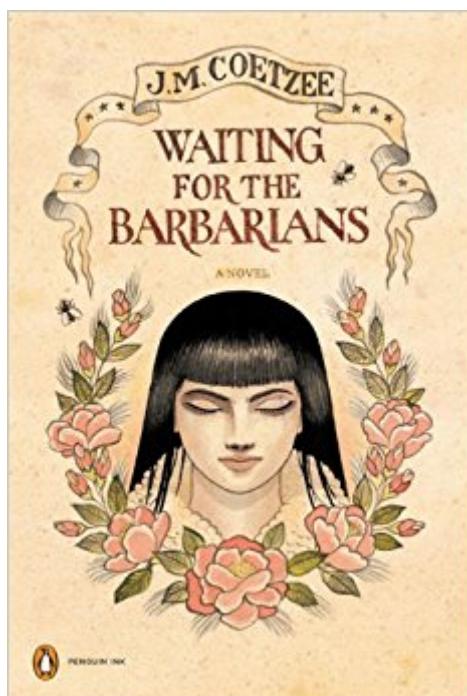


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# Waiting For The Barbarians: A Novel (Penguin Ink) (The Penguin Ink Series)



## **Synopsis**

A modern classic by Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee. His latest novel, The Schooldays of Jesus, is now available from Viking. Late Essays: 2006-2016 will be available January 2018. Waiting for the Barbarians centers on the crisis of the conscience of the Magistrate—a loyal servant of the Empire working in a tiny frontier town, doing his best to ignore an inevitable war with the "barbarians." After he witnesses the cruel and unjust treatment of prisoners of war, he reconsiders his role in the regime and carries out a quixotic act of rebellion. Mark Rylance (Wolf Hall, Bridge of Spies), Ciro Guerra, and producer Michael Fitzgerald are teaming up to bring J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians to the big screen.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"A real literary event" —Irving Howe, The New York Times Book Review (front-page review)"I have known few authors who can evoke such a wilderness in the heart of a man.... Mr. Coetzee knows the elusive terror of Kafka." —Bernard Levin, The Sunday Times (London)

For decades the Magistrate has run the affairs of a tiny frontier settlement, ignoring the impending war between the barbarians and the Empire, whose servant he is. But when the interrogation experts arrive, he is jolted into sympathy for the victims, and into a quixotic act of rebellion which lands him in prison.

The first person narrator is an old magistrate of a colony whose life changes after picking up a lantern one day to see what was going on and through subsequent incidents and circumstances, he becomes the examining/questioning voice over the human depravity as well as self examination. "But as for me, sustained by the toil of others, lacking civilized vices with which to fill my leisure, I pamper my melancholy and try to find in the vacuousness of the desert a special historical poignancy." to "..there was no way, once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again. the knot loops in upon itself; I cannot find the end." Through motifs of lantern, sun glasses and blindness, and the dream sequences, the author wakes up the awareness of human conscience, depravity, frailties, hypocrisies, and the horror of pointless and inconsequential pursuit, "the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" The protagonist is a rather antihero type, a real human, complex and ambivalent with conscience, lust, fear and doubts, often faltering and needy, but genuinely interested in knowledge and his mind and his (sub)consciousness active all the time. He is transformed beyond his "great indifference to annihilation"

Here Coetzee has written a fable that is not just timeless but also exists outside of time. Maybe this is a specious distinction, but I think the first descriptor is one assigned to books by their readers while the second is applied by the book's author. Purposely Coetzee withholds dates or details that might allow us to assign the events in the story to a particular time period. The characters remain, for the most part, nameless. The book's antagonists are known by their titles--Colonel Joll, Officer Mandel--representatives of an allegorical empire which itself remains nameless and could just as easily be Roman, British, Ottoman, even American. "Waiting for the Barbarians" is told from the viewpoint of an aging magistrate in a backwater territory of the empire at the edge of an inhospitable area of mountains and desert. The magistrate and his townspeople are aware that "barbarians" exist outside the walls of their town, but the barbarians are simply nomads who cause them no threat. Then the empire arrives, personified by Colonel Joll. The barbarians are made into devils who must be pushed back or subjugated. Joll's soldiers occupy the town and take what they desire, whether food or women, while Joll mounts a campaign against the barbarians. He rounds up a few prisoners and tortures them before setting out to find more. The magistrate is accused of treason after committing an act of kindness to one of the female barbarians and he too is tortured. Torture and occupation become the prime methods of the empire. Meanwhile the barbarians Joll pursues lead him deeper into the mountains. They never engage, and Joll's true enemy becomes the elements. Coetzee's book was written over thirty years ago, but the parallels to more recent events

in Iraq or Afghanistan are impossible to ignore. Of course one could also draw parallels to the British in colonial America, the Russians in Afghanistan, or Americans in Vietnam. The tactics of the native "barbarians" are, by necessity, largely the same: guerrilla warfare, ambushes, using the landscape to one's advantage. It is interesting that by the end of "Waiting for the Barbarians," Colonel Joll flees in defeat and the town returns to its previous state. Nothing aside from destruction and misery has been achieved. Like other Coetzee novels, this is a spare, poetic book, each word carefully chosen, which brings up the interesting question of the sex that occurs in it. The magistrate finds himself achieving a strange intimacy with the barbarian woman he helps. He also employs the services of a young prostitute and, at a later point, makes love to a middle-aged widow. There ensue some descriptions of the old man's waning sex drive, along with his speculations that he's pursuing these younger women as a way of reclaiming his youth. This motif of the old man-young woman dalliance has shown up in other Coetzee books, so maybe it's just a preoccupation of his, but maybe he's also making the comparison of male conquest on a personal scale with male conquest on an epic scale, i.e. the empire claiming new lands for itself. All in all, "Waiting for the Barbarians" is a beautiful if harrowing book. Like a fable, it is dreamlike, lacking the vivid and gritty details of Coetzee books like "Disgrace," but thematically it shares many of the same concerns of "Disgrace" while removing them from a particular historical context.

Coetzee spins an allegory of the maturation and dissolution of empire. It's our fault, and nobody's fault - the empire wants to survive, and will take all steps necessary to survive, but in that survival are the seeds of its destruction.

J. M. Coetzee's 1980 novel has perhaps become his most famous due to the strange allegorical quality of its story: its mostly nameless characters and setting lend themselves to application to almost any empire, from the British during the Boer Wars to the French in Northern Africa to the United States in the Middle East. (This work has particularly been used as a point of comparison for the US engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, so neatly does it seem to predict the infamous imperial justification for torture in fighting both these wars.) The story is told fairly simply by an official (called only "The Magistrate") in a frontier town of an unnamed empire; special forces from the imperial center arrive to conduct a border war with the "barbarians," who live beyond the desert. Despite his intentions, the Magistrate becomes emotionally involved with a barbarian woman who is captured, maimed, and blinded by the imperial forces; he becomes determined to make a perilous journey through the desert to return her to her people, and then returns to face the tortures and inquisitions

of the empire. Coetzee's gifts with language (and particularly with description) lend a hallucinatory quality to his prose, which has a kind of polished command unlike any other living writer of English. (It belies the sentimentality of the cover art for this new Penguin Ink edition.) No one else writing today seems to cover as much in such a tightly controlled space as Coetzee: his short novels are gifts for college professors who can unpack and unpack their meanings with our students.

This was a great book despite having read it a bunch of times, each through a different literary lens. Who are the barbarians? So the book is about waiting for the barbarians, for this threat to their existence, to their way of life but in the middle of it all is also a story of love, a strange love, but it is love. About acceptance, and about living with fear of the unknown and choosing to let that paralyze you or continue living, and letting others live.

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