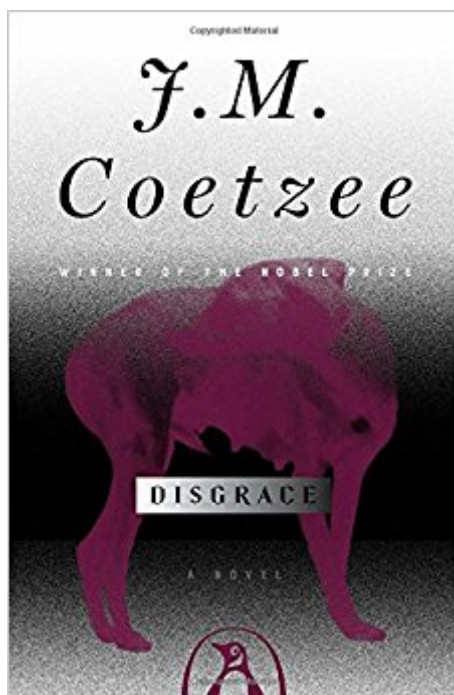


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Disgrace: A Novel



Synopsis

From the Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. J.M. Coetzee's latest novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, is now available from Viking. *Late Essays: 2006-2016* will be available January 2018. "Compulsively readable... A novel that not only works its spell but makes it impossible for us to lay it aside once we've finished reading it." *The New Yorker* At fifty-two, Professor David Lurie is divorced, filled with desire, but lacking in passion. When an affair with a student leaves him jobless, shunned by friends, and ridiculed by his ex-wife, he retreats to his daughter Lucy's smallholding. David's visit becomes an extended stay as he attempts to find meaning in his one remaining relationship. Instead, an incident of unimaginable terror and violence forces father and daughter to confront their strained relationship and the equally complicated racial complexities of the new South Africa.

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Customer Reviews

David Lurie is hardly the hero of his own life, or anyone else's. At 52, the protagonist of *Disgrace* is at the end of his professional and romantic game, and seems to be deliberately courting disaster. Long a professor of modern languages at Cape Town University College, he has recently been relegated to adjunct professor of communications at the same institution, now pointedly renamed Cape Technical University: Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the *Communications 101* handbook, preposterous: "Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other." His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in

song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. Twice married and twice divorced, his magnetic looks on the wane, David rather cruelly seduces one of his students, and his conduct unbecoming is soon uncovered. In his eighth novel, J.M. Coetzee might have been content to write a searching academic satire. But in *Disgrace* he is intent on much more, and his art is as uncompromising as his main character, though infinitely more complex. Refusing to play the public-repentance game, David gets himself fired--a final gesture of contempt. Now, he thinks, he will write something on Byron's last years. Not empty, unread criticism, "prose measured by the yard," but a libretto. To do so, he heads for the Eastern Cape and his daughter's farm. In her mid-20s, Lucy has turned her back on city sophistications: with five hectares, she makes her living by growing flowers and produce and boarding dogs. "Nothing," David thinks, "could be more simple." But nothing, in fact, is more complicated--or, in the new South Africa, more dangerous. Far from being the refuge he has sought, little is safe in Salem. Just as David has settled into his temporary role as farmworker and unenthusiastic animal-shelter volunteer, he and Lucy are attacked by three black men. Unable to protect his daughter, David's disgrace is complete. Hers, however, is far worse. There is much more to be explored in Coetzee's painful novel, and few consolations. It would be easy to pick up on his title and view *Disgrace* as a complicated working-out of personal and political shame and responsibility. But the author is concerned with his country's history, brutalities, and betrayals. Coetzee is also intent on what measure of soul and rights we allow animals. After the attack, David takes his role at the shelter more seriously, at last achieving an unlikely home and some measure of love. In Coetzee's recent Princeton lectures, *The Lives of Animals*, an aging novelist tells her audience that the question that occupies all lab and zoo creatures is, "Where is home, and how do I get there?" David, though still all-powerful compared to those he helps dispose of, is equally trapped, equally lost. *Disgrace* is almost willfully plain. Yet it possesses its own lean, heartbreaking lyricism, most of all in its descriptions of unwanted animals. At the start of the novel, David tells his student that poetry either speaks instantly to the reader--"a flash of revelation and a flash of response"--or not at all. Coetzee's book speaks differently, its layers and sadnesses endlessly unfolding. --Kerry Fried --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As a writer, Coetzee is a literary cascade, with a steady output of fiction and criticism (literary and social) over the last two decades. This latest book, his first novel in five years, is a searing evocation of post-apartheid South Africa; it earned him an unprecedented second Booker Prize. An uninspired teacher and twice divorced, David Lurie is a 52-year-old poetry scholar-cum-"adjunct professor of

communications" at Cape Technical University. Spooked by the flicker of twilight in his life trajectory, he sees himself as an aged Lothario soon to be "shuddered over" by the pretty girls he has so often wooed; he is disappointed in and unengaged by the academy he now serves by rote; and he cannot locate the notes for his opera, *Byron in Italy*, in which he has placed so much reluctant hope. He is, even at his best, a man of "moderated bliss." So when he seduces Melanie Isaacs, a lithe student from his poetry elective ("She does not resist. All she does is avert herself"), he believes her to represent the final object of his desire, his last act of lush, Romantic desperation. And then he is found out. This not uncommon outrage earns him a dismissal and censure from the university committee he refuses to cooperate with in hopes of saving his job. He immediately shoves off for Salem in the Eastern Cape where his daughter, Lucy, manages a dog kennel and works her smallholding, harvesting a modest crop. Here David hopes to cleanse himself with time-honored toil. But his new life in the country offers scarce refuge. Instead, he is flummoxed to discover an unfamiliar Lucy-principled, land-devoted, with a heroic resignation to the social and political developments of modern South Africa. He also memorably encounters Petrus, Lucy's ambitious colored neighbor and sometime assistant. Petrus embodies the shifting, tangled vicissitudes of a new national schematic, and forces David to relate to the broad segment of society previously shrouded by the mists of his self-absorption. But a violent attack on the estate irrevocably alters how the book's central figure perceives many things: his daughter and her bewildering (to him) courage, the rights of South Africa's grossly aggrieved majority, the souls of the damaged dogs he helps put down at the local Animal Welfare League and even the character of Lord Byron's mistress and the heroine of his operatic "chamber-play." But this is no tale of hard-earned, satisfying transformation. It is, rather, a paean to willfulness, an aria on the theme of *secca*, or the drying up of "the source of everything." In Coetzee's tale, not a single note is false; every sentence is perfectly calibrated and essential. Every passage questions the arbitrary division between the "major and minor" and the long-accepted injustices propped up by nothing so much as time. The book somehow manages to speak of little but interiority and still insinuate peripheries of things it doesn't touch. Somber and crystalline, it "has the right mix of timelessness and decay." It is about the harsh cleansing of humiliation and the regretfulness of knowing things: "I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don't sing, if you understand me." To perceive is to understand in this beautifully spare, necessary novel. First serial to the *New Yorker*. (Nov.) FYI: Viking accelerated the pub date after the Booker Prize was announced on October 25. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I was required to read this book for a class about colonization. I didn't understand how this book related to colonization, even though she tried to explain it several times. It was a good story though. It was interesting seeing what life is like in Africa. I think that it is a very necessary book for today. This is evident in Coetzee's several awards.

The master writer at his finest, he paints a picture of problems in South Africa that impact life in a very nasty way. He also shows us the conflict of an aging man caught in situations of his own making. My reason for the high rating is because of the masterful creation of tone and mood. I can't say I enjoyed the book. There is nothing there to be enjoyed except the craftsmanship. I was glad to be at the ending, a surprise ending that resolved nothing. This book will not make you sleep better. It conveys all too well the frightful state of life in an ugly place.

A true page turner, *Disgrace* grabs you early on with an effortless narrative of unspectacular events, which eventually develop into more consequential moments. Coetzee's writing is magnificent. The words drip from his pen like so much honey; drawing images and scenarios with ease. Reading his text is magically unconstrained, but the subtext is rife with symbolism throughout. Without divulging events that might spoil the read for others, certain incidents occur that turn the plot drastically in the direction of professional disgrace for the main character. This leads him down other paths and he ends up visiting his only daughter, who lives alone on a farm of sorts, out in the country. Certain matters converge and, this being South Africa in the early post-apartheid years, a series of unfortunate situations unfold that reflect the struggles for all involved when adapting to a new set of rules for cohabitation. Particularly the consideration of past harms done to a people and the inevitable resentment that persists within those generations that follow. As the novel proceeds we can read into many events a reflective measure of David's (David Lurie, the novel's central character) past actions, and find the balancing act nature creates in our lives to carry a certain sense of inevitability. Others do unto us what we do unto others. A wonderful read with much to tell us. It is a novel of devastating insight that poses many questions and offers few answers. As any good novel should do, it leaves the pondering to the reader.

For this novel to work, you have to accept the premise that a woman would choose to remain in a place (where she is certain she will be repeatedly gang raped at irregular intervals) because she has become rooted to the ground like a peasant; and, you have to believe she would do that when she has the financial resources and citizenship to move to the Netherlands and could easily do

so. Since I'm a male and my wife also read the novel, I asked her if she was troubled by that element and if she thought any woman would remain under the circumstances described. Her response: No woman, absolutely positively none, would voluntarily remain there when she could leave. With that construct unbelievable, the entire novel fails as a story and becomes an allegory or parable and the characters become representatives of ideas or positions and you cannot live additional lives vicariously through them. It's also a novel that heavily handedly shoves ideas at you and it's a novel of style, as in: written in the style of Camus. Unfortunately, that's all it is, "in the style of." If there was a "Bad Camus" competition, it'd be a winner. Camus wrote in sparse, spare language about people who were believable and had soul. This is a stylistic imitation that is devoid of believable characters and which must have been written with the hope that style will substitute for substance. It doesn't. I understand that it is a darling of the literary awards set and has a lot of group think going for it, but it is a lifeless allegory and poorly written.

Interesting POV (3rd person, but narrator takes on 1st person evaluation of events) is what perhaps makes an otherwise thoroughly unpleasant character an engrossing read.

No doubt about Coetzee's talent. He has the capacity to reach his readers with all the available emotions at hand via the shortest possible route, such is his tight and exquisite prose. Set in South Africa's post apartheid times the oppressor becomes the oppressed which has its own set of problems. The characters are well drawn but none was appealing. One can understand the protagonist and his action and reactions but he is nonetheless an unlikeable character. His daughter more so. My God....I simply just couldn't quite "get it" that she took such dumb decisions after the horrific events that took place at her small "farm" while her father was visiting. A bleak book with a sinister edge, it had me wanting THE END to appear as quickly as possible.

I bought the book after seeing the movie. I had questions about the politics of the setting, thinking the book would elaborate. Those questions were not answered, but the book is much richer in the area of the affair with the student. All the relationships went so much deeper than the movie and of course provided gripping detail. This book is full of life's ugly truths. The way the professor's peers try to save him from himself is the same way the professor tries to save his daughter. You cannot save people. People make choices. I thought it was nothing short of heroic that he never denied nor apologized for the affair. He, in fact, never turns away from his difficulties or challenges. Many meat-eaters would never agree to see how meat gets to the store. In comparison, many people live

life in denial of what is really going on. This protagonist faced it. I just really wish I had known more about post-Apartheid Africa.

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