This is the author’s radio script of this article.
In *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.M. Coetzee’s latest novel (his first book to be published by an Australian publisher, Text) an elderly, world-famous South African writer with the initials J.C. who has recently migrated to Australia has been asked by a German publisher to contribute to a book in which ‘six eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today’s world.’ (20) Before we know about the book, however, we have read four of these ‘strong opinions’, short essays on political philosophy, engaging, provocative and seductive. And depending upon how one chooses to read the book, we may also have met the writer and a young woman who interests him so much that he engages her to type his work without even knowing whether she can type.

*The Diary of a Bad Year* is a typesetter’s nightmare. Three sets of text run concurrently on each page. At the top of the page are the ‘opinions’ of J.C., on a range of subjects many of which will be familiar to Coetzee’s readers: ‘On Universities’, ‘On the Slaughter of Animals’, ‘On Dostoevsky’; and also on some that are more topical. There are blistering attacks on George W. Bush, and the Howard government is held up to some degree of scorn; there are chapters on suicide bombers and on Al Qaida. There will be many who will attribute these controversial opinions to Coetzee rather than his character J.C., of course: untangling the fact from the fiction is part of the challenge of a book like this, but there are many clues to help us make the distinction.

Underneath the essays, from page 1, runs J.C.’s first person narrative of his meeting and continuing relationship with Anya, a spectacularly attractive 29 year old of Philippine parentage, who lives upstairs in J.C.’s high-rise apartment block with a
possibly criminal investment consultant. From page 23, these two discourses are joined on the page by Anya’s own first person account.

This arrangement has the odd effect of making this book compulsively readable. You finish one essay, then you go back to the first narrative and follow it until it comes to a natural break, and then do the same for the second, by which time you’ve gone well past the beginning of the next essay and have to catch up. It isn’t until page 126 that all three texts finish together, to start again in Part 2 with the same kind of arrangement. There will be subtleties in the interplay of these three discourses which a first reading can’t quite catch. Is there, perhaps, a suggestion of a three-part fugue, quietly hinted at by the paean to J.S. Bach near the end of the book?

The plot, such as it is, concerns the relationships between this young woman, her boyfriend and the elderly writer, and the way they change each other’s points of view and overcome their initial prejudices. One could almost call it a love story, which is indeed a rare beast in the Coetzee catalogue. Certainly there is a distinctly more mellow feel to the book than much of his earlier work. This tendency has I think been noticeable in all his work since Disgrace, but Diary of a Bad Year has an unabashed atmosphere of warmth which is goes deeper than the comical wryness of Slow Man and is quite a surprising contrast to the bleakness we have come to expect from the Coetzee of novels like Life and Times of Michael K and Disgrace. One eminent Australian critic, an admirer of Coetzee, told me that he nearly threw Diary of a Bad Year at the wall in frustration. Nevertheless, I found it unexpectedly optimistic and a delight to read.