

# Books

## Small Talk

### Amity Gaige

**Amity Gaige is the author of three novels, *O My Darling* (2005), *The Folded World* (2007) and *Schroder* (2013). She is married with two children and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she is visiting writer at Amherst College.**

**Who is your perfect reader?**  
Anyone who had an unhappy childhood.

**What is the last thing you read that made you laugh out loud?**  
A witty email from an older gentleman asking for a date.

**Which books are on your bedside table?**  
Two books I've never read and should have by now: *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* by Vladimir Nabokov. And then a literary biography of Freya Stark *Passionate Nomad* by Jane Fletcher Geniesse, and John Banville's *The Sea*, a brilliant novel.

**Which book changed your life and why?**  
Alan Watts' *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. I read it soon before my marriage. I was awash with doubt and fear and the book said something like, "Doubt and fear are part of the texture of life and if you try to get rid of them you'll only be half-alive".

**What is your daily writing routine?**  
I just had a baby, so the words "daily writing routine" fill me with nostalgia. But before now, with just my one son, I would get him settled somewhere, and go to a library with a cup of coffee and maybe a doughnut.

**What do you snack on while you write?**  
Junk. Chocolate. Trail mix, if I'm in a healthy mood. Expensive pastries if I'm flush.

**Who are your literary influences?**  
John Updike, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Nabokov, Edward Albee.

**Who would you like to be stuck in a lift with?**  
Hugh Jackman. He

could sing to me, and he'd be strong enough to climb out and get help.

**When were you happiest?**  
When I first met my husband, my senior year of college, and for the half-dozen irremettable years after that.

**How do you relax?**  
White wine or Grey Goose on the rocks, cooking a leisurely meal, or holding my contented baby.

**What is the best piece of advice a parent gave you?**  
"When in doubt, don't."

**What would you change about yourself?**  
My habit of going over my day in the middle of the night and evaluating my actions and words.

**What book do you wish you'd written and why?**  
*To the Lighthouse*, which I feel to be the most beautiful novel in English. Does it sound odd to say that I feel Woolf was writing about humans as if she were God? Hearing all, feeling all, knowing all, with a kind of original compassion.

**Where is your favourite place in the world?**  
Tulum, Mexico.

**What novel would you give a child to introduce them to literature?**  
I loved Madeleine L'Engle as a child – *A Wrinkle in Time*.

**What does it mean to be a writer?**  
I think a writer is a describer. She describes society and human nature as she sees it. She has to be both typical of that society and alone within it.

*Interview by Anna Metcalfe*

*'Schroder' by Amity Gaige is published by Faber*

# A modern mystery play

JM Coetzee's new novel works on the imagination in unexpected ways. By *Hedley Twidle*

A little bit of obscurity, said JM Coetzee before reading from his new work in Cape Town last year, never did anybody any harm. *The Childhood of Jesus* conjures a world where everyone is required to speak Spanish, where refugees from a past life arrive "washed clean of all memories" and are given the bare minimum to begin life in a city named Novilla.

David, a young boy, and Simón, a *viejo*, are two of these arrivals. During the sea crossing, the boy has lost the letter round his neck that explains his origins and who his parents are. Simón becomes his guardian, working at the docks as a stevedore, hauling grain to support them. He convinces a woman, Inés, that David is her son, and persuades her to raise him, while he still plays the role of godfather.

This arrival of an unexpected child is the most obvious link one can make to the gospels, something the rather heavy-handed title seems to demand. In one sense, the book is a secular re-imagining of the Christian myth, the kind of thought experiment that others have tried. How would a historical individual such as Jesus be received in a different time and place? Would he be recognised as the prophet of a new social order, or (as the authorities recommend in this case) be sent to a school for children with special needs and taught how to be a docile subject?

This, though, is a crude summary of a wispy, shape-shifting book, for there are other worlds at play. The name Novilla captures the mixture of newness and nowhere that resides in literary utopias from Thomas More onwards. And as in More's commonwealth, we are left uncertain about whether this is a brave new world or else a worryingly centralised and even sinister dictatorship of the people.

All this is overlaid by a serene imperturbability that seems almost



### The Childhood of Jesus

by JM Coetzee  
Harvill Secker £16.99  
288 pages

Buddhist. Citizens of Novilla are urged to forget previous lives and attachments; their lack of interest in sex frustrates the ageing Simón. When he attends free evening classes at an unnamed Institute (which serves tasteless food), one of the earnest young philosophers explains to him that life drawing is always popular because people want to learn about the body: "He searches for the irony, but there is none, as there is no salt."

Obscurity has always drawn Coetzee as a writer. Yet since the onset of what his biographer JC Kannemeyer calls "the Australian novels" (written since his move from South Africa), a different, more diffuse kind of obscurity has infiltrated the forms and workings of Coetzee's books – obscurantism, perhaps. The prose has slackened and become puzzling in its operations, to this reviewer at least. Much of it is taken up with meandering and mock-serious meditations about ageing writers. In works such as *Slow Man* (2005) or *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), meaning is being made, one senses, or a wry joke being perpetrated at some obscure remove. But quite what its consequences are, and why the reader should care, is sometimes hard to tell.

Nonetheless, for the devotee Coetzee is an artist whom, like Bob Dylan or Keith Jarrett, one is willing to stick with through the wayward patches because when they were good, they were very, very good. And because their fundamental seriousness about

the creative process can never be doubted. In this sense there is something almost admirable in this kind of awkward late style: its lack of concern about being liked, or even understood.

Edward Saïd was intrigued by lateness not as maturity, harmony and resolution, but as "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction". But Coetzee's late style eludes both of these models. It is not one of magisterial syntheses or *ex cathedra* pronouncements (think Shakespeare's Prospero, or VS Naipaul). But it is also not the ferocious, libidinal raging against the dying of the light found in Beethoven, or Philip Roth. If anything, it is deliberately minor, sche-

### It unpicks the Christian myth and braids it together with folk tales, the early novel, Pythagorean mysticism

matic, lapidary. Perhaps a little bland, a little lacking in salt.

The equation of irony with saltiness recalls a line from Coetzee's previous work, *Summertime* (2009), when the narrator reflects on the irony of Pollsmoor prison being located in the rich suburbs of Cape Town: "But to the barbarians, as Zbigniew Herbert has pointed out, irony is simply like salt: you crunch it between your teeth and enjoy a momentary savour; when the savour is gone, the brute facts are still there. What does one do with the brute fact of Pollsmoor once the irony is used up?"

Is the world of this new book one in which all the irony has been used up? It is telling that *Don Quixote*, the ultimate primer in novelistic irony, is read

entirely literally by the young David.

The voice of the child is new in Coetzee's writing: it moves the story away from its bureaucratic beginnings and produces some of the most affecting parts of the book. The fundamental laws of logic and mathematics are viewed askance through David's questions. He cannot bring himself to believe that numbers are (as Simón maintains) "like a fleet of ships sailing in order, each knowing its place". To David they are like stars, and there are cracks between them, just as there are cracks in the pavement: "You don't understand! You don't remember anything! A number can fall out of the sky like Don Quixote when he fell down the crack."

Towards the end of the book, as David, Simón and Inés flee the authorities and pick up a hitchhiker who is also one of the "number mystics", there is a sense that disciples are being gathered, and that the real story is still to begin.

For those who like their Coetzee heavily seasoned, *The Childhood of Jesus* might seem rather dilute, faux-naïf and sometimes ponderous. But this book will continue to act, silently and unexpectedly, on the reader's imagination. It unpicks the Christian myth and braids it together with folk tales, the early novel, Pythagorean mysticism, Platonic philosophy, Buddhist epigrams, mathematics – powerful and poetic languages that underwrite our world. Future readers will be able to trace these borrowings more carefully but I emerged content to let this textual weave flicker on the horizon of awareness, all the while remaining a little unsure about a world that exists somewhere between the beguiling and the bland.

*Hedley Twidle lectures in English at the University of Cape Town and won the Bodley Head/FT essay prize for 'Getting Past Coetzee' (Vintage Digital)*

# Discomfort eating

A family is divided by food. By *Emma Jacobs*

Eddie Middlestein is killing herself. She is 59 years old, weighs more than 300lb and is in the grip of a deadly addiction. She can't stop gorging on liverwurst and rye bread, Big Macs and apple pies and potato chips.

As her health deteriorates, ("Legs, teeth, heart, blood. Everything about her was collapsing"), Eddie's husband Richard, father of her two grown-up children, leaves the home they share in a Chicago suburb. He can't take it any more.

The drama in Jami Attenberg's third novel, *The Middlesteins*, comes from the impact of Eddie's decay and Richard's departure on a suburban Jewish family. But food and its effect on the various family members is as important to the novel as any storyline.

The narrative is told by Eddie and through several other characters, including her daughter Robin, "the patron saint of former fat girls", who has replaced comfort food with alcohol. Meanwhile super-slim Rachelle, Eddie's daughter-in-law, uptight and self-



### The Middlesteins

by Jami Attenberg  
Serpent's Tail £11.99/Grand Central \$24.99, 288 pages

disciplined, is trying to control everyone else's appetite. She takes the joy out of her book group: "No pastries, no cheese, no crackers. Just crudités." She stalks Eddie, tracking every hot dog consumed and devises regimes for her to follow.

Why has Eddie become so huge? We learn that when she was a child – a "luscious" 62lb five-year-old – Eddie's parents indulged her appetite. Food was an expression of their affection: "made of love, and what made love".

Eddie's father, an immigrant from Ukraine, had almost starved on his jour-

ney to Chicago and was subsequently never able to feel full: "At meals, he ate and ate; he was carnal, primal, about food. He staked out territory, leaning forward on the table, one arm resting around his plate, the other dishing the food into his mouth, not stopping to chew or breathe. But he never gained a pound."

Eddie is not a caricature – Attenberg tells us that she used to be passionate, stayed up late campaigning, helped the homeless: "Once Eddie had been something close to an intellectual, and she took great joy in using her brain to its fullest." Instead, she worked in a law firm acting for property developers building shopping malls. "She had failed. Look at the rubble, the empty fast-food wrappers." Eddie is an unsympathetic protagonist – angry yet also curiously devoid of emotion.

Attenberg writes well, with economy and a welcome lack of sentimentality, but after finishing this novel one is left numb – rather like a binge eater feasting and gorging, only to feel empty when it's all gone.

# Wax lyrical

A 17th-century Florentine sculptor's search for the perfect woman. By *AN Wilson*

From the cold waters of the Arno, in the Florence of the 1690s, they have retrieved what Zummo very much wants: the perfect woman.

Zummo is a sculptor in wax. He makes effigies for churches, and small studies of criminal bodies in torment, and some foolish people esteem his exquisite works less highly than those crafted in stone or marble. He has escaped a terrifying childhood, beaten by a violent older brother who is also his love-rival (for the love of their mother, for the love of the local beauty in Sicily). Zummo, it seems, has been on a quest for the perfect woman ever since.

Rupert Thomson's ninth novel is a fiction that has been built, or moulded, around the few biographical details we have about a real Sicilian wax modeller, Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, some of whose work survives.

The author has fleshed out these fragments into a vivid fictional character. The result is Zummo, who has fetched up in decadent, dark-alleyed, stinking Flor-



### Secrecy

by Rupert Thomson  
Granta £14.99, 312 pages

ence. This is a city in which sexual licence is made yet more exciting by being forbidden, like the Vienna of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. In Florence: "Men found to have entered houses that were inhabited by unmarried women had been thrown into prison, and one youth had been sent to the galleys in Livorno, simply because he had stopped on the street and talked to a girl in an upstairs window." Such draconian laws do not deter our hero from active pursuit of Florentine love-lies, and the city's brothels do a brisk trade.

The Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III, has his own reason for banning adultery. His wife, long since decamped home to France, was scornfully unfaithful of him, and details of the Duke's miserable marriage unfold as the book progresses. Zummo's quest is not just for bodily gratification. Commissioned by the tormented old Grand Duke to sculpt "A kind of Eve... something of extraordinary beauty", he must find a body with the proportions of a goddess.

Thomson's narrative twists and turns like the darkened alleys of the Renaissance city that he clearly knows so intimately. This is a book that scores top marks for atmosphere, for the way in which the smell, and look, of pre-18th century Florence is conveyed, for the cinematic sense of menace (sinister sex-mad priests, vengeful courtiers and distrustful whores) that lurks round every street corner, every candle-lit arras, and every formal garden.

The plot is extraordinarily convoluted and there

were times when I had to re-read the previous 20 pages: we are being asked to carry in our heads all the memories of Zummo's unhappy past in Siracusa; the identity of a lot of very mysterious characters who live quite literally in the shadows and about whom very little is revealed; and the names and details of a number of sexually alluring women whose bodies are delineated more fully than their characters.

But however lost you feel, it is worth pressing on until the moment about halfway through when that unknown girl's body is hoisted out of the Arno. Now the mystery story really begins to unfold. The description of the method by which Zummo works for 30 hours to take a plaster cast of the corpse, and the depiction of the final object, with its own hair, and glass eyes from Murano, is chillingly brilliant and sinister: "I had paid attention to the most obscure and seemingly insignificant details, the particular hue of an eyelid or fingernail, the special pallor of her parts

that rarely saw the light. I had worried she might be too much of an aphrodisiac, and I had been right to worry."

For Zummo, it is quite difficult to distinguish between the living women after whom he lusts and the waxwork he has made. There are moments when you wonder whether the author, like Zummo himself, is not getting a bit carried away with his creation.

By the time you have finished, however, you will be full of admiration for the finished whole: a superb depiction of a pre-Enlightenment world, shimmering with superstition, repression, and incomprehension, and a plot that really is masterly. I know there's a Silver Dagger award for the best crime novels. Someone should invent the Silver Knot award for the densest puzzle of the year.

*AN Wilson is author of 'The Potter's Hand' (Atlantic)*

*Read Rupert Thomson on his inspiration for 'Secrecy' [www.ft.com/magazine](http://www.ft.com/magazine)*