you’ve collected every literary prize in the world, you ought to be able to write whatever you damn well please.

But caveat emptor.

“The Schooldays of Jesus,” Coetzee’s new novel, is a sequel to his equally enigmatic book “The Childhood of Jesus” (2013). You can be forgiven for assuming that these novels follow the life of, say. . . .

*To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:*
https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...

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### Elaine says

I literally have no idea what I just read. Perhaps it's very much my fault, as I didn't read the first book, and as I know very little about the story of Jesus between his birth and his adult ministry.

This is an extremely smoothly written but quite boring book set in a fantastical version of Spain (why Spain?) that is a little totalitarian, a little antique and a little future dystopian all at the same time. Although the state is actually depicted as mostly inept. Everyone in Spain is an immigrant from another life (ah topicality) but they have forgotten their past including their name upon arrival in Spain. Is Spain heaven? Or hell? If so, why is Jesus growing up there?

The main character is Jesus/David's father/stepfather, Simon. He is a sexless, aging and simple man who devotes his life to the obnoxious and imperious "David". Is that the book's message? If you knew the Messiah as a child, He would be a brat? Or is it a commentary on modern permissive parenting?

There is sort of a parody of a 19th century Russian novel stuck in there about a criminal named Dmitri (of course). It may be meant to make us meditate on mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Or the impotence of all of the above. Some of the book's more bleakly funny scenes poke fun at ineffective rehabilitative justice. (Oh and Dmitri's victim is named Magdalena. What does that mean? )

Then there are a lot of passages about cosmic numbers as supreme beings, dance as truth, language or worship, etc. I didn't really understand or care about much of this, and again there is something tongue-in-cheek about the book's dalliance with abstract philosophy: I'm not really sure we're meant to care. Coetzee seems to be daring us, "knock yourselves out puzzling out my allegory!" But does the Emperor have any clothes?

Could not shake the feeling that the author knows he can put down any random sequence of portentous sounding anecdotes and the literati will swoon, and likely give him a Booker prize. And so he set out to create a book with a salad of seemingly highly symbolic ingredients but with no moorings whatsoever. While the book is oddly compulsively readable, I did feel a bit toyed with. No thanks.

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### Krista says

> *To his and Inés' enquiries about his schooldays the boy responds briefly and reluctantly. Yes, he likes señor Arroyo. Yes, they are learning songs. No, they have not had reading lessons. No, they do not do sums. About the mysterious arc that señora Arroyo sounds at the end of the day*

*he will say nothing.*

The Schooldays of Jesus picks up where The Childhood of Jesus left off (and as a result, I can't imagine understanding much of this book without having read the earlier): In this new land where refugees arrive with erased memories and assigned identities, the formerly unacquainted Simón, Inés, and six-year-old David have formed a type of family, and after the authorities in Novilla had threatened to remove the headstrong David and send him to a reformatory school, the trio fled to the faraway city of Estrella. As this book begins, the family arrives at a farm where they are hired on as fruitpickers, and as David runs wild with the local children, Simón and Inés attempt to solve the problem of the boy's education: having proven himself incapable of conforming to the demands of a public school setting, just how will the precocious and stubborn little boy be prepared for life? After the family suffers through an unsatisfactory meeting with a local tutor, the women who own the farm – a trio of aging spinsters known as The Three Sisters – offer to pay the tuition for David to attend the Academy of Dance in downtown Estrella. With gratitude, the family decamps to the city where young David commences his schooldays. Filled with odd situations and nonstop philosophical debates, I was intrigued by *The Schooldays of Jesus*, but as with *Childhood*, I can't say that I completely understand author J. M. Coetzee's intentions here (perhaps it will all be resolved in a third volume?); yet, I'm glad to have had had the experience.

Having been assured that the Academy of Dance would give David the most well-rounded education possible, Simón and Inés don't understand when David explains that the students spend their days dancing, “calling the numbers down from the stars”. This process is never made clearer to the reader than it is to the baffled parents:

'Inés showed me your dance chart,' he says. 'What are the numbers for? Are they positions for your feet?'

'It's the stars,' says the boy. 'It's astrology. You close your eyes while you dance and you can see the stars in your head.'

'What about counting beats? Doesn't señor Arroyo count the beats for you while you dance?'

'No. You just dance. Dancing is the same as counting.'

'So señor Arroyo just plays and you just dance. It doesn't sound like any dance lesson I am familiar with. I am going to ask señor Arroyo whether I can sit in on one of his lessons.'

'You can't. You are not allowed. Señor Arroyo says no one is allowed.'

'Then when will I ever see you dancing?'

'You can see me now.'

He glances at the boy. The boy is sitting still, his eyes closed, a slight smile on his lips.

'That is not dancing. You can't dance while you are sitting in a car.'

'I can. Look I am dancing again.'

David is so attracted to the Dance Academy's philosophy, and his parents are so reluctant to oppose his demands, that he eventually insists on becoming a boarder at the school and the family essentially breaks up. As the book is told from Simón's point-of-view, it's easy to identify with the despair he feels as the guardianship of the boy – Simón's entire raison d'être in this new land – is removed. And especially because Simón doesn't understand what is attracting David to the odd education, the ice cold dance teacher Ana Magdalena (finally a Biblical tie-in), and Dmitri; the grungy museum worker who hangs around the dance studio. After a violent crime is committed, the book begins to debate ideas like passion and mercy and justice, and throughout it all, Simón understands that people are laughing at him behind his back; calling him a passionless pedant.

Much of *The Schooldays of Jesus* debates the essential nature of things (Is everything quantifiable? How many times can you ask the question "why" before the answer becomes "because"? Do numbers exist in nature or just the human mind?); and as I was reminded that in *Childhood* Simón impatiently exited a philosophy course that was dwelling on this same topic, it seems significant enough to note some examples.

While still on the farm, the tutor hired by Simón and Inés attempted to teach David the foundations of mathematics by going over the meaning of numbers with him; explaining why objects can be quantified as existing in groups of one, or two, or three, the tutor says, "Every object in the world is subject to arithmetic. In fact every object in the universe." David reasonably responds, "But not water. Or vomit." Despite the solid logic of not being able to count water or vomit as discreet units, the tutor leaves, declaring the boy unteachable. In another instance, after patiently answering a string of "why" questions from David, Simón is forced to eventually answer:

> *A rule is just a rule. Rules don't have to justify themselves. They just are. Like numbers. There is no* why *for numbers. This universe is a universe of rules. There is no* why *for the universe.*

(To which, of course, David asks, "Why?" and in frustration Simón declares him "silly"). It is also frustrating for Simón when others won't provide him with straightforward answers, as when he tries to get señor Arroyo to explain what David means when he says only the music teacher really understands who he is:

> *If I were a philosopher I would reply by saying: It depends on what you mean by* who*, it depends on what you mean by* he*, it depends on what you mean by* is*. Who is he? Who are you? Indeed, who am I?*

(This is also frustrating for the reader.) And in my final examples, at one point Simón attends a free lecture on Astrology for want of something better to do after David moves out:

> *Discussion turns to the Spheres: whether the stars belong to the Spheres or on the contrary follow trajectories of their own; whether the Spheres are finite or infinite. The lecturer believes the number of Spheres is finite – finite but unknown and unknowable, as she puts it.*

And in a contrasting scene near the end of the book, Simón attends another lecture, this time on the philosophy of measurement; including a debate on whether everything *should* be measured:

> *According to one strand of the legend, Metros said there's nothing in the universe that cannot be measured. According to another strand, he said that there can be no absolute measurement – that measurement is always relative to the measurer.*

And in a scene that seems intended to tie it all up, some boys from the Dance Academy do their dance to call down the numbers, which some in the audience seem to understand, but which is still all arcane to Simón. And by extension, arcane to me as well. As I opened with, I was interested in this reading experience, but I was pretty sure I wasn't understanding it; so I went to the experts, wondering what the official reviews said. According to The Telegraph:

> *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*, J?M 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.*

As an example of a *positive* review, that's pretty faint praise. More damning is The Guardian:

> *On the evidence of this austere, barely realised mise-en-scène, it is difficult not to feel that Coetzee, like Plato, is no longer much interested in the accidents of our quotidian human world, the shadows on the cave wall. He is after essence alone, the pure, ungraspable fire. In his fidelity to ideas, to telling rather than showing, to instructing rather than seducing us, he does not actually write fiction any more.* The Schooldays of Jesus*, philosophically dense as it is, is parched, relentlessly adult fare – rather like eating endless bread and bean paste.*

I used an unusually high number of quotes in this review in order to give the best sense what *The Schooldays of Jesus* is like, and even still, you'd have to read the whole thing to really experience it. What I know for sure: if there is a third book in this series, I will happily pick it up; Coetzee has me hooked if confused.

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### Neil says

As I started this book, for the first few pages, I thought I was going to like it a lot more than I did The Childhood of Jesus which I read in preparation for reading this and which I really did not enjoy. This one started off a lot more promisingly. But then I started to notice repeated use of phrases like “to him, Simon”, “so he, Simon”, “he, Simon”, “then he, Simon” and, worst of all “says he, Simon”. From that point onwards I found it hard to concentrate on the book properly as I was counting the paragraphs between use of one of those ridiculous phrases. I rarely had to use the fingers on my second hand. Unfortunately, that did it for me. The book reads like it has been badly translated from some other language.

The plot merely serves to navigate us between philosophical discussions. Nothing is required to happen

except to open up the next debate. For much of the time, I was unfortunately reminded of Ayn Rand and Atlas Shrugged and that's not something I would wish on anyone.

In The Guardian, Elizabeth Lowry writes: “On the evidence of this austere, barely realised mise-en-scène, it is difficult not to feel that Coetzee, like Plato, is no longer much interested in the accidents of our quotidian human world, the shadows on the cave wall. He is after essence alone, the pure, ungraspable fire. In his fidelity to ideas, to telling rather than showing, to instructing rather than seducing us, he does not actually write fiction any more. The Schooldays of Jesus, philosophically dense as it is, is parched, relentlessly adult fare – rather like eating endless bread and bean paste."

And that’s about how I feel at the end of this: like I have been living for an age on a diet of bread and bean paste. Childhood and Schooldays are the only two Coetzee books I’ve read. I won’t be putting any others on my “to read” list in a hurry.

That said, I confidently expect it to be on the Man Booker short list.

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### Anya says

I really enjoyed this book about two adults trying to raise a very headstrong, very 'different' little boy.

I'm sure that there were some very clever messages in the book that I didn't necessarily pick up, however, even at face value, the book was very entertaining, and even humorous.

This was my first Coetzee novel, but I am definately interested in reading more of his work.

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### Vicky "phenkos" says

This is a book about many things: alternatives to formal education, the nature of children and how they differ from adults, crime and punishment, nascent sexuality and trauma. It's also about two brilliantly drawn characters, David, an exceptional six-year-old, and his stepfather or adopted father, Simon. The book follows the journey of Simon and Ines, the child's mother, as they take David out of the formal educational system and secretly make their way to another town to escape the law. Not much is given away at this stage but we do get to know that David could not fit into traditional schooling, and that his parents are taking him out of it in the hope of offering him an education more suited to his needs.

The three of them end up at a farm where Ines and Simon find casual work as fruit pickers, while David mingles with the other labourers' children. An episode soon ensues that gives us a glimpse of David's headstrong character. Whilst playing, the children come upon a family of ducks, which Bengi, the oldest of the group, begins to chase and hurl stones at. A stone strikes one of the ducks and breaks its wing; David is outraged and falls into the water to save the duck. His parents intervene and Simon dives in to get the wounded duck ashore. It's too late for the duck, it has to be put down, but Simon urges David to go with Bengi and give the bird a proper burial. He also advises David to forgive Bengi because the older boy has apologised for his action. But David is adamant that Bengi was not sorry for what he did. A long conversation follows: Simon patiently and rationally tries to explain why David should forgive Bengi, but David is not convinced. He has his own views on the matter -- that Bengi hurt the duck on purpose -- and is

not prepared to backtrack.

This episode sets the pattern for the entire book with Simon patiently engaging with David's questions, but ultimately failing to win over the boy who does not find Simon's answers convincing. The relationship between them begins to turn sour. David is not happy with the kind of explanations he gets from Simon, while Simon feels that the boy is losing his respect for him. The relationship is further complicated by David's insistence that 'David' is not his real name and that Ines and Simon are not his real parents. Simon does not contest the latter explaining that David arrived on a boat "just as I did, just as the people around us did. ... When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life". This is repeated later on in the book, so it is to be understood somewhat literally, rather than as a simple explanation suitable for a six-year-old.

There soon follows another failed educational experiment; Ines and Simon find David a private tutor. Initially, this tutor seems to have promising educational methods, for example, he tries to teach numbers by getting young David to abstract from the idea of things that come in pairs and focus solely on the notion of 'two'. However, this tutor, too, fails to engage David, and in fact, the reader tends to sympathise with the young boy who clearly possesses a kind of intelligence the tutor neither understands nor engages with. Thus, when shown two pens and two pills and prompted for an answer to the question 'what is the property the pills and the pens have in common', David answers 'Two. Two for the pens and two for the pills. But they aren't the same two". This is right, of course. But the tutor does not care about young David's objections, he only cares about getting his own point reinforced. This tutor proves to be as self-assured and incapable of engaging with young, fresh minds as any in David's short foray into the formal school system.

The book thus raises important questions about what it is to teach, especially when the children in question have inquisitive minds keen on questioning everything. For his part, Simon is both different and similar to the other adults David has encountered. He's different in that he makes a genuine effort to engage with the boy's questions. On the other hand, his rationalist views do not go down well with David. It's pretty clear that Simon loves the boy, but gets frustrated at the boy's repeated 'why' questions. His frustration becomes more pronounced when a different kind of school is suggested for young David, the Academy of Dance, run by the Arroyo couple, where students are not taught the numbers through traditional methods but actually dance the numbers and by dancing them, they call the numbers down to earth. Simon's rationalist bend of mind immediately rebels against this theory but David is captivated. The contrast between these two characters occupies much of the rest of the book with Simon keen to encourage the boy but also completely unable to feel any sympathy for the Arroyos' unorthodox methods.

The conflict between Simon's down-to-earth rationalism and David's frank, uncompromising attitude forms the backbone of this book. The question is not only how we, as adults, teach, but also how we, as adults, love. Simon loves David -- there's no doubt about that. But he is unable to convey this to David while he rejects the boy's more intuitive approach to the world. The book brings this out superbly, and yet, this conflict is not final or catastrophic, because eventually Simon will make more efforts to understand the boy's point of view. Conversely, the boy does respect Simon even at the times when his frustration takes the upper hand.

There are many more elements in the book: philosophical discussions about the nature of numbers and a long foray into crime and punishment, which unfortunately, for me, did nothing to enhance the main story. There of course remains the question of Jesus in the title. Is David 'Jesus' as suggested by the fact that the book tells the story of his schooldays? There's wonderful point in the book where Senor Arroyo explains to Simon why David is a rare child: "The word I use for him is *integral*. He is integral in a way that other children are not. Nothing can be taken away from him. Nothing can be added. Who or what you or I believe him to be is of

not importance". Young David seems to possess traits that other people do not, and in that sense he is extraordinary, out of this world. Only some god could have the kind of integrity, the kind of completeness young David has. On the other hand, David also seems to be the archetypical child, the child that each one of us *might* be if we hadn't those qualities knocked out of us by our parents or the educational system. So my take on this is that David is both unlike any other child but also very much like every other child, and in this he is 'Jesus'.

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### Doug says

'I cannot tell you, señor Arroyo,' he says, 'how much I dislike these cheap paradoxes and mystifications." p. 199

That pretty much sums up my feelings about Coetzee's allegedly allegorical work, which - although marginally more interesting than its predecessor ('Childhood of Jesus'), since it in large part deals with a mysterious murder and its aftermath - is still somewhat incomprehensible and meaningless. The story moves quickly, and there are some interesting sections, but the underlying philosophy just never brings with it any tangible results, IMHO.

On a side note, I assume that the names of the characters Dmitri and Alyosha are a reference/homage to Dostoyevsky's Brothers K., but again, can see no reasonable explanation for why that should be so (and where's Ivan?)

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### Seemita says

*[Originally appeared here (with edits): http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/li...]*

The journey from a toddler to a schoolchild is often the most memorable and ironically, chaotic one. The sudden loosening of parental grip propels the child without doubt; towards what direction, of course, is the biggest question to be answered.

The Schooldays of Jesus is a sequel to The Childhood of Jesus wherein we continue to befriend David and walk along with him as he traces the arc of his life. With a former stevedore, Simon, for a stepfather and an evidently ambitious, Inés, for a mother, David metamorphoses into a strikingly different child, of his own volition and vanity. Nothing holds his interest in the new town of Estrella which the trio is forced to inhabit after leaving Novilla until the ‘Dance Academy’ comes by. Funded by three large-hearted sisters, David gains admission into the Dance Academy and thus, commences a love-hate relationship with the adult world on the tremulous and bewitching rhythm of dance moves.

Fraught with arguments and passion, longing and loss, Coetzee conjures up a trick that remains largely engaging. The stronghold of Coetzee’s signature restrained and unadorned language continues to enthral, releasing vibrations far and wide in my psyche. Transformation of David from a reticent, indifferent and disdainful child to a feral, passionate and invested boy is done with subtle undertones; much like how a little dash here and a little wipe there gives a painting its fuller, flawless texture. His never-ending questions and silent pursuing of the same imparts a certain fluidity to his personality which sticks to him till the end.

While the chapter of David left a reaffirming stamp on my love for Coetzee, it was the sketches of other prime characters that played hide and seek. Through the unselfish and consistent efforts of Simon to provide comfort and education to David, Coetzee displays the powerful instincts of a parent. That the intentions of a parent remain untarnished despite unresponded affections from his ward is beautifully depicted in the troubled-yet-unsevered bond between the stepfather and the son. Inés, on the other hand, drew no sympathy or loyalty; she seemed almost a half-formed thing in her insipid dialogues and disjointed conversations with her family.

Juan Sebastian Arroyo and Anna Magdalena Arroyo, the husband-wife duo who own the Dance Academy and Dmitiri, the security guard of the adjacent museum who also performs part-time duties at the Dance Academy, are the characters that further render the narrative, its chequered garb. At a major turning point (view spoiler) mid-way through this book, the tempo suddenly escalates. Unfortunately though, this tempo turns unsustainable after a short while and experiences, all at once, a sharp fall. It never recovers from there. David continues to hurl his questions but amidst these three characters, the questions haggle haplessly and collapse without much attention or resolution. There is a sprinkle of science and philosophy towards the fag end which is withdrawn before they can make their presence felt.

A book that offers growing up on the nourishing feed of dance can’t go much wrong, not unless one is already fed upto their soul. I checked in, half satiated. Left, the same way.

*[A note of thanks to Netgalley and Random House UK, Vintage Publishing for providing me a copy of this book]*.

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### Javier Avilés says

Fascinante, desconcertante e irritante a partes iguales. Uno tiene la sensación de que Coetzee a alcanzado ese grado de total maestría que le permite hablar de cualquier cosa con una lucidez extraordinaria. Eso sí, ¿de qué habla exactamente esta novela? Pues al igual que la que la precede nos dice que NO PENSEMOS EN UN OSO BLANCO.

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### Trish says

Coetzee’s quiet skill shows us how an old bible story parallels events that happen today in every country—the dislocation of migration for instance—making us scour the landscape for examples of God working through us. By telling the old story in a new way, we think anew about Christian values—charity, kindness, and love for instance—and what they really mean in practice.

The city Estrella to which Davíd, Inés and Simón escape sounds remarkably like Australia when spoken. Davíd attends a school without regular classes, called the Dance Academy, which teaches numbers through dance by calling the numerals down from the stars. His teacher, Ana Magdalena, is a beautiful woman. After she is horribly attacked by a man who claims to love her, Davíd discovers her body.

The cast of characters is more transparent than the earlier book, though were I to go back to that earlier piece now, having read this one, I’m sure I would find more in it that fits into the myth. What we find ourselves contemplating is the lack of stability in the world, and our need for the society of others. We learn the

difference between passion and love between people (passion is selfish while love is unselfish), but also the perhaps contradictory need for passion when choosing a field of study.

We learn that there is evil, that sometimes people do evil things. There is something…something along the lines of “pay attention” that makes the point that we must not be careless with our actions, but should have reasons for what we do. Until the heart of a bear can be put into a human being, Simón tells Davíd, people will have to take responsibility for their actions. “I don’t know why” is no kind of an excuse for bad behavior. We’ll find out in the next installment what happens to those who knowingly do things that will harm others.

Coetzee is such a master. His descriptions of children’s speech and actions are so perceptive—like the dog Bolívar’s swagger—that we trust his descriptions of the sisters on the farm, and Señor Arroyo’s sister Mercedes, who finally teaches Simón to dance, to remember, and maybe to get his passion back.

I like everything about this series. Coetzee gives it to us in installments rather than trying to make one big book of it. As a result, the stories are slim things, which allows us to read with attention. After all, the underlying story is going to be familiar to most of the world. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim believers have all learned the life of Jesus.

The book is available in audio, produced by HighBridge and read by James Cameron Stewart. It is listening to Stewart’s very British accent that I discovered that Estrella sounds so much like Australia. We know Simón and family learned Spanish when they left Novilla, but I'm going to guess the accent you have in your head for this family is not British. No matter. Stewart does a magnificent job. Read or listen, this layered novel is a real treat.

I’d been pronouncing Coetzee’s name wrong for years, so I copy the wiki for you: John Maxwell "J. M." Coetzee ([kut?se?], kuut-SEE. It occurred to me that I would not be afraid to meet Coetzee, though I am rather timid when I consider meeting other authors I admire. Somehow I imagine he would be kind, and neither he nor I would need to perform.

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