Nobel Prize winner J. M. Coetzee decries Israel's "genocidal campaign in Gaza" while declining to attend Jerusalem literature festival

David Walsh
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South African-born writer J. M. Coetzee has rejected an invitation to attend the upcoming International Writers Festival in Jerusalem, outlining his opposition to the state of Israel's murderous assault on the population of Gaza since October 2023.

Coetzee, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2003, is one of the most prominent and acclaimed living authors writing in English. He has also won the Booker Prize two times, the Jerusalem Prize, the Central News Agency Literary Award (South Africa) three times, France's Prix Femina étranger and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. Among his best-known works are *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Disgrace* (1999) and the "Jesus" trilogy (2013-2019).

The 86-year-old author, who lives in Australia, wrote to the organizers of the Jerusalem event in November. The *Guardian* has only recently obtained the full text of Coetzee's "excoriating letter."

In reply to an invitation from the festival's artistic director Julia Fermentto-Tzaisler, Coetzee declined and explained, "I wish to state the grounds on which I do so."

> For the past two years the state of Israel has been conducting a genocidal campaign in Gaza that has been vastly disproportionate to the murderous provocation of 7 October 2023. This campaign, conducted by the IDF, appears to have had the enthusiastic support of the vast majority of Israel's population. For this reason it is not possible for any considerable sector of Israeli society, including its intellectual and arts community, to claim that it should not share in the blame for the atrocities in Gaza.

Coetzee continued, *Guardian* according to the

> Until recently Israel enjoyed a broad measure of support in the West. I would number myself among such supporters: I kept telling myself that surely the day was coming when the Israeli people would have a change of heart and deliver some form of justice to the Palestinian people whose land they had taken over. It was in this spirit that I visited Jerusalem in 1987 to receive the Jerusalem prize.
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> The campaign of annihilation in Gaza has changed all that. Long-time supporters of Israel have turned away in revulsion at the actions of the Israeli military. It will take many years for Israel to clear its name, assuming that it wishes to do so, and to re-establish itself in the international community.

In late April, Fermentto-Tzaisler told the Israeli media that "she again faced difficulties and sharp responses from international writers while organizing this year's event." She explained that

> Coetzee wrote me an especially harsh response, saying he was refusing my invitation because, in his words, over the past two years the State of Israel has been conducting a campaign of genocide in Gaza.

In her lying, delusional reply to the South African writer, Fermentto-Tzaisler expressed her solidarity with the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the West Bank:

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> October 7 was not an uprising of the oppressed. It was an expression of a jihadist ideology that sees the very presence of Jews in the Land of Israel and Palestine as intolerable… Israel went to war in Gaza in order to dismantle Hamas, so that it would not commit such crimes again.

Which other "international writers" offered Fermentto-Tzaisler "sharp responses" is not known to us, but the miserable list of those who did agree to appear is some sort of indication of the Zionist state's fully deserved pariah status. The most prominent is Italian author Erri De Luca, a former leftist turned translator of books of the Bible, who "maintains a daily practice of reading passages from the Hebrew Bible."

Other attendees include novelist Nell Zink, thriller writer Joseph Finder, ferocious defender of Israel author Dara Horn ("October 7 Created a Permission Structure for Anti-Semitism"), historian Steven J. Zipperstein ("The Gaza genocide claim fails the test of law and fact"), author and rabbi Benjamin Resnick ("The first seder since Oct. 7 arrives in a hostile and beautiful world"), Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz and Argentine author Marcelo Birmajer.

In her director's statement, Fermentto-Tzaisler notes

> This year, we are grateful to open the festival without Israeli hostages or captives. To mark this significant milestone, former hostage Eli Sharabi will join us for a conversation with Roni Kuban at the opening event. The event will take place in the presence of the President of the State of Israel [Isaac Herzog], the Mayor of Jerusalem [Moshe Lion], and the President of the Jerusalem Foundation [Shai Doron].

Furthermore, the *Times of Israel* lets us know that at the festival

> Two former intelligence officers turned novelists, Finder, a former CIA officer, and Jonathan de Shalit, a former Mossad operative, will discuss the thin line between reality and fiction and how their work served as literary raw material.

In other words, this is a celebration of Zionist-imperialist violence and oppression masquerading as a cultural event.

Born in Cape Town in 1940, Coetzee became one of the more prominent opponents of apartheid "within Afrikaner literature and letters." In the 1960s, he studied and lived in the US for several years. He sought permanent residence, but his participation in anti-Vietnam War protests played a part in the failure to win that legal status. He was arrested at the State University of New York at Buffalo during a protest in 1970.

In 2016, Coetzee attended the Palestine Festival of Literature, held in multiple cities, and he delivered a brief speech during its closing night:

> I came to Palestine to see and listen and learn and, over the course of the past week, I have seen and heard and learned a great deal. I come away with an enduring impression of the courage and the resilience of the Palestinian people at this difficult time in their history. Also of the grace and humour with which they respond to the frustration and the humiliations of the occupation.

Asked about what he saw of South Africa in Israel-Palestine, Coetzee resorted to acute and sustained irony. At first, he expressed concern about using the word "apartheid" in regard to "the present situation in Palestine," because it "diverts one into the inflamed semantic wrangle." However, he went on:

> Apartheid [in South Africa] was a system of enforced segregation based on race or ethnicity, put in place by an exclusive, self-defined group in order to consolidate colonial conquest particularly to cement its hold on the land and natural resources.
>
> In Jerusalem and in the West Bank—to speak only of Jerusalem and the West Bank—we've seen a system of enforced segregation based on religion and ethnicity, put in place by an exclusive, self-defined group to consolidate the colonial conquest, in particular to maintain and, indeed, extend its hold on the land and its natural resources.
>
> Draw your own conclusions.

Coetzee joins a lengthening list of prominent writers who have denounced Israel's brutal war against the Palestinian people, a list that includes Nobel prize winners Annie Ernaux and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Arundhati Roy, Sally Rooney, Rachel Kushner, Ian McEwan, Elif Shafak, Michelle de Kretser, Hanif Kureishi, Jhumpa Lahiri, Zadie Smith, David Grossman, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Irvine Welsh and many others.

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