



Getting Past Coetzee

Hedley Twidle

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Ten years ago, I was commissioned by a famous poet-editor to write a profile of Coetzee for a London review. At the time, the offer was a big break, and could have led to great things. I was fresh out of university and the editor was high-up at Faber and Faber, a talent scout for The New Yorker. But it never got written.

Instead of providing a controlled and judicious survey of the oeuvre, I found myself obsessed by minor details on the outskirts of his work. The grim memoir Youth (2002) had just appeared and I wrote at length about the stockings full of clotting cheese that young "John" hangs up in his kitchen – proof of his extreme thriftiness, in life as in prose. The fish fingers that he fries in olive oil in a London garret, trying to emulate the Mediterranean diet of Ford Madox Ford: these finer points of domestic economy seemed laden with meaning. So this became my account of stalking the South African writer JM Coetzee on page and in the halls of academe.



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