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AGE OF IRON



Synopsis

Mrs. Curren, a retired classics professor dying of cancer in her native Cape Town, writes an extended letter to her daughter in America. She recounts a series of extraordinary events beginning with the discovery of Mr. Vercueil, a homeless man, sleeping beside her garage. The worsening social upheaval and deadly violence of a morally corrupt political order drives Mrs. Curren to contemplate a final shocking act of protest and outrage. She entrusts Vercueil with her letter and her legacy. But is this homeless man who he seems? And is truth more illuminating, or destructive, than fire?

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Customer Reviews

After finishing Coetzee's Booker-prize winning *Disgrace*, I found *The Age of Iron*. This is a moving internal first-person narrative of a cancer victim's final days, filled with graceful and disturbing reflections on a life lived and a death to come. Into the narrative come bursting the untidy eruptions of South Africa in the 1980's--township riots, the anger of blacks finally boiling to the surface, dead children martyred by the state, and homeless alcoholics--driving the tale far beyond a simple exegesis on life and death. Once again, I discovered a disquieting novel written from within the

cramped point of view of a protagonist who knows better but cannot seem to gain the courage or momentum to change how she or he relates to the world. And, once again, I was bowled over by the quiet and simple prose that hurtled the narrative to the end. Coetzee's protagonists are deeply flawed--the attraction of the novel is to see if they find a state of grace or even understanding by the end. They can see the corruption in the world around them, can dispassionately view their own weaknesses as well. But they lack the clarity, or perhaps the courage, to act on what they see and know. Will they learn to act? That is the mystery that drives us to read with them. The narrator, an old, dying woman, a former college professor, becomes one of the few white civilians to experience the Township riots. She sees black teenagers she has known since childhood shot and killed--even one who is murdered in her own home. Yet she does nothing except write a long letter to her daughter (it is sometimes so longwinded that you wish she would move on already!). She contemplates self-immolation as a protest, but this goes nowhere.

In a letter to her daughter in America, Mrs. Curren, the 70-ish narrator of the terrific *AGE OF IRON*, makes a gruesome disclosure: her Cape Town physician has just told her she has an incurable cancer and her time is short. Her letter, which is the *AGE OF IRON*, then declares: "The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone." While this task may feel right to Mrs. Curren, its fulfillment is undermined by her cancer, which gradually asserts control. "The end comes galloping," she observes. "I had not reckoned that as one goes downhill one goes faster and faster." The fulfillment of this task is also foiled by the apartheid system of South Africa, which Coetzee presents as a form of political and societal cancer. Finally, her own nature makes such a calm and self-contained end impossible. "To be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there? Out of their withered bodies even the old try to squeeze one last drop." These elements--cancer, apartheid, and Mrs. Curren's giving and communicative nature--combine to create a tense and brutal story, in which Mrs. Curren, who is isolated on principle, develops a strange yet appropriate accommodation to her impending death. In doing so, she confronts her cancer and the cancer of her country, while finding comfort in the company of an alcoholic vagrant, who embodies both malfunctioning South Africa and the shortcomings of willed obliviousness. Sounds weird... but it works. As with most elements of this layered novel, the expression "age of iron" has multiple meanings.

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