



Foe

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A woman on Robinson Crusoe's island? A male feminist following in the already well-worn footsteps of Erica Jong and Kathy Acker, cannibalizing a classic according to the prescriptions of the 1980's? The premise of J.M. Coetzee's FOE is not inviting, but readers who go no further than the blurb will miss an extraordinary book.

The novel opens with the narrative of Susan Barton, a castaway on the island where Cruso (as he is called here) and Friday have long been marooned. Her Cruso, who differs in many respects from the intrepid figure known to generations of readers, dies on shipboard en route to England after they are rescued, a little more than a year after Susan's arrival. Finding herself in London without resources, and feeling responsible for the mute Friday, Susan composes an account of her experiences on the island (the very account which we have been reading) and gives it to a professional writer, Daniel Foe (as Defoe was in fact known until past the age of forty), hoping that he can fashion it into a salable book. He sees promise in the tale but, finding it wanting in incident, proposes to flesh it out--adding some cannibals, for example.

Coetzee's novel is indeed a feminist fable; it is also a political allegory the more powerful for being unspecific (Friday brings to mind not only the black people of South Africa but also the voiceless oppressed in every society) and a fiction about the writing of fiction. Shifting easily from dreamlike vision to witty disputation, FOE is in its own right a rich work of the imagination, not merely a parasite on the genius of its model.

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