



Disgrace

J.M. Coetzee

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Set in post-apartheid South Africa, J. M. Coetzee's searing novel tells the story of David Lurie, a twice divorced, 52-year-old professor of communications and Romantic Poetry at Cape Technical University. Lurie believes he has created a comfortable, if somewhat passionless, life for himself. He lives within his financial and emotional means. Though his position at the university has been reduced, he teaches his classes dutifully; and while age has diminished his attractiveness, weekly visits to a prostitute satisfy his sexual needs. He considers himself happy. But when Lurie seduces one of his students, he sets in motion a chain of events that will shatter his complacency and leave him utterly disgraced.

Disgrace Details

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From Reader Review Disgrace for online ebook

Kim says

There should be one of those button options on GR that states *this review has been hidden due to hormonal, maybe not so justified, incoherent rants...* [click here to view](#)

Because that's what you're about to get.

David Lurie is a playah. In the full urban dictionary sense of the word.

A male who is skilled at manipulating ("playing") others, and especially at seducing women by pretending to care about them, when in reality they are only interested in sex....A certain class of low-rent, slack-jawed fuckups has decided that backstabbing and misogyny are totally radical, so the word is sometimes used as a compliment or term of endearment between male friends, as in the greeting "what's up, player?"

Maybe others got a sense of woefulness and redemption and even thought that he might have 'learned' from his 'disgrace' and all that shit. Not me. This book incited this---*rage* in me. Believe, I was knocked on my ass by it. My feminist instincts aren't usually this easily inflamed. I tend to dole out my hatred in a neatly fashioned, equal rights, sort of way. So, why can't I get over this?

Maybe I should give kudos to Coetzee for bringing this character so vividly to life---too bad I have such a hard time distinguishing him from the author. I don't know if I can read anything else by him. I'm sort of lost in the disgust right now. I'm not saying it's right. That's the whole point of a rant, right? Just let it flow, man.

Was David supposed to be redeemed? Did making him a scholar, a *thinker*, let him off? Because he cared for his daughter as he thought a father should—is this supposed to make him a worthy person? Because he could see what he did---clearly---because he could dissect it---were we just supposed to say 'Oh, it's okay, he knows where his evil lies... no biggie.'

Fuck, no.

He is swarmy. He deserved everything he got. He is superficial and cares only about his legacy. He is lofty enough to believe himself to be Byronesque (don't EVEN get me started.) Where does he get off thinking he's doing these women a favor? He praises his daughter for being a strong woman in S. Africa, yet his first description is as follows:

"For a moment he does not recognize here. A year has passed and she has put on weight. Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the best word) ample."

Then he goes on to call her 'sturdy'—'A *solid woman, embedded in her new life.*' Does that sound like he's praising? Sounds like a judgment to me. And not a flattering one. And then there's 'poor Bev Shaw' and even his downfall, his own Teresa: *"Her name is Melanie Isaacs, from his Romantics course. Not the best student but not the worst either: clever enough, but unengaged."*

Man, can he dole out the compliments.

And the whole issue of race relations? How dare he think he could pass judgment on how people like Petrus

presented themselves. How dare he take offense at Petrus's sense of what is right and wrong when he's throwing around his own 'lofty' assessments of women. Get over yourself, already.

I think that his 'disgrace' is just a cop out. I don't believe for one minute that he actually felt he did any wrong. He's spineless and deserves everything he got and much much more.

Because the writing is well done, *just* because of that, actually. I'll give it 3 stars... I know, I know, I should step back, appreciate the insight and all.

Screw that.

I've seen too many real life examples of this twat. He can go to Hell.

IMO.

Candi says

I finished this book a little over a week ago and for the first time I couldn't decide how to rate a book, much less write a review about it. So here I am still mulling it over, reading through my notes and trying to type some sort of articulate thoughts into my laptop. I don't really think I 'liked' **Disgrace**. I respected the writing; it made me think ... a lot. I had trouble finding any beauty in it; and I think that is where the problem lies with this book for me. If a book touches me emotionally, or if I learn something by reading it, then I can truly say I loved it. However, the only real emotion I felt was anger if anything else. I didn't really learn much – except that unfortunately maybe I am correct in that life can be really crummy at times and people sometimes unpleasant or in some cases downright despicable. How does one get into a state of disgrace and is it possible to move back into a state of grace afterwards? Perhaps.

Professor David Lurie is a man I disliked right from the start. "... a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it." Okay, there's that. And then there is the fact that he has an affair with one of his students, a young woman that could be his own daughter, who is in fact younger than his daughter, Lucy. This is where I had some trouble – raising my own daughter that is still school-age and under the influence of her own teachers and others that have positions of 'power' over her – this perhaps makes me a poor audience for this book! When David is faced with harassment charges, he will fall into a state of disgrace. But what exactly does disgrace mean to David? He has no regrets for what he has done. He says to Lucy, "*One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts.*" Disgrace to him is not loss of his job, loss of respect, or loss of face. Rather for him it is the process of aging, losing that magnetism that attracts others, even perhaps not leaving behind a legacy for which he can be proud. When David leaves Cape Town to stay with Lucy in Salem in the Eastern Cape of post-apartheid South Africa, he will have time to ponder the state of disgrace and all of its inherent meanings. Lucy and David do not see eye to eye, but I have to give David some credit for trying to understand his daughter and the life she has made for herself on her farm and with the animals under her care. When violence erupts and becomes personal, David is placed in a position that prompts even further self-reflection.

Much of this book is uncomfortable and harsh. There may be triggers for those that are distressed by cruelty to both animals and people, so I want to note that warning here. Coetzee did manage to make me side with David and pull for him partway through the book. I couldn't really understand Lucy – I felt sympathy for her but her actions troubled me and left me feeling a bit hopeless. I'm not thoroughly convinced that David will transform, but I can envision the opportunity; I will continue to hope for that state of grace. As far as a rating, well I've finally settled on 3.5. The book is extremely well-written; no doubt about that. However, based on my own personal reaction to the book, I have to rate accordingly. I wouldn't turn anyone away from this book (with the exception of the possible triggers noted above), but note that negative emotions got the best (or should I say worst) of me this time around.

Perry says

Transcendent and Transformative

"On trial for his way of life. For unnatural acts: for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*. If the old men hog the young women, what will be the future of the species? ... Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species."

I am wonderstruck by this 220-page novel, the 1999 Booker Prize winner. It's my first read of Coetzee. In sharp, precise prose, this transcendent novel traverses through about 8-9 months in the life of a twice-divorced, 52-year-old communications / poetry professor at a Cape Town university, who is dismissed from his post by admitted allegations of sexual relations with a 20-year-old female student (and covering for her missing a test and classes). The story is about so much more than the firing/resigning though, as the professor flees to his grown daughter's home and plot of land in east South Africa. It resonates on issues of the stages and value of life, the relationships between genders and generations, the animosity between races in South Africa in the 1990s, an interracial rape borne of hatred, the connection between humans and dogs, and, especially, the relation of a father to his daughter, as well as, of course, *disgrace*.

I rarely find a novel transformative, as I did with Disgrace. I highly recommend this novel to anyone who hasn't read it.

"In a sudden and soundless eruption, as if he has fallen into a waking dream, a stream of images pours down, images of women he has known on two continents, some from so far away in time that he barely recognizes them. Like leaves blown on the wind pell-mell, they pass before him. ... He holds his breath, willing the vision to continue.

What has happened to them, all those women, all those lives? Are there moments when they too, or some of them, are plunged without warning into the ocean of memory?...

...by each of them he was enriched ... even the least of them, even the failures. Like a flower blooming in his breast, his heart floods with thankfulness."

Elyse says

Update: \$1.99 Kindle special today for those who can handle reading this book the writing - and story gets inside you and doesn't leave quickly.

"Disgrace" is a perfect title.

David Laurie, professor, father, divorced, (twice married), jobless after and inappropriate affair, temporary farmworker, is a 'disgrace'.

David dips into a downfall transgression with himself and his daughter, Lucy.

Racial tensions run high....violence is on the rise....brutal.....in South Africa. (and this was post apartheid).

.....

It was easier for me to understand the "disgrace-of-David"than it was for me to understand Lucy's train of thought after the horrific things that happened to her.

Step into Africa with J.M. Coetzee.....complex, controversial, personal & political.....

Choices to cringe overyet compassion is circulating in our thoughts.

Powerful --- winner of the 1999 Booker Prize

*note.... readers who are extremely sensitive to animals abuse, may not want to read this --- or skip over parts.

Dolors says

Brace yourself to meet Professor David Lurie, banished son of the Romantic Poets, he roves and loves, spreading his unfertile seed unapologetically.

Byronic in his burning desire to possess female bodies, he doesn't crave for their souls, it is the release of the flesh, the ecstasy of the unloved that he is after.

Fifty-two year old David seeks only his own pleasure and succumbs to his instincts as the true womanizer he is, or as he calls himself *a lover of women*, paying homage to *Wordsworth* in nurturing his true nature, embracing its mystery, arising as the dutiful *Don Juan*.

David feels satisfied combining this quiet life of debauchery with his comfortable post as a teacher at Cape Town University, but when his old age starts pressing on him, casting a shadow to his virile charms, he seeks for rejuvenation in lusting over one of his young students. Taking advantage of his position and blinded by his heated obsession, he recklessly pursues the young girl until she yields to his unrelenting demands.

When the affair is brought to light, David rejects all kind of moral compromise and, adopting a pose built on vanity and self-righteousness, he self-expels himself from the University.

"I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself", he unflinchingly says to his daughter Lucy, whom he visits in her faraway farm until the scandal in Cape Town subsides.

A despicable character, indeed.

Or isn't it?

This is the real beginning of David Lurie's story. The starting point of a transcendental journey, which will change, not Lurie's nature but the way he understands life, death and history.

For his lesbian daughter Lucy is everything he is not, a sturdy countrywoman who runs a farm and a kennel in a foreign land, an idealist with a not yet fired gun for protection, a forgiving soul who takes him in, without judging or questioning.

David will discover an unknown South Africa in Lucy's rural spot, a place where his erudition and cynicism are worthless, a terrible place where a new order is being consolidated amidst brutish racial conflict, a territory whose implacable rules transcend what's merely human. Lucy will pay a dear price for *the sake of history*, only to become David's scapegoat, leaving no path for redemption.

Coetzee intertwines subjects such as the suffering and the dignity of animals with the mute and inescapable violence of his homeland, presenting challenging questions to the reader. What kind of mercy can animals expect from human beings who kill each other because of their race, their gender, or simply for random pleasure? How is it possible for people to achieve mutual respect if they can't treat animals that feed them with the dignity they deserve?

The suffering of animals, the suffering of human beings: **a sublime game of two-way mirrors.**

Coetzee's mirrors, capable of deforming his characters until the reader can see them for what they really are, reflect, from a myriad of kaleidoscopic angles, the central idea of the novel: the concept of *Disgrace*.

David Lurie, the cult seducer, *disgraced* in his old age and remorse.

His daughter Lucy, the white independent woman, *disgraced* in losing her status in a world where racial conflict has turned over the social order through injustice and cruelty. Humiliation and shame become Lucy's new home in penance for the burden of history.

South Africa, a wealthy country and the future of Africa, *disgraced* with its harrowing violence and misery.

Coetzee's final *coupe de grâce* relays in the way he weaves his dry, detached tone and unadorned narrative style with the lyrical closing chapters, in which David tries to recover his existential balance through the process of writing an opera based on the decaying affair of *Lord Byron* and his mistress *Teresa*. The voice of the dead poet mingles with David's, and a phantasmagorical chant roams dolefully throughout South Africa, accompanying his descend to the abyss.

This crude novel won't offer redeeming answers. But one can recover some dignity in resigned acceptance, as David does when his thoughts meddle with **Yeats's poem**:

"He sighs. The young in one another's arms heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country, this, for old men."

Old men, like Professor David Lurie, don't have it in their core to adjust to change, to adapt to a new imposed reality. Their only aspiration is that of a decent death. In finding someone merciful enough to give a lethal shot while they are soothed and caressed, only to be put in a plastic bag and later be consumed by the fire of an industrial oven. What's important is to make sure they don't suffer any more than what's strictly necessary, it doesn't matter whether they are animals or human beings, when their souls are finally sucked away and gone in a gush of dark smoke.

*"That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.*

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.*

*O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.*

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”*

William Butler Yeats

Sara says

When I closed on the last page of this book, I just sat in stunned silence and stared into space. I felt a little sick and lost, over affected by the sad truths it disclosed. I did not cry, but there were tears behind my eyes pricking through much of this read, and they were not tears for these characters as much as for humanity at large.

David Lurie is not a likeable person. He is short-sighted and self-centered and amazingly insensitive. So, how is it that I ended this book wishing him well? Wishing he would find the future better than the present? That Bev Shaw's assertion that "*One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet.*" will not be the truth for him always? There is a glimmer of hope growing at the end of this story that flickers like a candle flame. It might easily be blown out, but perhaps it will find a way to burn on into the future; perhaps it will save Lucy and David alike.

I have been being surprised a lot by the books I have been reading lately. I seem to have some preconceived idea about what they will entail and then find they are not that at all. This definitely falls into that category for me. I thought this was going to be about race relations in South Africa, and it is, but it is about so much more than that. It is about humanity and what unavoidable ugly choices we make, that we are not always

forced into, and how we relate to others and their choices which we find completely impossible to understand. Lucy tells David that he sees her as a minor play in the story of *his* life, but that she believes she is at the center of her own story. And that might be the most true statement Coetzee makes. We are all the center of our own stories and everyone else is a minor player. We cannot help that. Can anyone really imagine life goes on without them? Can you think about the day after you are dead and all the people you know still getting up for breakfast and going to work...but you are not there, you do not exist? It is the hardest thing to imagine in all the world.

Huge kudos to J. M. Coetzee for tackling the big questions and weaving them into a marvelous story that grips you from beginning to end. I heartily recommend this book. I have no doubt I will be thinking about it for a long, long time.

J says

? ?This book made me want to read *Twilight*. Yes, *Twilight*: perfectly perfect young people falling in love and never growing old. God, I hope that's what's in store for me there. I need an antidote to *Disgrace*.
? ?It affected me more than I thought it could, in ways I hadn't imagined possible. At page ten I would have readily given it five stars; the writing is superb. Halfway through I'd have given it four. Excellent, but slightly annoying. At the moment I finished it, shouting "WHAT?? What the hell kind of ending is THAT???" and wondering if I was going into shock, I'd have demanded stars back for ruining my life. A little distance was needed before I could consider it rationally again.

? ?The word disgrace is what struck me with nearly every page. Coetzee's writing is like that. Tight. There's no escaping what he wants you to see. It's not outrageously blatant, but it's none too subtle either. It's good. So good you might be tempted to revel in it. Do not. This is not for the faint-hearted. Run. Read something easy, something happy. Anything. If you stay Coetzee will turn that word, disgrace, in your mind a hundred different ways. I'm no stranger to the word. I have been a disgrace, been disgraced, disgraced myself and others. Seriously. I thought I was immune to it.

? ?The main character, David Lurie, is disgraced. Big deal. He disgraces a student. Yeah, I'm familiar with that. She'll live. He is a disgrace. Yes, clearly. David Lurie is entering the disgrace of growing old. That's where Coetzee has me.

? ?I can't find it in me to despise Lurie. He's a Lothario and possibly worse ("*She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself.*"), but I don't have to live with him. Then there's the sharp intelligence with too little empathy or emotion to make it truly sing. The bare objectiveness. He claims to have lost 'the lyrical' within himself, but it's doubtful he ever had it. He's a pretender. I'm amused by the fact that he, a professor of language, begins the affair that causes his public fall from grace by quoting Shakespeare's first sonnet. The words apply as much to himself as to anyone. But self-delusion is my own stock-in-trade. I can't condemn him for that. I don't love him either. I feel as dispassionate as Lurie himself. The disgrace of the dying though - the 'without grace' - that younger generations foist upon them. That they're made to feel as intruders in life, burdensome. This is where Coetzee hooks me. And he reels me in. Reels me in until I find myself suffocating in a world I want no part of. A world of shame, dishonor, humiliation, degradation. *Disgrace*. That of a man, a father, a daughter, a woman, an unborn child. Now make those plural. Add the disgraces of South Africa, of humanity, of animals. Yes, animals. I suspected Coetzee would sneak in a little commentary on that. He has a reputation. I did not expect to be so affected by it. I, a confirmed carnivore, did not expect to lie awake at night considering vegetarianism. Coetzee brings that passionate quote at the beginning of this paragraph back to hit me square in the face near the end though and - once again - *Disgrace*.

? ?So five stars, but would I recommend it? I'm still not sure. Read it if you dare. Coetzee is brilliant.

Bill Kerwin says

This short novel, written in spare, economical prose, tells the story of a not particularly likable middle-aged Capetown college instructor who falls into "disgrace" because of an affair with a student and is soon reduced to living with his daughter in the bush and working as a euthanizer at the local animal shelter. A violent incident occurs, and "disgrace" takes on another meaning.

The novel is both merciless and compassionate (not an easy combination to achieve), and is also incisive in its portrayal of the changing world of South Africa.

Steve says

It's a little-known fact (where "fact" is understood in the contemporary, alternative sense) that the title of this book was originally an acronym that Coetzee used as a guide for writing it:

Dishonor-Inducing Sex & Glaring Racial Antipathy Corroding Emotions

David Lurie, a white South African professor in his fifties, had taught communications and poetry in Cape Town. An ill-advised affair with a student spoiled all that. David sought refuge with his daughter Lucy who experienced some conflicts of her own living in the country's interior. With its setting in post-apartheid South Africa, a race angle was virtually inevitable. I have to say, the emotions packed a real punch, including some you don't see coming. As far as I know, Disney had no role in producing the movie version of this raw and hard-edged book. Despite the lack of uplift, I did appreciate the writing and the plausibility of the angst. Evidently, the Booker committee did, too, since they gave this one their fiction prize in 1999.

This has been another entry in the KISS series -- **Keep It Short, Steve**. Note that "Steve" itself is an acronym:

Severely Testing Every Visitor's Equanimity

N W James says

ummm...no. I'm afraid for me, this book suffers from what I call the Booker disease. I've read very few books that won the Man Booker prize that I've enjoyed.

-----SPOILERS AHOY AHOY-----

I looked through the GoodReads comments concerning this book and saw a lot of positive feedback. But not one of those comments talked about Coetzee's horrible dialogue. All of his characters speak like a phlebotomy textbook, and they are all just an obvious soundboard for the author's opinions. What's the point

of making an idea a piece of fiction if the author just uses all of the characters to spout off his views on rape, class, prostitution? There were no distinctions in tone or vocabulary between the characters. I think his points would have been better taken if he had just let the characters work out the issues themselves and not filled them with political rants. I felt nothing for David, or Lucy, or Bev - the only emotive element that haunted me was the killing of the dogs every week. The author sets his narrator on fire and the dogs are the only thing that got me.

For a better book about South Africa, try *The Power of One*. For a better discussion of the effects of rape try *Bastard Out of Carolina* or *The Color Purple*. For a less heavy handed discussion of class and morality, try *The Human Stain* or *On Beauty*.

Fernando says

Durante aquella época de mi febril admiración por Fiódor Dostoievski, unos años atrás, admiración que cuya llama no se apaga, tuve la oportunidad de leer el libro "El maestro de Petersburgo", de J.M. Coetzee y ver en la tapa que había sido premiado con el premio Nobel en 2003 auguraba una interesante lectura.

Me sorprendió en el acto y gratamente la manera en que se mete en la piel del genial escritor ruso, en una novela atrapante donde Dostoievski, luego de años de exilio vuelve su querido San Petersburgo para averiguar que sucedió con Pável, su hijo fallecido.

Coetzee crea una ficción en la que nos narra cómo el la miseria y la pobreza petersburguesa de las clases más baja con la misma maestría que el viejo Fiódor. Ese libro me encantó y lo releeré algún día.

Ahora bien, mucho tiempo después, decido encarar la lectura de "Desgracia", al que siempre veía en las estanterías de las librerías y que de algún modo me llamaba con su tapa tan especial, la de ese perro flaco mirando hacia un camino de tierra. Informándome del resumen de la contratapa, podría percibir una historia fuerte y así fue.

Realmente, la prosa de Coetzee es profundamente convincente, sin retruécanos ni rodeos y va al hueso. Es directo, visceral por momentos y no le da miedo meterse con temas escabrosos, fuertes y de apabullante actualidad como lo son el abuso de menores, el acoso sexual, o la violación.

Es que Coetzee pinta una cruda realidad que abofetea al lector sin aviso.

Mientras uno lee el principio del libro, cuando David Lurie sacía sus necesidades con Soraya, la prostituta que frecuenta hasta que decide ir a visitar a su hija Lucy, no espera que la historia gire hacia una dirección inesperada a partir de un suceso puntual que sucede en la granja de Lucy y a partir de esto la acción se desarrollará sin pausa y luego de lo sucedido comenzarán a aflorar las miserias de los personajes, las culpas y las peleas.

Es que David y Lucy congenian poco. Siendo un padre ausente, todo lo que sucede entre ellos a partir de su llegada a la granja se torna forzado y complejo.

Durante todo el libro se narra todo lo que le sucede a David, este profesor devenido en ayudante de una veterinaria que sacrifica perros, pero que en realidad nunca sabe que hacer con su vida. Ha fracasado en dos matrimonios y a los cincuenta y dos años su vida naufraga entre el hastío y la indecisión.

Para mí el libro se divide en tres partes bien claras: en primer lugar, todo el asunto del affaire con su alumna Melanie Isaacs, un tema que lo salpica de lleno y que lo perseguirá hasta el final, en segundo termino el episodio violento en la granja de su hija Lucy, que no voy a contar para no generar spoiler y en su devaneo existencial final, su vuelta a su ciudad, mucho peor de como se fue y de sus inciertos planteos de cara al futuro, especialmente respecto de sus intentos de terminar una ópera que está escribiendo sobre Lord Byron, "Byron en Italia".

"Desgracia" es una historia fuerte, sin tapujos que el lector no puede esquivar, puesto que se le viene encima de golpe. Narrada por Coetzee con aplomo, sin pausas y como aclaré antes con mucha convicción.

Ese es el término que define a "Desgracia": es una historia convincente, con un acercamiento psicológico de los principales personajes muy logrado. Nuevamente ha sido de sumo placer para mí leer a Coetzee. *"Todo esto no ha sido otra cosa que una desgracia, una verdadera desgracia"*, dice su ex esposa Rosalind. Y sí, David. Deberías haber sabido que todo terminaría así.

Garima says

It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat.

At the beginning, it appears pretty easy:

- To hate David Lurie.
- To take Coetzee's writing for granted.
- To assume that everything would fall in its right or may be wrong place.
- To anticipate a letdown feeling by just another Booker prize novel.
- To learn the same old lessons we have confronted since the original sin was committed.
- To read another long-winded definition of *Disgrace*.

But talent rarely hails from Planet Obvious and Coetzee, a talented writer he is, knows very well what it takes to write a good book. *Disgrace* left me pleasantly surprised and severely shocked. Surprised at the simplicity of narrative which resulted in a powerful fiction and shocked at the impact it had on my psyche. David Lurie, an aging Professor at a University in Cape Town, SA, who is best friends with *Eros* is getting *reckless* with a young girl student of his. I rolled my eyes after reading this because more notes on a trite scandal was something I didn't want to read about but I gave my snobbery a break. The pace of the book helped and quickly we're introduced to David's daughter, Lucy. She has turned into a perfect country girl with no inclination towards dressing up or looking attractive and would rather tend her farm and take a walk with her dogs. At this point begins a surge of impressive writing and one can say that Coetzee is home. He knows his South Africa well, he knows the plight of its citizens and above all he knows how to put across various points by using myriad symbolisms and allegories to tell the story of a big, unfortunate world in a small, splendid novel.

Disgrace knocked at Lurie's door at an age when conventionally one look forward to a calm life without any burden of expectations but if we ever try to chart out the blueprint of our future then the joke is on us. Lurie wasn't prudent to say the least but to come face to face with his immediate past in a brutal fashion is something he didn't prepare himself for and neither did the readers. Coetzee slowly takes off the layers after layers and tells us that:

- Beauty is indeed only skin deep.
- It's not what it looks like.
- God works in mysterious ways.
- Welcome to The Karma Café. There are no menus. You will get served what you deserve.

'How humiliating,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.'

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.'

Lurie also got what he deserved. But was it fair? What he did? What her daughter did? Whatever they had to experience? From one point it was completely unfair but the history of Africa is an example of unfairness and to live there, to find a place one can call home even if the price to pay is through disgrace, acceptance of fate and be at peace with whatever we are left with to move on with our lives is something one can't deny no matter how much it infuriates us. If at times the characters seems a bit distant then it's solely because we would never want to be in their shoes and experiencing this feeling, the pathos this book is able to create is something which makes it a great read.

Brina says

I read *Disgrace* by Nobel Laureate J M Coetzee with a few friends in the group reading for pleasure. A winner of the Man Booker Prize, *Disgrace* also fulfills the Nobel Laureate square on my classics bingo card. All of Coetzee's novels have received multiple awards or prizes, and *Disgrace* is the first of his novels that I have read. Although short in length, this introduction reveals to me the brilliance of Coetzee's writing.

David Lurie is a fifty two year old professor of communications at Cape Town Technical University. Having been divorced twice and struggling to get inspired by his courses, Lurie engages in one affair after another with either prostitutes or women passing through town. Lurie's last affair left a bad taste in his mouth, and for the first time he decided to sleep with a student. Although this is hardly unheard of, Lurie is caught and forced to resign his position. In the throes of both a scandal and midlife crisis, he moves in with his grown daughter Lucy.

A child of the city, Lucy has decided to live in a rural farming community on the eastern cape. A young, determined woman of the younger generation, Lucy allows her father into her homestead but from the onset it is obvious that she would rather be left alone. The generation gap is evident as she calls her father by his first name and does not bestow any respect on him. Determined to do a better job as a parent as a middle aged man, Lurie feels the inherent need to parent Lucy at this trying time for both of them.

Coetzee's writing delves into what an affair and a rape is like for both the man and the woman, across lines of race and class. Set in post apartheid South Africa, it is evident that blacks are still struggling in their relations with whites and feel the need to turn the tables on them. Likewise, the younger generation that Lucy is a part of also does not see a need for white male protection. In striving to erase these lines, Coetzee writes in third person and refers to all characters, even in passing, by their first names. He treats all his persona with the same respect regardless of age, gender, or class, even the animals at the clinic where Lucy and later David work. As a result, as a reader, I am able to feel empathy for all of the characters, even the stubborn ones like Lucy and the disgraced David.

For an introduction to Coetzee, *Disgrace* is a poignant novel. After reading only women authors during women's history month, it was refreshing to read a novel written by a male author that shows empathy toward strong women characters. The writing is powerful and deserving of its praise. I am now inspired to read more of Coetzee in the future to see firsthand the work that merited him the Nobel Prize. Solid 4.5 stars.

Warwick says

David Lurie, 52, professor, seduces a student. 'Not rape,' we are told, 'not quite that, but undesired nevertheless.' The girl's name, Melanie, means *black*. The power dynamic between them, the disparity of authority, is foregrounded.

Later, Lurie's daughter is raped by intruders, and violently. She is white; her assailants – three of them – are black. We are in South Africa.

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David is forced out of his position at the university for his 'undesired' liaison. An investigating committee asks him to issue a statement of contrition and regret, but he refuses to do so on principle. He insists on accepting his due punishment. He insists on what he calls his 'freedom to remain silent'.

Later, David's daughter refuses to report her rape. She refuses to take medical precautions. She refuses to seek vengeance against one of the men when she sees him in the neighbourhood. She, too, insists on remaining silent. She, too, bases this on a moral principle.

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Apartheid was in force in South Africa from 1948 to 1991. This book, published in 1999, is set after apartheid has ended.

There are many animals in this book. The way people talk about animals sounds a lot like the way that white South Africans once talked openly about black South Africans. 'By all means let us be kind to them,' Lurie comments. 'But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, but different.'

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What is the moral of these correspondences (which I write down here only to order my thoughts, not to elucidate the book's point)? The answer is the novel, and it can't helpfully be further distilled. What makes *Disgrace* so impressive is precisely that it is no simple allegory, but rather a series of dynamics that echo and echo against each other in painful and confusing ways.

Lurie's employers talk primly about the undesirability of 'mixing power relations with sexual relations'. But Coetzee suggests that the two might be – if not quite synonymous, at least tightly bound together. He writes about sex in an extraordinary way: unsentimentally, even anti-sentimentally, to the point of misanthropy. Libido is described in terms of

complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat

and voice thicken and the soul hurl its longings to the skies. That is what [Lurie's regular prostitute] and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry.

Lurie's daughter, who is gay, addresses the link between sex and violence directly, in a monologue that is the more shocking for her tone of calm, dispassionate analysis:

'Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?'

Jesus. Coetzee's words hit like whiplash. And they are very carefully chosen, despite an expressed conviction in the novel that 'English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa'.

Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them.

This is a very grown-up book (it reminded me a lot of Max Frisch's *Homo Faber*). But it isn't a hopeless one – it expresses confusion, anger, and sometimes despair, but also a certain sense of searching that at least imagines a different future. Perhaps, as one of the characters thinks, it is necessary, in order to build something up, for everything to be first brought down to nothing. For that, you need disgrace. And Coetzee offers that to everyone in the book – and everyone reading it.

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## Sawsan says

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## Lizzy says

To begin with, let me make something clear: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* left me intellectually fulfilled and severely shocked. Fulfilled at the simplicity and beauty of its narrative which resulted in a powerful drama; shocked at the impact it had on my innermost self. This is not a book for the faint-hearted. If you lack faith in your fortitude, do not even start, read something easier. But that would be a pity, for you would be deprived of an experience that will only enrich your understanding of the world. If you stay, Coetzee will grant you a masterpiece. And there have been some moments of genuine awe in my reading experiences, but I can without any trace of doubt testify that reading Coetzee is always one of them.

*Disgrace* follows David Lurie's fall from grace, a professor of poetry and communications, that is unable to fit in a tormented post-apartheid South Africa. David clashes with the University's politically correct environment as well as with the land dispute barbarism in the country's interior, where his daughter lives.

With an immaculate prose, in which no word is wasted, the novel is a plunge into a society lacerated by poverty, criminality and a social conduct values deadlock. *Disgrace* is a work of art, rare nowadays: that that refuses simple explanations, which reinvents and enriches reality.

“But the truth, he knows, is otherwise. His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float towards his end. He sees it quite clearly, and it fills him with (the word will not go away) despair. The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment. You breathe it in, your limbs relax, you cease to care, even at the moment when the steel touches your throat.”

At 52, twice divorced, David is solitary, resigned, erudite and sarcastic. He does not care for the disinterest of his students show his poetry classes.

“He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing.”

He contemplates writing an opera on Lord Byron, but always postpones the project. He believes to have “*solved the problem of sex rather well*”: on Thursdays afternoons he visits a prostitute that could be his daughter, pays what he owes her and has the right to the oasis of one and half hours of his continuous and dreary mundane existence.

(view spoiler)

In what is to come, he will face a brutal reality, made of vengeance, banditry, submission. Brutality against which occidental culture is simply worthless: “*He speaks Italian, speaks French, but Italian and French are useless to him in Black Africa*”.

J.M. Coetzee builds in *Disgrace* flesh and blood characters and, through them, weaves relationships between classes, between men and women, between parents and children, black and white, between a long exploration history and a present of explosive resentments.



Situated in nobody's land, where civilization and barbarity mingle - a region well known by Brazilian readers, Coetzee slowly denudes realities and ultimately tells us that there are no just rewards, there are not even fairness.

"How humiliating, ' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.'

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but...

With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.'"

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## Ben says

This could have been the most uncomfortable I've ever felt while reading a novel. The issues and themes addressed are those that are immersed in the sensitive, pitch-black parts of my insides. And it didn't relent; not once did it get easier. It was painful to keep going, yet I was gripped and couldn't stop.

Mining through our darker spirits is not pleasurable. Looking at the world and its sickness, and feeling some of its constant, inherent pain is no easier. But when these merge together, a glorifying truth is present; one we train ourselves to avoid in order to make life easier. But to read *Disgrace* intently and honestly is to not have a choice in these matters, and the reward is a realness and truth found in very few novels. Your own moral inadequacies are dug up and looked at directly, as is your culture; your race; your generation; your values; your guilts; and your sense of justice. Your way of life gets *shaken*.

Yet the general state of all life, as a whole, is exposed. Because people are weak and corrupt, life for the individual wavers in many ways. But life itself, with all its beings -- put together with nature, the earth, and all it entails -- is solid and ongoing. Life is still. Life is indifferent. The meat of existence is unbending and immovable. And it goes on.....

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## Robin says

### **A savage, ruthless book.**

At the onset of this 1999 Booker winner, I thought I was reading the story of 52 year old Capetown romantics poetry professor David Lurie, who has an affair with a student over thirty years his junior. I was in awe of the storytelling, of how Coetzee was able to show much by saying little, about the two sides of that affair.

Lurie, a man who identifies as a Byron-esque lover, who has been twice divorced and who enjoys the services of prostitutes, isn't exactly likeable. Especially when he has the opportunity to save his career by simply issuing an apology, but doesn't, on principle. His hubris is cold and unwavering.

I thought the book would revolve around his fall from grace after being forced to resign from his position. I guess it is, in a small part, but the book really begins after taking what seems like a wild left turn into the remote countryside of South Africa, where Lurie's daughter Lucy lives. It's a whole other world - a world that buzzes with danger.

This 1990's post-Apartheid South Africa is a seething place, certainly unsafe for a white lesbian woman alone on a farm. A terrible attack occurs, fuelled by hatred.

So yes, it is a story about disgrace - but Coetzee casts his net far wider than an aging philanderer who abuses his position of power and loses face in the academic community. It is more about the disgrace of rape. The disgrace of misogyny. The disgraceful violence, resulting from Apartheid.

It also touches on the father/daughter relationship, generational gaps, and what one is prepared to lose for one's principles. It is about aging, loss of virility, and death. And I haven't even discussed the animals - those poor, poor dogs. All in 220 pages (what IS it with the powerful, short novels I've been reading this month?!).

I am disturbed by the brutality of life in this part of the world. I'm even more disturbed by how Lucy reacts to it. She refuses to leave the farm after the attack. Transformed into a walking dead, she is at the mercy of her attackers, becoming a peasant in the fields she once mastered. I wasn't a fan of David Lurie, womanizer, objectifier, general dick-head. But I found myself pleading along with him, begging his daughter to choose something else for her life. Instead, she loses herself, laying down in submission, much like a dog undergoing euthanasia.

I'm shattered by the way that Lucy lays down like a dead dog, whether it is in general terms as a woman in subjugation to the violence of men, or whether it is a political illustration of how white South Africans of this time laid down to take their punishment, a retribution for the sins of their fathers. Coetzee is merciless in his depictions, pointing an accusing finger. It's shocking, unacceptable. A complete DISGRACE.

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## **Orsodimondo says**

### **LE RAGIONI DELL'ALTRO, A MAD HEART**

Qual è la vera vergogna, chi la commette, chi dovrebbe provarla?

Devono vergognarsi anche le vittime?

La ragione non sta mai da una parte sola.

### **John Malkovic è il professore David Lurie, e Jessica Haines è sua figlia Lucy nel film di Steve Jacobs del 2008.**

La storia di David Lurie, professore di Poesia Romantica in una qualche università di Cape Town, con la sua studentessa è uno stupro? Il prof si è avvantaggiato della sua posizione e del suo carisma, ma ha davvero commesso violenza?

Una violenza pari a quella dei tre ragazzi di colore?

Eppure, anche loro sembrano avere giustificazioni: la segregazione razziale non si cancella con la spugna, la povertà esiste, la rabbia la violenza la voglia di vendetta prosperano in condizioni repressive e razziste, la miseria non è un punto di vista, uno dei tre ragazzi è perfino mentalmente disturbato: basta questo a spiegare, ad assolverli?

Il professore appare fastidiosamente altezzoso e arrogante, però sa restare accanto alla figlia che sembra aver fatto una scelta molto irragionevole e dalle conseguenze tutt'altro che semplici: quest'uomo è davvero così superbo e borioso come i suoi colleghi lo dipingono e percepiscono?

David Lurie è incapace di difendere la figlia, è debole e vigliacco come anche la figlia Lucy sembra pensare, oppure la violenza che subisce, il tentativo di dargli fuoco, spiega il suo non intervento?

I tre stupratori uccidono anche i cani in gabbia. I neri vedevano nei cani il simbolo del potere bianco, della repressione che dovevano subire.

Basta a motivare l'odiosa gratuita carneficina?

Possiamo spiegare questo magnifico romanzo di Coetzee come una parabola del Sudafrica post-apartheid?

Coetzee non è uno scrittore per chi ama i punti fermi più dei punti interrogativi, per chi preferisce le risposte alle domande: senza pregiudizio, scrivendo tre parole e cancellandone quattro, scopre le responsabilità di ciascun personaggio, rovescia ogni violenza e ogni vergogna.

Per capire le ragioni dell'altro bisogna dimenticare, mettere da parte almeno per un poco le proprie - solo così potremo concederci di arrivare al giudizio.

Ma a quel punto, ci renderemo conto dell'inutilità del giudizio.

Ci renderemo conto di essere abbandonati al nostro destino.

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## She-Who-Reads says

I literally just finished this book a few minutes ago, so I have not by any means worked through all of my reactions to it yet. It is written in a very spare, emotionally distanced style, even though it deals with very emotional topics. It is a page-turner, an absorbing, fast read that keeps you anxious to find out what happens next -- but that seems almost incidental, besides the point. I thoroughly disliked the main character, David Lurie -- he is unbelievably arrogant and chauvinistic -- but that seemed less and less important as the novel went on, and totally irrelevant by the end. In fact, I don't think there is a single likable character anywhere in this book, not even Bev Shaw (she is admirable, I think, but not likable). But these characters and their lives have so much to say to the reader that their *likability* just doesn't even enter into it.

This is an extremely complex book, with a lot going on -- I haven't even begun to unpack it all. At its core, it's about race, specifically about race relations in modern-day South Africa. But it also has a lot to do with gender politics and with animal rights (or, if not animal rights exactly, the treatment animals receive at the hands of human beings). Lucy, David's daughter, becomes the focal point for most of these issues, yet she, as

a character, would eschew the whole notion of "issues". She doesn't deal in abstractions, only in the concrete necessities of daily life. She is -- all of these characters are -- hard to wrap your head around, hard to understand their motivations. Honestly, Lucy disturbed me even more than David disturbed me. David is an arrogant jackass who constantly romanticizes everything around him. Lucy, however, is a victim, a voluntary martyr. It is the role she has adopted for herself, the price she has decided she has to pay for being a white woman living in the South African countryside. She is powerless and oppressed -- not by other people, not by the society she lives in, but by herself. She may be trying to live a good life and be a good person, but I cannot imagine that *anything* good could possibly come out of the stance she chooses to take. She takes self-loathing to new and extreme levels, in my opinion.

So what is the disgrace that the title references? David's disgrace at the beginning of the book, being caught in an affair with a student? The disgrace Lucy feels from the rape? South Africa's disgraceful history of apartheid? The disgraceful behavior of the rapists and of Petrus, who is protecting them and may possibly have instigated the whole incident in the first place? Lucy's lack of self-respect? Her father's lack of empathy and connection with other human beings? Some other meaning I haven't considered yet? All of the above?

I don't know. But I know I will be thinking about this little novel for a long time to come. Haunting is, I think, the right word for it.

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