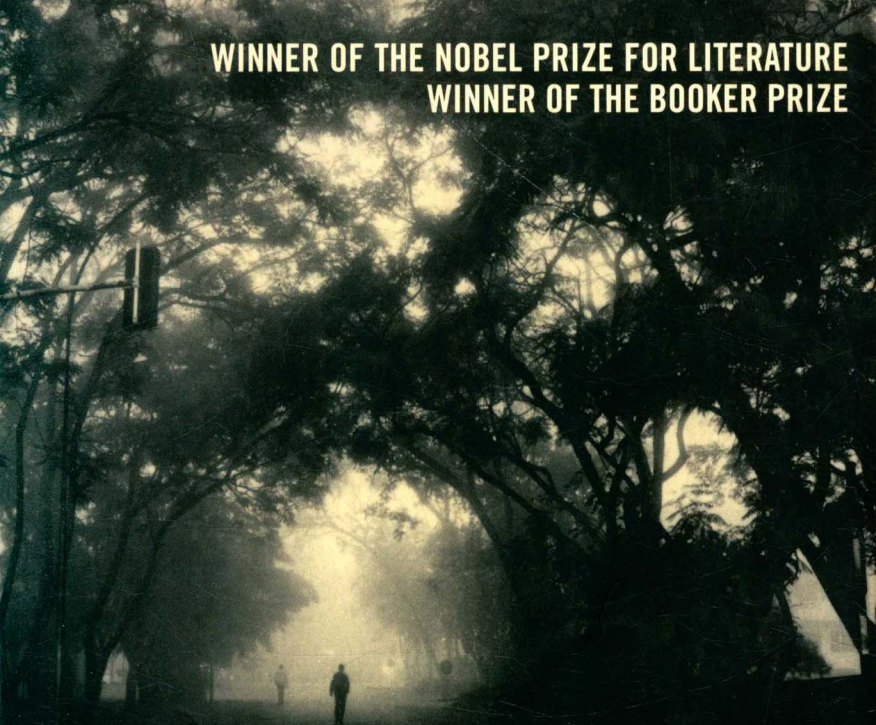


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Life & Times of Michael K



J.M. COETZEE

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J.M. Coetzee

LIFE & TIMES OF
MICHAEL K

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LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K

J.M. Coetzee's work includes *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*, which won the Booker Prize, making him the first author to have won it twice. In 2003 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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Youth

Elizabeth Costello

Diary of a Bad Year

War is the father of all and king of all.
Some he shows as gods, others as men.
Some he makes slaves, and others free.

❖ ONE ❖

THE FIRST THING THE MIDWIFE NOTICED ABOUT MICHAEL K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip. The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped. Obscuring the child for a moment from its mother, she prodded open the tiny bud of a mouth and was thankful to find the palate whole.

To the mother she said: 'You should be happy, they bring luck to the household.' But from the first Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months. The child could not suck from the breast and cried with hunger. She tried a bottle; when it could not suck from the bottle she fed it with a teaspoon, fretting with impatience when it coughed and spluttered and cried.

'It will close up as he grows older,' the midwife promised. However, the lip did not close, or did not close enough, nor did the nose come straight.

She took the child with her to work and continued to take it when it was no longer a baby. Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children. Year after year

Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet.

Because of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick, Michael was taken out of school after a short trial and committed to the protection of Huis Norenius in Faure, where at the expense of the state he spent the rest of his childhood in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children learning the elements of reading, writing, counting, sweeping, scrubbing, bedmaking, dishwashing, basketweaving, woodwork and digging. At the age of fifteen he passed out of Huis Norenius and joined the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener, grade 3(b). Three years later he left Parks and Gardens and, after a spell of unemployment which he spent lying on his bed looking at his hands, took a job as night attendant at the public lavatories on Greenmarket Square. On his way home from work late one Friday he was set upon in a subway by two men who beat him, took his watch, his money and his shoes, and left him lying stunned with a slash across his arm, a dislocated thumb and two broken ribs. After this incident he quit night work and returned to Parks and Gardens, where he rose slowly in the service to become Gardener, grade 1.

Because of his face K did not have women friends. He was easiest when he was by himself. Both his jobs had given him a measure of solitariness, though down in the lavatories he had been oppressed by the brilliant neon light that shone off the white tiles and created a space without shadows. The parks he preferred were those with tall pine trees and dim agapanthus walks. Sometimes on Saturdays he failed to hear the boom of the noon gun and went on working by himself all through the afternoon. On Sunday mornings he slept late; on Sunday afternoons he visited his mother.

Late one morning in June, in the thirty-first year of his life, a message was brought to Michael K as he raked leaves in De Waal

Park. The message, at third hand, was from his mother: she had been discharged from hospital and wanted him to come and fetch her. K put away his tools and made his way by bus to Somerset Hospital, where he found his mother seated on a bench in a patch of sunlight outside the entrance. She was fully dressed, save that her street shoes stood beside her. When she saw her son she began to weep, holding a hand before her eyes so that other patients and visitors should not see.

For months Anna K had been suffering from gross swelling of the legs and arms; later her belly had begun to swell too. She had been admitted to hospital unable to walk and barely able to breathe. She had spent five days lying in a corridor among scores of victims of stabbings and beatings and gunshot wounds who kept her awake with their noise, neglected by nurses who had no time to spend cheering up an old woman when there were young men dying spectacular deaths all about. Revived with oxygen when she arrived, she was treated with injections and pills to bring down the swelling. When she wanted a bedpan, however, there was seldom anyone to bring it. She had no dressing-gown. Once, feeling her way along the wall to the lavatory, she had been stopped by an old man in grey pyjamas who spoke filth and exposed himself. The needs of her body became a source of torment. When the nurses asked about the pills she said she had taken them, but often she was lying. Then, though the breathlessness abated, her legs grew so itchy that she had to lie on her hands to control the urge to scratch. By the third day she was pleading to be sent home, though evidently not pleading with the right person. The tears she wept on the sixth day were thus largely tears of relief that she was escaping this purgatory.

At the desk Michael K asked for the use of a wheelchair and was refused it. Carrying her handbag and shoes for her, he supported his mother the fifty paces to the bus stop. There was a long queue. The timetable pasted on the pole promised a bus every fifteen minutes. They waited for an hour while the shadows

lengthened and the wind grew chilly. Unable to stand, Anna K sat against a wall with her legs before her like a beggarwoman while Michael kept their place in the line. When the bus came there were no seats. Michael held on to a rail and embraced his mother to keep her from lurching. It was five o'clock before they arrived at her room in Sea Point.

For eight years Anna K had been employed as a domestic servant by a retired hosiery manufacturer and his wife living in a five-roomed flat in Sea Point overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. In terms of her contract she came in at nine in the morning and stayed till eight at night, with a three-hour break in the afternoon. She worked alternately five and six days a week. She had a fortnight's paid holiday and a room of her own in the block. The wage was fair, her employers were reasonable people, jobs were hard to come by, and Anna K was not discontented. A year ago, however, she had begun to experience dizziness and tightness of the chest when she bent down. Then the dropsy had set in. The Buhrmanns kept her on to do the cooking, cut her pay by a third, and hired a younger woman for the housework. She was allowed to stay on in her room, over which the Buhrmanns had the disposal. The dropsy grew worse. For weeks before entering hospital she had been bedridden, unable to work. She lived in dread of the end of the Buhrmanns' charity.

Her room under the stairs of the Côte d'Azur had been intended for air-conditioning equipment, which had never been installed. On the door was a sign: a skull and crossed bones painted in red, and underneath the legend DANGER—GEVAAR—INGOZI. There was no electric light and no ventilation; the air was always musty. Michael opened the door for his mother, lit a candle, and stepped outside while she prepared for bed. He spent this, the first evening of her return, and every evening for the next week, with her: he warmed soup for her on the paraffin stove, saw to her comfort as far as he was able, carried out necessary tasks, and consoled her by stroking her arms when she fell into one of her fits of

tears. One evening the buses from Sea Point did not run at all and he had to spend the night in her room sleeping on the mat with his coat on. In the middle of the night he woke chilled to the bone. Unable to sleep, unable to leave because of the curfew, he sat shivering on the chair till daylight while his mother groaned and snored.

Michael K did not like the physical intimacy that the long evenings in the tiny room forced upon the two of them. He found the sight of his mother's swollen legs disturbing and turned his eyes away when he had to help her out of bed. Her thighs and arms were covered with scratch marks (for a while she even wore gloves at night). But he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty. The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenius, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother.

Nothing that her son said could calm Anna K's fear of what might happen to her if she lost her room. Her nights among the dying in the corridors of Somerset Hospital had brought it home to her how indifferent the world could be to an old woman with an unsightly illness in time of war. Unable to work, she saw herself withheld from the gutter only by the unreliable goodwill of the Buhrmanns, the dutifulness of a dull son and, in the last resort, the savings she kept in a handbag in a suitcase under her bed, the new currency in one purse, the old currency, valueless now, that she had been too suspicious to exchange, in another.

Thus when Michael arrived one evening speaking of layoffs in Parks and Gardens, she began to revolve in her mind something she had hitherto only idly dreamed of: a project of quitting a city that held little promise for her and returning to the quieter countryside of her girlhood.

Anna K had been born on a farm in the district of Prince Albert. Her father was not steady; there was a problem with drinking;

and in her early years they had moved from one farm to another. Her mother had done laundry and worked in the various kitchens; Anna had helped her. Later they had moved to the town of Oudtshoorn, where for a while Anna went to school. After the birth of her own first child she had come to Cape Town. There was a second child, from another father, then a third one who died, then Michael. In Anna's memories the years before Oudtshoorn remained the happiest of her life, a time of warmth and plenty. She remembered sitting in the dust of the chicken-run while the chickens clucked and scratched; she remembered looking for eggs under bushes. Lying in bed in her airless room through the winter afternoons with rain dripping from the steps outside, she dreamed of escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet, and returning to a countryside where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies.

In the plan she outlined to Michael she did not mention death or dying. She proposed that he should quit Parks and Gardens before he was laid off and accompany her by train to Prince Albert, where she would hire a room while he looked for work on a farm. If it happened that his quarters were large enough, she would stay with him and keep house; if not, he could visit her at weekends. To prove her seriousness she had him bring out the suitcase from under the bed, and before his eyes counted out the purseful of new notes which, she said, she had been putting aside for this purpose.

She expected Michael to ask how she could believe that a small country town would take to its bosom two strangers, one of them an old woman in bad health. She had even prepared an answer. But not for an instant did Michael doubt her. Just as he had believed through all the years in Huis Norenus that his mother had left him there for a reason which, if at first dark, would in the end become clear, so now he accepted without question the

LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K

wisdom of her plan for them. He saw, not the banknotes spread out on the quilt, but in his mind's eye a whitewashed cottage in the broad veld with smoke curling from its chimney, and standing at the front door his mother, smiling and well, ready to welcome him home at the end of a long day.

Michael did not report for work the next morning. With his mother's money stuffed in two wads into his socks, he made his way to the railway station and the main-line booking office. Here the clerk told him that, while he would happily sell him two tickets to Prince Albert or the nearest point to it on the line ('Prince Albert or Prince Alfred?' he asked), K should not expect to board a train without both a seat reservation and a permit to leave the proclaimed Cape Peninsula police area. The earliest reservation he could give him would be for the eighteenth of August, two months away; as for the permit, that could be obtained only from the police. K pleaded for an earlier departure, but in vain: the state of his mother's health did not constitute special grounds, the clerk told him; on the contrary, he would advise him not to mention her condition at all.

From the station K went to Caledon Square and stood for two hours in a queue behind a woman with a whimpering baby. He was given two sets of forms, one set for his mother, one for himself. 'Pin the train reservations to the blue forms, take them to room E-5,' said the policewoman at the desk.

When it rained Anna K pushed an old towel against the bottom of the door to keep water from seeping in. The room smelled of Dettol and talcum powder. 'I feel like a toad under a stone living here,' she whispered. 'I can't wait till August.' She covered her face and lay in silence. After a while K found that he could not breathe. He went to the corner shop. There was no bread. 'No bread, no milk,' said the assistant—'come tomorrow.' He bought biscuits and condensed milk, then stood under the awning watching the rain fall. The next day he took the forms to room E-5. Permits would be mailed in due course, they told him, after the

applications had been seen and approved by the police in Prince Albert.

He went back to De Waal Park and was told, as he had expected, that he was to be paid off at the end of the month. 'It doesn't matter,' he told the foreman—'we are leaving anyhow, my mother and I.' He remembered his mother's visits to Huis Norenius. Sometimes she had brought marshmallows, sometimes chocolate biscuits. They had walked together on the playing-field, then gone to the hall for tea. On visiting days the boys wore their khaki best and their brown sandals. Some of the boys did not have parents, or had been forgotten. 'My father is dead, my mother is working,' he had said in respect of himself.

He made a nest of cushions and blankets in the corner of the room and spent the evenings sitting in the dark listening to his mother breathe. She was sleeping more and more. Sometimes he too fell asleep where he sat, and missed the bus. He would wake in the morning with a headache. During the day he wandered about the streets. Everything was suspended while they waited for the permits, which did not come.

Early one Sunday morning he visited De Waal Park and broke the lock on the shed where the gardeners kept their equipment. He took hand-tools and a wheelbarrow, which he trundled back to Sea Point. Working in the alley behind the flats, he broke up an old crate and knocked together a platform two feet square, with a raised back, which he lashed to the wheelbarrow with wire. Then he tried to coax his mother out for a ride. 'The air will do you good,' he said. 'No one will see, it's after five, the front is empty.' 'People can see from the flats,' she replied: 'I'm not making myself into a spectacle.' The next day she relented. Wearing her hat and coat and slippers, she shuffled out into the grey late afternoon and allowed Michael to settle her in the barrow. He wheeled her across Beach Road and on to the paved promenade along the seafront. There was no one about but an old couple walking a dog. Anna K held stiffly to the sides of the

platform, breathing in the cold sea air, while her son wheeled her a hundred yards along the promenade, stopped to allow her to watch the waves breaking on the rocks, wheeled her another hundred yards, stopped again, then wheeled her back. He was disconcerted to find how heavy she was and how unstable the barrow. There was a moment when it tipped and nearly spilled her. 'It does you good to get fresh air in your lungs,' he said. The next afternoon it was raining and they stayed indoors.

He thought of building a hand-cart with a box as body mounted on a pair of bicycle wheels, but could not think where to find an axle.

Then late one afternoon in the last week of June a military jeep travelling down Beach Road at high speed struck a youth crossing the road, hurling him back among the vehicles parked at the curbside. The jeep itself swerved off and came to a halt on the overgrown lawns outside the Côte d'Azur, where its two occupants were confronted by the youth's angry companions. There was a fight, and a crowd soon gathered. Parked cars were smashed open and pushed broadside on into the street. Sirens announced the curfew and were ignored. An ambulance that arrived with a motorcycle escort turned about short of the barrier and raced off, chased by a hail of stones. Then from the balcony of a fourth-floor flat a man began to fire revolver shots. Amid screams the crowd dashed for cover, spreading into the beachfront apartment blocks, racing along the corridors, pounding upon doors, breaking windows and lights. The man with the revolver was hauled from his hiding-place, kicked into insensibility, and tossed down to the pavement. Some residents of the flats chose to cower in the dark behind locked doors, others fled into the streets. A woman, trapped at the end of a corridor, had her clothes torn from her body; someone slipped on a fire escape and broke an ankle. Doors were beaten down and flats ransacked. In the flat immediately above Anna K's room, looters tore down curtains, heaped clothing on the floor, broke furniture, and lit a fire, which, though it