Youth continues J.M. Coetzee’s thinly veiled autobiography, which began in 1997 with Boyhood. Although these books are called novels, his main character shares not only the author’s age and background, but his name, John Coetzee.

One of the most striking things about Youth is the way it conveys this young man’s uncertainties not only about how to behave, but also what to feel. Despite the third person narration, which detaches the author from himself as subject and allows scope for gentle mockery, the book is written in the present tense, so the reader lives his experiences as they happen. At the beginning of the book, in 1959, John is nineteen, a university student in Cape Town, maintaining a precarious emotional and financial independence from his family. He waits vainly for the grand passion which will begin his life as a poet – ‘Through the blinding ecstasy of sex, said the poets, one is transported into brightness beyond compare, into the heart of silence; one becomes at one with the elemental forces of the universe. Though brightness beyond compare has eluded him thus far, he does not doubt for a moment that the poets are correct.’ (79) All that happens, however, is that he gets a girl pregnant, passively accepting her decision to have an abortion. His groping self-questioning is meticulously documented:

What is the difference between an abortion and a miscarriage and what in books is called losing a child? In books a woman who loses a child shuts herself off from the world and goes into mourning. Is Sarah still
due to enter a time of mourning? And what of him? Is he too going to mourn? How long does one mourn, if one mourns? Does the mourning come to an end, and is one the same after the mourning as before; or does one mourn forever? (36)

This kind of alienation from one’s emotions is perhaps a part of growing up for many intelligent people, but it is particularly marked in his case because of his determination to escape from his mother’s stifling love and what he regards as the abnormality of his family. In the early sixties he flees his family, and the growing tension and brutality of South Africa, following the well-worn path of so many young colonials to London, where he intends to start his career as a poet. But London proves to be ‘a great chastener.’ (113) He observes West Indians, wondering ‘what draws them from Jamaica and Trinidad to this heartless city where the cold seeps up from the very stones of the streets, where the hours of daylight are spent in drudgery and the evenings huddled over a gas fire in a hired room with peeling walls and sagging furniture? Surely they are not all here to find fame as poets.’ (104) Once again, Coetzee glances over his narrator’s shoulder at the reader with that little touch of mocking irony, exposing his younger self’s conceit and pretensions.

The structure of this novel is unusual. Near the end John develops the idea of writing a novel whose ‘horizon of knowledge’ is that of South Africa in the 1820s. Coetzee’s first novel, Dusklands, published in 1974, fulfils this aim. However, as the narrative ends he is working as a computer programmer, ‘killing time … afraid: afraid of writing, afraid of women … not prepared to fail’ in his attempts to write and to live. ‘Perhaps tomorrow he will be in the mood, have the courage.’ Meanwhile ‘he is not a poet, not a writer, not an artist.
He is a computer programmer, a twenty-four-year-old computer programmer in a world where there are no thirty-year-old computer programmers.’ The novel ends on a desperate, almost suicidal, note.

Not a political novel in any sense, this book deals with a personal response to the world that confronted a child of English-speaking Afrikaners in the South Africa of the post-war period. All his failures of courage and kindness are mercilessly exposed. He is not aware of racial problems in an abstract sense: he is afraid of the practical consequences of apartheid – he knows that he can expect no pity from the oppressed.

Strangely enough, in a novel whose main character believes that his natural element is misery, humour is never far away. The passages which take the form of a list of unanswerable questions to himself are often profoundly comic. One would like to feel that this young man, left in such a desolate state in 1964, will find a way to live and love and write. It is certainly open to Coetzee to continue the series – the ending does not give the usual sense of closure – but he can never be expected to fulfil expectations. We can only be sure that his work, always disturbing, always worth reading, will follow no agenda but his own.