Male teachers vital: author

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RENEWED SA novelist and Nobel Laureate John Maxwell "JM" Coetzee praised teachers while being awarded an honorary doctorate during a graduation ceremony at Wits University in Johannesburg yesterday.

The two-time recipient of the Booker Prize received a Doctor in Literature (Dlitt) degree after addressing his fellow graduates.

He said education is one of the most highly bureaucratised sectors in modern society. "At the bottom of the education pyramid are teachers; modestly paid, overworked, doing their best for their young charges but groaning under the weight of soul-destroying paperwork," Coetzee said in his address. "The middle of the pyramid is occupied by functionaries who fill their hours creating that paperwork, inventing endless tests and reports for humble teachers to implement."

Coetzee is the author of thirteen works of fiction, including Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) and Disgrace (1999). He has published memoirs, literary criticism and translations.

His professional career includes appointments at the University of Cape Town and the University of Chicago.

He has had visiting appointments at Stanford University, Harvard and John Hopkins University.

Coetzee said women had been the backbone of the education system. He called on men to opt for a career in education by teaching young children, as "it is good for children to sometimes have a man's hand guiding them."

"Never in history has there been a greater need for hard-working, dedicated, good-humoured, loving teachers," said South African-born Coetzee who now resides in Adelaide, South Australia.

"Children can be exhausting, they can be irritating, but they are never anything but their full human selves."

He added that children in the care of teachers are real people, from whom much can be learned.

"The more open you are to them, the more you will learn," said Coetzee.