

Does J.M Coetzee have a sense of humour? Ian Buruma, reviewing Coetzee’s memoir *Youth* (2002) in the *New York Review of Books*, claimed that there was nothing funny about his work: ‘The Afrikaner blood runs thickly in his English prose. And that blood contains a tendency toward dogmatism.’

Critics tend to take Coetzee very seriously and seem reluctant to see a funny side. His themes are dark, and his characters are often at the extremes of suffering, but I believe he would agree that the novel is a comic form, with little room for tragedy. Indeed *Slow Man*, his latest novel, is concerned, partly at least, with this very subject.

Paul Rayment is a fit sixty-year-old when he is hit by a car while cycling down Magill Road. His shattered right leg has to be amputated. Paul takes it badly. He retreats to his upstairs flat in North Adelaide to mope and avoid his friends. New people nevertheless enter his life. After a false start, he finds a nurse from whom he can accept care, and soon moves beyond acceptance to desire. Marijana is a Croatian from Munno Para, married with three children. Paul becomes wilfully embroiled in the family’s concerns and is gripped by a frenzy of generosity, paying school fees for her son and buying her daughter’s way out of a shoplifting charge. Paul is uncomfortably aware of the absurdity of an elderly cripple showering love gifts on his down-to-earth nurse, and he is worried about her husband’s response if he found out about his longings: would he ‘fly into one of those elemental Balkan rages that give birth to clan feuds and epic poems?’
Although he mocks himself, Paul is morbidly self-conscious and needs to lighten up. To help him, Coetzee brings into this so far realist novel a strange element. Elizabeth Costello, the Melbourne novelist who was the title character of his last novel, appears at Paul’s flat and starts interfering in his life. She knows a lot about him, though he has never met her before. She seems to embody the frustrations of an author trying to write about a character who will not ‘take off’ and make himself worth writing about. He, in turn, tries reading some of her books and finds them ‘unseemly’. ‘Why does she ask a question and then not give the answer?’ he asks testily. There are layers of irony here: Paul’s narrative is full of questions without answers, and so is Coetzee’s prose. And it is basically a comic device.

I would be the last to claim that Coetzee is not a deeply serious writer. Even when using postmodern devices like introducing Costello into Slow Man, he is not frivolous. His fiction is honest, searching, philosophical, and never dogmatic. Dogma is the enemy of fiction and Coetzee’s comic questioning undercuts any dogma his characters might be tempted to espouse.