JM Coetzee’s advice to young graduates

RENOVED South African author and Nobel literature laureate JM Coetzee has urged young male graduates to consider a career in education.

“It’s good for children to have a man’s hand guiding them, and it is also good for you and common social life,” he said yesterday at the University of the Witwatersrand, which was conferring on him an honorary doctorate in literature.

“What a relief it is to see so many young men among graduates in the humanities... What a relief that men have not entirely abandoned a field which they once used to dominate.”

Although he had been taught by phenomenal women, he was certain the presence of male figures would have enriched the experience, he said.

“It has nothing to do with personal qualities, but if there had sometimes been a male presence in the classroom, the experience would have been different and, I am convinced, fuller.”

Coetzee warned against placing the responsibility of teaching children in the hands of a single sex.

He urged male graduates to meet the country’s need for hard-working, dedicated and well-humoured teachers.

“Look upon it as a challenge. Let us be a generation of young teachers who will transform school and make it a place of intellectual excitement where children can’t wait to get to school.”

He told the young women in the crowd they had been the backbone of the teaching profession so far. He spoke against the “suspicious eye” cast on men who expressed an interest in young children.

Coetzee was born in South Africa, but now lives in Australia.

His professional career includes appointments at the University of Cape Town, the University of Chicago, and visiting appointments at Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University and Stanford University.

His fictional works include Waiting for the Barbarians, which won the CNA Literary Award. He won the Booker Prize for the first time for his novel Life and Times of Michael K and the second time for Disgrace. He has won many other literary prizes. – Sapa