

J.M. Coetzee & Arabella Kurtz. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*

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BOOK REVIEW

J.M. Coetzee & Arabella Kurtz. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*. London: Harvill Secker, 2015. Hardcover ISBN: 9781846558887. Paperback ISBN: 9781846658894. Ebook ISBN: 9781473512290.

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This book asks one of the biggest questions in narrative studies: What is the truth of the stories that we humans spend our lives telling about ourselves? That question then generates others. Who can evaluate this truth, and in what terms? How much truth of ourselves do we need to know? If I understand the authors, the point of a good life is specifically not to answer these questions, but rather to let them inform how one thinks about the stories we call our own--and what "being one's own" means is another question.

J. M. Coetzee is the 2003 Nobel Prize winner for literature, now living in Australia, but whose work is usually set in South Africa, where he grew up and lived much of his life. Arabella Kurtz is a British psychoanalytic psychotherapist, trained at the Tavistock Clinic in a tradition strongly influenced by Melanie Klein, who appears repeatedly in Kurtz's sections. The book ends with a brief glossary of common psychoanalytic terms; that inclusion may say more about the publisher's interests than the authors' goals. Those goals are broad. Each of the eleven chapters begins with Coetzee thinking out loud about issues of selves, fictions of the self, truth, and topics including memory and group membership. Kurtz seems to take her task to be providing a psychoanalytic gloss on the issues that Coetzee raises. Her responses can read like outtakes from a psychotherapy training course, albeit a very well-taught course. Coetzee then responds to her response, and she writes a final section, except in the last chapter where Coetzee gets the last word.

Readers never learn what relationship led Coetzee and Kurtz to engage in these exchanges, as the title calls them. Although the nature of dialogue is a frequent topic, the exchanges don't read as much of a dialogue. No relationship develops between the authors; their collaboration has a contingent tone. Differences about a topic will be almost established, and then the conversation veers elsewhere. The density with which I took notes was uneven. Especially in the later chapters, when the discussion turns to groups, I felt that neither author could figure out exactly what was at stake. The book has the quality of a psychoanalytic session: readers realize that what engages them says more about themselves than about what is on the page. In sum, readers who want an essay-like cohesiveness of argument will be frustrated. Those looking for flashes of inspired reflection on some of life's biggest questions will be fascinated.

I sought out this book hoping for guidance on the question that Coetzee poses in the opening lines: "What are the qualities of a good (a plausible, even a compelling) story?" (p. 1). Yet the inclusion of those parentheses deflects my interest, which is whether the quality of goodness can be understood only as matters of plausibility and coherence. My problem is how stories that are compelling to some people are not at all good to others. As Coetzee and Kurtz's exchanges develop, the limitation of the initial phrasing of the good-story question becomes apparent, although that issue becomes more a background concern than an explicit focus.

Coetzee's opening opposes narrative goodness as being "well-formed" with high drama and suspense versus a "neutral, objective, striving to tell a kind of truth that would meet the criteria of the courtroom" (p. 1). Much of their ensuing discussion shows that those qualities are mutually dependent, not opposed. Coetzee soon acknowledges that none of us is "free to make up" our life stories (p. 4), and Kurtz puts it well when she writes that a narrative that is "too self-serving ... will have a frailty, a brittleness, a tendency to come undone on its own terms" (p. 5). Any story of the self must be both well-enough formed and have sufficient objective truth—neither quality can stand alone. As the exchanges progress, different forms of truth don't exactly proliferate, but several are proposed: "poetic truth" (p. 7) and "emotional truth" (p. 9) are especially important.

Coetzee uses this question of narrative truth to introduce a fundamental objection to psychoanalysis and its imperative to a form of

truth-telling. That objection is worth quoting at length, because it puts narrative at the centre of culture:

But what if the true secret, the inadmissible secret, the secret about secrets, is that secrets can indeed be buried and we can indeed live happily ever after? What if this big secret is what the Oedipus-type story is trying to bury? In other words, what if our culture, perhaps even human culture in general, has created a form of narrative which is on the surface about the unburiability of secrets but under the surface seeks to bury the one secret it cannot countenance: that secrets can be buried, that the past can be obliterated, that justice does not reign? (p. 34)

No surprise, then, that the conversation turns to two key texts: *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky, 1866/2014) and *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850/2003). In the latter novel, Coetzee finds a partial refutation of the former. Coetzee understands Hester as a “secret ironist” who rejects the legitimacy of the law that sentences her and takes as much control of her life story as her circumstances allow. But in a move typical of these exchanges, he then undercuts at least one understanding of her heroism: “the idea that Hester’s story must be a good story simply because it is Hester’s, strikes me as highly questionable” (44). Here, my question of the moral basis of a good story is the core issue; specifically, what counts as authenticity in a personal narrative, and the limits of authenticity as a criterion of goodness.

At the end of the book, Coetzee summarizes his differences from Kurtz. The view he proposes impresses me as an exemplary summary of Erving Goffman’s (1959; see also Lemert & Branaman, 1997) understanding of selves and how their lives are social:

Your faith seems undimmed that we can learn to “be ourselves.” Would that it were so simple, I say to myself. To my mind, it would be enough if we can settle on fictions of ourselves which we can inhabit more or less comfortably, fictions that interact sans friction with the fictions of those around us. In fact, this would be my notion of a good society, even an ideal society: one in which, for each of us, our fiction (our fantasy) of ourselves goes unchallenged; and where some grand Leibnizian presiding force sees to it that all the billions of personal fictions interlock

seamlessly, so that none of us need stay awake at night wondering anxiously whether the world we inhabit is real. (p. 177)

If this book keeps you awake at night, whether you wonder about the telling of your own story or someone else's, at least your anxiousness about how to hear those stories will have the companionship of two fine interlocutors with whom to share that wonder.

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