Here for the first time in one volume is J.M. Coetzee’s majestic trilogy of fictionalised memoir, Boyhood, Youth and Summertime.

Scenes from Provincial Life opens in a small town in the South Africa of the 1940s. We meet a young boy who, at home, is ill at ease with his father and stifled by his mother’s unconditional love. At school he passes every test that is set for him, but he remains wary of his fellow pupils, especially the rough Afrikaners.

As a student of mathematics in Cape Town he readies himself to escape his homeland, travel to Europe and turn himself into an artist. Once in London, however, the reality is dispiriting: he toils as a computer programmer, inhabits a series of damp, dreary flats and is haunted by loneliness and boredom. He is a constitutional outsider. He fails to write.

Decades later, an English biographer researches a book about the late John Coetzee, particularly the period following his return to South Africa from America. Interviewees describe an awkward man still living with his father, a man who insists on performing dull manual labour. His family regard him with suspicion and he is dogged by rumours: that he crossed the authorities in America, that he writes poetry.

Scenes from Provincial Life is a heartbreaking and often very funny portrait of the artist by one of the world’s greatest writers.
J.M. Coetzee’s work includes Waiting for the Barbarians, Life and Times of Michael K, Boyhood, Youth, Disgrace, Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man and Diary of a Bad Year. He was the first author to win the Booker Prize twice, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003.

Praise for the trilogy

BOYHOOD

This life is described with such skill, such exactitude and such relentlessness that I found myself gasping for air . . . Coetzee has achieved something universal in his work . . . a fine book, probably the best description of a childhood I have ever read.

– The Times

YOUTH

A memorable picture of the harshness London can offer to incomers . . . Youth is a wonderful book: a Bildungsroman, or portrait of the artist as a young man, to rank with any in the canon.

– Evening Standard
Certainly, no writer I have encountered has captured so vividly the paralysing sense of deracination that seized many of us when we found ourselves cast up on a shore that proved far more alien and hostile than our fantasies and ambitions had led us to imagine.

– The Sydney Morning Herald

**SUMMERTIME**

This is the third instalment of a life so reserved, so repressed, so seething with polite rage and restrained despair that it could only be approached through a third-person voice it is wonderful stuff. But then, Coetzee is wonderful: edgy, black, remorselessly human, witty, and often outright funny.

– Irish Times

Here in Summertime, passion exceeds argument. Here for a moment she [the reviewer] answers as a reader not with her head but with her heart.

– Australian Literary Review

As the [fictional] biography unfolds, the picture that emerges is devastatingly honest, charming, at times funny, but always self-critical. The book is not too cool or too neat. It is a stunning achievement by a man at the height of his powers.

– The Courier-Mail

Summertime is an exhilarating read. Like being played with by a magnificent lion whose paws sometimes caress but at other times the muscle and the claw send you spinning. The sly joke is that this lion puts the idea into his text that he, the writer, is inconsequential. Here is a paradox: a man such as this can write words that touch readers at the deepest level.

– The Age

Summertime is both an elegant request that the sum of Coetzee’s existence as a public figure should be looked for only in his writing, and ample evidence, once again, why that request should be honoured.

– The Guardian

Rich offerings as an imaginatively distorted and distorting portrait of the artist as outsider.

– Times Literary Supplement

The writing is luminous, revealing intellectual and emotional subtlety of a very high order.

– The Sydney Morning Herald
Boyhood
They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road. The streets of the estate have tree-names but no trees yet. Their address is No. 12 Poplar Avenue. All the houses on the estate are new and identical. They are set in large plots of red clay earth where nothing grows, separated by wire fences. In each backyard stands a small block consisting of a room and a lavatory. Though they have no servant, they refer to these as ‘the servant’s room’ and ‘the servant’s lavatory’. They use the servant’s room to store things in: newspapers, empty bottles, a broken chair, an old coir mattress.

At the bottom of the yard they put up a poultry-run and install three hens, which are supposed to lay eggs for them. But the hens do not flourish. Rainwater, unable to seep away in the clay, stands in pools in the yard. The poultry-run turns into an evil-smelling morass. The hens develop gross swellings on their legs, like elephant-skin. Sickly and cross, they cease to lay. His mother consults her sister in Stellenbosch, who says they will return to laying only after the horny shells under their tongues have been cut out. So one after another his mother takes the hens between her knees, presses on their jowls till they open their beaks, and with the point of a paring-knife picks at their tongues. The hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging. He shudders and turns away. He thinks of his mother slapping stewing steak down on the kitchen counter and cutting it into cubes; he thinks of her bloody fingers.

The nearest shops are a mile away along a bleak eucalyptus-lined road. Trapped in this box of a house on the housing estate, there is nothing for his mother to do all day but sweep and tidy. Every time the wind
blows, a fine ochre clay-dust whirls in under the doors, seeps through
the cracks in the window frames, under the eaves, through the joints
of the ceiling. After a daylong storm the dust lies piled inches high
against the front wall.

They buy a vacuum cleaner. Every morning his mother trails the vacuum
cleaner from room to room, sucking up the dust into the roaring belly
on which a smiling red goblin leaps as if over a hurdle. A goblin: why?

He plays with the vacuum cleaner, tearing up paper and watching the
strips fly up the pipe like leaves in the wind. He holds the pipe over a
trail of ants, sucking them up to their death.

There are ants in Worcester, flies, plagues of fleas. Worcester is only
ninety miles from Cape Town, yet everything is worse here. He has a
ring of fleabites above his socks, and scabs where he has scratched.
Some nights he cannot sleep for the itching. He does not see why they
ever had to leave Cape Town.

His mother is restless too. I wish I had a horse, she says. Then at least
I could go riding in the veld. A horse! says his father: Do you want to
be Lady Godiva?

She does not buy a horse. Instead, without warning, she buys a bicycle,
a woman’s model, second-hand, painted black. It is so huge and heavy
that, when he experiments with it in the yard, he cannot turn the pedals.

She does not know how to ride a bicycle; perhaps she does not know
how to ride a horse either. She bought the bicycle thinking that riding
it would be a simple matter. Now she can find no one to teach her.

His father cannot hide his glee. Women do not ride bicycles, he says.
His mother remains defiant. I will not be a prisoner in this house, she
says. I will be free.

At first he had thought it splendid that his mother should have her
own bicycle. He had even pictured the three of them riding together
down Poplar Avenue, she and he and his brother. But now, as he listens
to his father’s jokes, which his mother can meet only with dogged silence,
he begins to waver. Women don’t ride bicycles: what if his father is right?
If his mother can find no one willing to teach her, if no other housewife
in Reunion Park has a bicycle, then perhaps women are indeed not
supposed to ride bicycles.
Alone in the backyard, his mother tries to teach herself. Holding her legs out straight on either side, she rolls down the incline towards the chicken-run. The bicycle tips over and comes to a stop. Because it does not have a crossbar, she does not fall, merely staggers about in a silly way, clutching the handlebars.

His heart turns against her. That evening he joins in with his father's jeering. He is well aware what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone.

Nevertheless she does learn to ride, though in an uncertain, wobbling way, straining to turn the heavy cranks.

She makes her expeditions to Worcester in the mornings, when he is at school. Only once does he catch a glimpse of her on her bicycle. She is wearing a white blouse and a dark skirt. She is coming down Poplar Avenue towards the house. Her hair streams in the wind. She looks young, like a girl, young and fresh and mysterious.

Every time his father sees the heavy black bicycle leaning against the wall he makes jokes about it. In his jokes the citizens of Worcester interrupt their business to stand and gape as the woman on the bicycle labours past. 

Trap! Trap! they call out, mocking her: Push! There is nothing funny about the jokes, though he and his father always laugh afterwards. As for his mother, she never has any repartee, she is not gifted in that way. ‘Laugh if you like,’ she says.

Then one day, without explanation, she stops riding the bicycle. Soon afterwards the bicycle disappears. No one says a word, but he knows she has been defeated, put in her place, and knows that he must bear part of the blame. I will make it up to her one day, he promises himself. The memory of his mother on her bicycle does not leave him. She pedals away up Poplar Avenue, escaping from him, escaping towards her own desire. He does not want her to go. He does not want her to have a desire of her own. He wants her always to be in the house, waiting for him when he comes home. He does not often gang up with his father against her: his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father. But in this case he belongs with the men.
He shares nothing with his mother. His life at school is kept a tight secret from her. She shall know nothing, he resolves, but what appears on his quarterly report, which shall be impeccable. He will always come first in class. His conduct will always be Very Good, his progress Excellent. As long as the report is faultless, she will have no right to ask questions. That is the contract he establishes in his mind.

What happens at school is that boys are flogged. It happens every day. Boys are ordered to bend over and touch their toes and are flogged with a cane.

He has a classmate in Standard Three named Rob Hart whom the teacher particularly loves to beat. The Standard Three teacher is an excitable woman with hennaed hair named Miss Oosthuizen. From somewhere or other his parents know of her as Marie Oosthuizen: she takes part in theatricals and has never married. Clearly she has a life outside the school, but he cannot imagine it. He cannot imagine any teacher having a life outside school.

Miss Oosthuizen flies into rages, calls Rob Hart out from his desk, orders him to bend, and flogs him across the buttocks. The blows come fast one upon another, with barely time for the cane to swing back. By the time Miss Oosthuizen has finished with him, Rob Hart is flushed in the face. But he does not cry; in fact, he may be flushed only because he was bending. Miss Oosthuizen, on the other hand, heaves at the breast and seems on the brink of tears – of tears and of other outpourings too.

After these spells of ungoverned passion the whole class is hushed, and remains hushed until the bell rings.
Miss Oosthuizen never succeeds in making Rob Hart cry; perhaps that is why she flies into such rages at him and beats him so hard, harder than anyone else. Rob Hart is the oldest boy in the class, nearly two years older than himself (he is the youngest); he has a sense that between Rob Hart and Miss Oosthuizen there is something going on that he is not privy to.

Rob Hart is tall and handsome in a devil-may-care way. Though Rob Hart is not clever and is perhaps even in danger of failing the standard, he is attracted towards him. Rob Hart is part of a world he has not yet found a way of entering: a world of sex and beating.

As for himself, he has no desire to be beaten by Miss Oosthuizen or anyone else. The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame. There is nothing he will not do to save himself from it. In this respect he is unnatural and knows it. He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day.

Every teacher at his school, man or woman, has a cane and is at liberty to use it. Each of these canes has a personality, a character, which is known to the boys and talked about endlessly. In a spirit of connoisseurship the boys weigh up the characters of the canes and the quality of pain they give, compare the arm and wrist techniques of the teachers who wield them. No one mentions the shame of being called out and made to bend and being beaten on one’s backside.

Without experience of his own, he cannot take part in these conversations. Nevertheless, he knows that pain is not the most important consideration. If the other boys can bear the pain, then so can he, whose willpower is so much greater. What he will not be able to endure will be the shame. So bad will be the shame, he fears, so daunting, that he will hold tight to his desk and refuse to come when he is called out. And that will be a greater shame: it will set him apart, and set the other boys against him too. If it ever happens that he is called out to be beaten, there will be so humiliating a scene that he will never again be able to go back to school; in the end there will be no way out but to kill himself.
So that is what is at stake. That is why he never makes a sound in class. That is why he is always neat, why his homework is always done, why he always knows the answer. He dare not slip. If he slips, he risks being beaten; and whether he is beaten or whether he struggles against being beaten, it is all the same, he will die.

The strange thing is, it will only take one beating to break the spell of terror that has him in its grip. He is well aware of this: if, somehow, he can be rushed through the beating before he has had time to turn to stone and resist, if the violation of his body can be achieved quickly, by force, he will be able to come out on the other side a normal boy, able to join easily in discussion of the teachers and their canes and the various grades and flavours of pain they inflict. But by himself he cannot leap that barrier.

He puts the blame on his mother for not beating him. At the same time that he is glad he wears shoes and takes out books from the public library and stays away from school when he has a cold – all the things that set him apart – he is angry with his mother for not having normal children and making them live a normal life. His father, if his father were to take control, would turn them into a normal family. His father is normal in every way. He is grateful to his mother for protecting him from his father’s normality, that is to say, from his father’s occasional blue-eyed rages and threats to beat him. At the same time he is angry with his mother for turning him into something unnatural, something that needs to be protected if it is to continue to live.

Among the canes it is not Miss Oosthuizen’s that leaves the deepest impression on him. The most fearsome cane is that of Mr Lategan the woodwork teacher. Mr Lategan’s cane is not long and springy in the style most of the teachers prefer. Instead it is short and thick and stubby, more a stick or a baton than a switch. It is rumoured that Mr Lategan uses it only on the older boys, that it will be too much for a younger boy. It is rumoured that with his cane Mr Lategan has made even Matric boys blubber and plead for mercy and urinate in their pants and disgrace themselves.

Mr Lategan is a little man with close-cropped hair that stands upright, and a moustache. One of his thumbs is missing: the stub is neatly covered.
Mr Lategan hardly says anything. He is always in a distant, irritable mood, as though teaching woodwork to small boys is a task beneath him that he performs unwillingly. Through most of the lesson he stands at the window staring out over the quadrangle while the boys tentatively measure and saw and plane. Sometimes he has the stubby cane with him, idly tapping his trouser-leg while he ruminates. When he comes on his inspection round he disdainfully points to what is wrong, then with a shrug of the shoulders passes on.

It is permitted for boys to joke with teachers about their canes. In fact this is one area in which a certain teasing of the teachers is permitted. ‘Make him sing, sir!’ say the boys, and Mr Gouws will flash his wrist and his long cane (the longest cane in the school, though Mr Gouws is only the Standard Five teacher) will whistle through the air.

No one jokes with Mr Lategan. There is awe of Mr Lategan, of what he can do with his cane to boys who are almost men.

When his father and his father’s brothers get together on the farm at Christmas, talk always turns to their schooldays. They reminisce about their schoolmasters and their schoolmasters’ canes; they recall cold winter mornings when the cane would raise blue weals on their buttocks and the sting would linger for days in the memory of the flesh. In their words there is a note of nostalgia and pleasurable fear. He listens avidly but makes himself as inconspicuous as possible. He does not want them to turn to him, in some pause in the conversation, and ask about the place of the cane in his own life. He has never been beaten and is deeply ashamed of it. He cannot talk about canes in the easy, knowing way of these men.

He has a sense that he is damaged. He has a sense that something is slowly tearing inside him all the time: a wall, a membrane. He tried to hold himself as tight as possible to keep the tearing within bounds. To keep it within bounds, not to stop it: nothing will stop it.

Once a week he and his class troop across the school grounds to the gymnasium for PT, physical training. In the changing room they put on white singlets and shorts. Then under the direction of Mr Barnard, also attired in white, they spend half an hour leapfrogging the pommel horse or tossing the medicine ball or jumping and clapping their hands above their heads.
Scenes from Provincial Life

They do all of this with bare feet. For days ahead, he dreads baring his feet for PT, his feet that are always covered. Yet when his shoes and socks are off, it is suddenly not difficult at all. He has simply to remove himself from his shame, to go through with the undressing in a brisk, hurried way, and his feet become just feet like everyone else’s. Somewhere in the vicinity the shame still hangs, waiting to return to him, but it is a private shame, which the other boys need never be aware of.

His feet are soft and white; otherwise they look like everyone else’s, even those of boys who have no shoes and come to school barefoot. He does not enjoy PT and the stripping for PT, but he tells himself he can endure it, as he endures other things.

Then one day there is a change in the routine. They are sent from the gymnasium to the tennis courts to learn paddle tennis. The courts are some distance away; along the pathway he has to tread carefully, picking his steps among the pebbles. Under the summer sun the tarmac of the court itself is so hot that he has to hop from foot to foot to keep from burning. It is a relief to get back to the changing room and put on his shoes again; but by afternoon he can barely walk, and when his mother removes his shoes at home she finds the soles of his feet blistered and bleeding.

He spends three days at home recovering. On the fourth day he returns with a note from his mother, a note whose indignant wording he is aware of and approves. Like a wounded warrior resuming his place in the ranks, he limps down the aisle to his desk.

‘Why were you away from school?’ whisper his classmates.

‘I couldn’t walk, I had blisters on my feet from the tennis,’ he whispers back.

He expects astonishment and sympathy; instead he gets mirth. Even those of his classmates who wear shoes do not take his story seriously. Somehow they too have acquired hardened feet, feet that do not blister. He alone has soft feet, and soft feet, it is emerging, are no claim to distinction. All of a sudden he is isolated – he and, behind him, his mother.