

J M COETZEE



BY THE WINNER OF
THE 1983 BOOKER PRIZE

J. M. COETZEE

FOE

SECKER & WARBURG
LONDON

First published in England 1986 by
Martin Secker & Warburg Limited
an imprint of Reed Consumer Books Ltd
Michelin House, 81 Fulham Road,
London SW3 6RB and Auckland,
Melbourne, Singapore and Toronto

Copyright © J. M. Coetzee 1986

British library Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN 0-436-10298-6

Set in 12/15 Garamond
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

FOE

By the same author

DUSKLANDS
IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY
WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS
LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K

I

‘**A**t last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard. With slow strokes, my long hair floating about me, like a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil, I swam towards the strange island, for a while swimming as I had rowed, against the current, then all at once free of its grip, carried by the waves into the bay and on to the beach.

‘There I lay sprawled on the hot sand, my head filled with the orange blaze of the sun, my petticoat (which was all I had escaped with) baking dry upon me, tired, grateful, like all the saved.

‘A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him. “Castaway,” I said with my thick dry tongue. “I am cast away. I am all alone.” And I held out my sore hands.

‘The man squatted down beside me. He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a

pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust. "*Agua*," I said, trying Portuguese, and made a sign of drinking. He gave no reply, but regarded me as he would a seal or a porpoise thrown up by the waves, that would shortly expire and might then be cut up for food. At his side he had a spear. I have come to the wrong island, I thought, and let my head sink: I have come to an island of cannibals.

'He reached out and with the back of his hand touched my arm. He is trying my flesh, I thought. But by and by my breathing slowed and I grew calmer. He smelled of fish, and of sheepswool on a hot day.

'Then, since we could not stay thus forever, I sat up and again began to make motions of drinking. I had rowed all morning, I had not drunk since the night before, I no longer cared if he killed me afterwards so long as I had water.

'The Negro rose and signed me to follow. He led me, stiff and sore, across sand-dunes and along a path ascending to the hilly interior of the island. But we had scarcely begun to climb when I felt a sharp hurt, and drew from my heel a long black-tipped thorn. Though I chafed it, the heel quickly swelled till I could not so much as hobble for the pain. The Negro offered me his back, indicating he would carry me. I hesitated to accept, for he was a slight fellow, shorter than I. But there was no help for it. So part-way skipping on one leg, part-way riding on his back, with my petticoat gathered up and my chin brushing his springy hair, I ascended the hillside, my fear of him abating in this strange backwards embrace. He took

no heed where he set his feet, I noted, but crushed under his soles whole clusters of the thorns that had pierced my skin.

‘For readers reared on travellers’ tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway’s thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home. But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place: a great rocky hill with a flat top, rising sharply from the sea on all sides except one, dotted with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves. Off the island grew beds of brown seaweed which, borne ashore by the waves, gave off a noisome stench and supported swarms of large pale fleas. There were ants scurrying everywhere, of the same kind we had in Bahia, and another pest, too, living in the dunes: a tiny insect that hid between your toes and ate its way into the flesh. Even Friday’s hard skin was not proof against it: there were bleeding cracks in his feet, though he paid them no heed. I saw no snakes, but lizards came out in the heat of the day to sun themselves, some small and agile, others large and clumsy, with blue ruffs about their gills which they would flare out when alarmed, and hiss, and glare. I caught one of them in a bag and tried to tame it, feeding it flies; but it would not take dead meat, so at last I set it free. Also there were apes (of whom I will say more later) and birds, birds everywhere: not only flocks of sparrows (or so I called them) that flitted all day chirruping from bush to bush, but on the cliffs above the sea great tribes of gulls and mews and gannets and cormorants, so that

the rocks were white with their droppings. And in the sea porpoises and seals and fish of all kinds. So if the company of brutes had been enough for me, I might have lived most happily on my island. But who, accustomed to the fullness of human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind?

‘At last we came to the end of our climb and my porter halted to catch his breath. I found myself on a level plateau not far from some kind of encampment. On all sides stretched the shimmering sea, while to the east the ship that had brought me receded under full sail.

‘My one thought was for water. I did not care to what fate I was being borne so long as I could drink. At the gate of the encampment stood a man, dark-skinned and heavily bearded. “*Agua*,” I said, making signs. He gestured to the Negro, and I saw I was talking to a European. “*Fala inglez?*” I asked, as I had learned to say in Brazil. He nodded. The Negro brought me a bowl of water. I drank, and he brought more. It was the best water I ever had.

‘The stranger’s eyes were green, his hair burnt to a straw colour. I judged he was sixty years of age. He wore (let me give my description of him all together) a jerkin, and drawers to below his knees, such as we see watermen wear on the Thames, and a tall cap rising in a cone, all of these made of pelts laced together, the fur outwards, and a stout pair of sandals. In his belt were a short stick and a knife. A mutineer, was my first thought: yet another mutineer, set ashore by a merciful captain, with one of the Negroes of the island,

whom he has made his servant. "My name is Susan Barton," I said. "I was cast adrift by the crew of the ship yonder. They killed their master and did this to me." And all at once, though I had remained dry-eyed through all the insults done me on board ship and through the hours of despair when I was alone on the waves with the captain lying dead at my feet, a handspike jutting from his eye-socket, I fell to crying. I sat on the bare earth with my sore foot between my hands and rocked back and forth and sobbed like a child, while the stranger (who was of course the Cruso I told you of) gazed at me more as if I were a fish cast up by the waves than an unfortunate fellow-creature.

'I have told you how Cruso was dressed; now let me tell you of his habitation.

'In the centre of the flat hilltop was a cluster of rocks as high as a house. In the angle between two of these rocks Cruso had built himself a hut of poles and reeds, the reeds artfully thatched together and woven in and out of the poles with fronds to form roof and walls. A fence, with a gate that turned on leather hinges, completed an encampment in the shape of a triangle which Cruso termed his castle. Within the fence, protected from the apes, grew a patch of wild bitter lettuce. This lettuce, with fish and birds' eggs, formed our sole diet on the island, as you shall hear.

'In the hut Cruso had a narrow bed, which was all his furniture. The bare earth formed the floor. For his bed Friday had a mat under the eaves.

'Drying my tears at last, I asked Cruso for a needle or some such instrument to remove the thorn from my foot. He brought out a needle made of a fishbone

with a hole pierced through the broad end, by what means I do not know, and watched in silence while I took out the thorn.

“Let me tell you my story,” said I; “for I am sure you are wondering who I am and how I come to be here.

“My name is Susan Barton, and I am a woman alone. My father was a Frenchman who fled to England to escape the persecutions in Flanders. His name was properly Berton, but, as happens, it became corrupted in the mouths of strangers. My mother was an Englishwoman.

“Two years ago my only daughter was abducted and conveyed to the New World by an Englishman, a factor and agent in the carrying trade. I followed in search of her. Arriving in Bahia, I was met with denials and, when I persisted, with rudeness and threats. The officers of the Crown afforded me no aid, saying it was a matter between the English. I lived in lodgings, and took in sewing, and searched, and waited, but saw no trace of my child. So, despairing at last, and my means giving out, I embarked for Lisbon on a merchantman.

“Ten days out from port, as if my misfortunes were not great enough, the crew mutinied. Bursting into their captain’s cabin, they slew him heartlessly even while he pleaded for his life. Those of their fellows who were not with them they clapped in irons. They put me in a boat with the captain’s corpse beside me, and set us adrift. Why they chose to cast me away I do not know. But those whom we have abused we customarily grow to hate, and wish never to lay eyes on

again. The heart of man is a dark forest – that is one of the sayings they have in Brazil.

“As chance would have it – or perhaps the mutiny had been so ordered – I was set adrift in sight of this island. ‘*Remos!*’ shouted the seaman from the deck, meaning I should take up the oars and row. But I was shaking with terror. So while they laughed and jeered I drifted hither and thither on the waves, till the wind came up.

“All morning, while the ship drew away (I believe the mutineers were of a mind to become pirates off Hispaniola), I rowed with the dead captain at my feet. My palms were soon blistered – see! – but I dared not rest, fearing that the current would draw me past your island. Worse by far than the pain of rowing was the prospect of being adrift at night in the vast emptiness of the sea, when, as I have heard, the monsters of the deep ascend in quest of prey.

“Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard and began to swim towards your island. The waves took me and bore me on to the beach. The rest you know.”

‘With these words I presented myself to Robinson Cruso, in the days when he still ruled over his island, and became his second subject, the first being his manservant Friday.

‘I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso, as I heard it from his own lips. But the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, that I was more

and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy. Thus one day he would say his father had been a wealthy merchant whose counting-house he had quit in search of adventure. But the next day he would tell me he had been a poor lad of no family who had shipped as a cabin-boy and been captured by the Moors (he bore a scar on his arm which was, he said, the mark of the branding-iron) and escaped and made his way to the New World. Sometimes he would say he had dwelt on his island the past fifteen years, he and Friday, none but they having been spared when their ship went down. "Was Friday then a child, when the ship went down?" I asked. "Aye, a child, a mere child, a little slave-boy," replied Cruso. Yet at other times, as for instance when he was in the grip of the fever (and should we not believe that in fever as in drunkenness the truth speaks itself willy-nilly?) he would tell stories of cannibals, of how Friday was a cannibal whom he had saved from being roasted and devoured by fellow-cannibals. "Might the cannibals not return to reclaim Friday?" I would ask, and he would nod. "Is that why you are forever looking out to sea: to be warned of the return of the cannibals?" I would pursue; and he would nod again. So in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling.

‘But let me return to my relation.

‘Tired to the bone, I asked to lie down, and fell at once into a deep sleep. The sun was sinking when I awoke, and Friday was preparing our supper. Though

it was no more than fish roasted over coals and served with lettuce, I ate with gusto. Grateful to have my belly full and my feet on solid earth again, I expressed my thanks to this singular saviour of mine. I would have told him more about myself too, about my quest for my stolen daughter, about the mutiny. But he asked nothing, gazing out instead into the setting sun, nodding to himself as though a voice spoke privately inside him that he was listening to.

“May I ask, sir,” said I, after a while: “Why in all these years have you not built a boat and made your escape from this island?”

“And where should I escape to?” he replied, smiling to himself as though no answer were possible.

“Why, you might sail to the coast of Brazil, or meet a ship and be saved.”

“Brazil is hundreds of miles distant, and full of cannibals,” said he. “As for sailing-ships, we shall see sailing-ships as well and better by staying at home.”

“I beg to disagree,” said I. “I spent two long years in Brazil and met no cannibals there.”

“You were in Bahia,” said he. “Bahia is naught but an island on the rim of the Brazilian forests.”

So I early began to see it was a waste of breath to urge Cruso to save himself. Growing old on his island kingdom with no one to say him nay had so narrowed his horizon – when the horizon all around us was so vast and so majestic! – that he had come to be persuaded he knew all there was to know about the world. Besides, as I later found, the desire to escape had dwindled within him. His heart was set on remaining

to his dying day king of his tiny realm. In truth it was not fear of pirates or cannibals that held him from making bonfires or dancing about on the hilltop waving his hat, but indifference to salvation, and habit, and the stubbornness of old age.

'It was time to retire. Cruso offered to give up his bed, but I would not accept, preferring to have Friday spread me a bed of grass on the floor. There I laid myself down, an arm's-length from Cruso (for the hut was small). Last night I had been bound for home; tonight I was a castaway. Long hours I lay awake, unable to believe the change in my fortunes, troubled too by the pain of my blistered hands. Then I fell asleep. I awoke once in the night. The wind had dropped; I could hear the singing of crickets and, far away, the roar of the waves. "I am safe, I am on an island, all will be well," I whispered to myself, and hugged myself tight, and slept again.

'I was woken by the drumming of rain on the roof. It was morning; Friday was crouched before the stove (I have not yet told you of Cruso's stove, which was built very neatly of stone), feeding the fire, blowing it into life. At first I was ashamed that he should see me abed, but then I reminded myself of how free the ladies of Bahia were before their servants, and so felt better. Cruso came in, and we breakfasted well on birds' eggs, while the rain dripped here and there through the roof and hissed on the hot stones. In time the rain ceased and the sun came out, drawing wisps of steam from the earth, and the wind resumed and blew without respite till the next lull and the next rain. Wind, rain, wind, rain: such was the pattern of the days in that

place, and had been, for all I knew, since the beginning of time. If one circumstance above all determined me to escape, whatever the cost, it was not the loneliness nor the rudeness of the life, nor the monotony of the diet, but the wind that day after day whistled in my ears and tugged at my hair and blew sand into my eyes, till sometimes I would kneel in a corner of the hut with my head in my arms and moan to myself, on and on, to hear some other sound than the beating of the wind; or later, when I had taken to bathing in the sea, would hold my breath and dip my head under the water merely to know what it was to have silence. Very likely you will say to yourself: In Patagonia the wind blows all year without let, and the Patagonians do not hide their heads, so why does she? But the Patagonians, knowing no home but Patagonia, have no reason to doubt that the wind blows at all seasons without let in all quarters of the globe; whereas I know better.

‘Before setting out to perform his island duties, Cruso gave me his knife and warned me not to venture from his castle; for the apes, he said, would not be as wary of a woman as they were of him and Friday. I wondered at this: was a woman, to an ape, a different species from a man? Nevertheless, I prudently obeyed, and stayed at home, and rested.

‘Save for the knife, all tools on the island were of wood or stone. The spade with which Cruso levelled his terraces (I shall have more to say of the terraces later) was a narrow wooden thing with a crooked handle, carved all of a piece and hardened in the fire. His mattock was a sharp stone lashed to a stick. The

bowls we ate and drank from were crude blocks of wood hollowed out by scraping and burning. For there was no clay on the island to mould and bake, and such trees as there were were puny, stunted by the wind, their twisted stems seldom broader than my hand. It seemed a great pity that from the wreck Cruso should have brought away no more than a knife. For had he rescued even the simplest of carpenter's tools, and some spikes and bars and suchlike, he might have fashioned better tools, and with better tools contrived a less laborious life, or even built a boat and escaped to civilization.

'In the hut there was nothing but the bed, which was made of poles bound together with thongs, crude in workmanship yet sturdy, and in a corner a pile of cured apeskins, that made the hut smell like a tanner's storehouse (in time I grew used to the smell, and missed it after I had put the island behind me; even today when I smell new leather I grow drowsy), and the stove, in which the embers of the last fire were always left banked, for making new fire was tedious work.

'What I chiefly hoped to find was not there. Cruso kept no journal, perhaps because he lacked paper and ink, but more likely, I now believe, because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or, if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it. I searched the poles that supported the roof, and the legs of the bed, but found no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon.

'Later, when I had grown freer with him, I told