“You want to mess with people’s heads”: An Interview with Jim Crace

The *antae* Editorial Board

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antae *is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing is also accepted.*

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ANTAE: When staying in Malta in the seventies, Samuel Beckett described his stay as 'the nearest antidote to Paris' that he had ever found.[1] Anthony Burgess had a number of complaints about the place, while Lord Byron reportedly called Malta an 'island of yells, bells and smells'.[2] Based on your experiences here so far, what would you add to these impressions?

JIM CRACE: What I like about Malta is that it feels like a triumph of scale. It's only x miles long and x miles wide, which is tiny. Actually, it's the distance between the house we had for the last forty years and where we are now—it's driveable in thirty-five, forty minutes and I like that, and I like the fact that you're surrounded by sea. It's a very architecturally and schematically pleasing place. What fascinates me about small communities is that, somehow or other, the natural order of things fills every niche. For example, I come from the West Midlands; I used to live in Birmingham and there are two million people living in Birmingham; that's five times as many, almost, as there are living in Malta. If you were to say at any time that there was a Prime Minister—that there's someone within that two million people that's good enough to be Prime Minister of Britain—you'll probably say that's not true, that it couldn't happen. But in a community like this, something happens, every niche is filled. You've got a Prime Minister, a President, priests, construction workers, thieves, pickpockets, adulterers, drunks. Every niche is filled. It's almost as if it doesn't matter how small a community. Even with a tiny community like the Falkland Islands (which only has a few thousand people), still, scale fills every little corner. I like that. I like that everything is achievable, every niche is filled, that there are all kinds of people. It is intensely rich and someone said to me that if you take a plane from Heathrow to Malta, and you're Maltese, you're bound to know some other people on the plane. Now that's what I call very pleasing in many respects—but also very scary, and that's the downside.

Even though I've only been here five or six weeks, I already sense a feeling of claustrophobia, and that which enchants you—its smallness, its scale, its compactibility—is also the thing that will drive you crazy. To some extent, for me, Malta has all the attributes of paradise: blue sea, wonderful cliffs, glorious landscape, and interesting history. But it has two things that just don't belong to paradise, and that is overpopulation (and the cars that go with it), and the mad building. This is what horrifies me: so many nations are destroying

[1] As quoted in Deirdre Blair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1993), p. 619.
[2] This description is erroneously attributed to Lord Byron. Refer to David Niven's autobiography, *The Moon's a Balloon* (1972), for the original source of the description.

themselves with ill-considered buildings and bad traffic and overpopulation. The last thing I'll say is that I wonder whether Malta has benefitted from tourism, except financially. I wonder whether tourism really is just one of the many invasions you've already suffered. I was shocked as I was reading the history of Malta. I'd never really counted up the number of invasions you've had here: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Arabs, French (about three times), the Italians, the Sicilians, the Normans, the British… and now the tourists. I get the sense that even though you finally got independence in Malta, the tune is being called not by the almost-half-a-million Maltese, but by the 1.2 million tourists. I feel that their heavy hand is on everything in Malta, and that's to be regretted.

A: Can we look forward to seeing Malta featured in the topography of what has been called 'Craceland'?[3]

JC: Yes, definitely. I'd already worked this out last time I came to Malta two or three years ago. Some of the things I've just said to you occurred to me—the clash to do with tourism, the effect of the outsider on a small community. That was the starting point. And that is somehow mixed in my mind with a couple of visits I've made during the last eighteen months in which the subject of poverty, which is such an important issue, has raised its head. Craceland—though I don't call it that—is always full of neat and organic landscapes, and what can be more organic than an island? I don't want to say too much about it, but I absolutely know what my next book is. It is never going to mention the word Malta, but I'm going to steal the landscape. It is not going to be Malta. It's going to be an appropriation of Malta; the theft of Malta. I am going to use this landscape. I love the idea of this porous landscape sitting on blue clay with no rivers or lakes, plenty of water all around it. Yes, it's going to show up in a book about poverty.

A: As the first Writer in Residence for the University of Malta's newly-launched Creative Writing Programme, would it be too unfair to ask you whether creative writing can really be the subject of a programme? What is your main goal as a creative writing mentor?

JC: Well, it's happened! It is the subject of a programme. I've said the other day that in order to make beautiful sculptures out of wood you need inspiration. Inspiration and artistic insight can't be taught. But you also need a hammer and chisel. You need tools and you need skills to use those tools. If you were a piano player you might want to argue that someone like me will never play the piano well because, even though I like music, I don't have the musical skills. But there might be a boy or girl who is born with innate musical skills and they will never play the piano either unless they're taught their scales and forced to practise. So yes, of course, I believe that skills can be taught.

A: You say that you are a schematic writer and that your works are full of a symbolism which is very knowingly placed. But you also speak of an 'abandonment' of the self that

[3] See Adam Begley and Jim Crace, 'Jim Crace, The Art of Fiction No. 179', *The Paris Review* (2003). http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/122/the-art-of-fiction-no-179-jim-crace [accessed 4 November 2014].

occurs when you write. These two sides of your writing process seem to be contradictory. How do you reconcile them?

JC: They are not contradictory at all. You see, if you don't have a shape or a plan before you start writing, then it's a very nerve-racking enterprise. You're like a person who's fallen off a boat and is tossed about at sea. You hang on to every piece of wreckage you can find. Say I'm starting to write a novel... I know what the theme is, but I don't know the setting, the time scale, the plot or the characters: I want to discover those things as I write. So on the second day of writing, somehow or other, a big strangely shaped rock appears because it's necessary to the narrative. Now I hang on, metaphorically—but also in a writerly way—to that rock, and it's something that I want to put to schematic use. I bear it in mind and think that it's a useful device in my armoury, and so I refer to it later. These things just accumulate in my head and give me a marker for the future because I don't know what the future of the book holds. At least I can tell myself: "I can use that rock again". Now life's not like that, which is why I say 'schematic'; life is not patterned. But because I start off my book without any sense of design or pattern, when I can make a pattern I do it almost automatically. Some of my critics and readers hate that, but that's what I do.

A: We were speaking about the possibility of featuring Malta in your next novel. And while we'll be able to recognise it, the setting will be quite transformed into something remote. In fact, some of your novels, such as *Quarantine* or *The Gift of Stones*, feature a certain chronological remoteness. Elsewhere, you have referred to your interest in 'dislocating' a contemporary subject, so that your novels are often chronologically distant but metaphorically relevant anyway. Why are you attracted to such remoteness?

JC: You're right. If I were to set a novel in Malta—if that novel ever mentioned the word Malta—the puritanical ex-journalist in me would be forced to get it right. The phrasing that I've used before is that if a reader is reading this book (such as a Maltese person or a person who's been on holiday to Malta or worked in Malta), they should read that book and they should say: "Yes, I've been in Malta; it looks, smells, tastes and sounds like that". It's like holding a mirror up to a real world. You have a duty, if you mention a real place, to get it right, to not tell lies about it, and not misrepresent it. It may not matter where Malta is concerned, but if you consider, for example, the great canon of writing by white writers about Africa, you see examples again and again of the way in which Africa is misrepresented. *Heart of Darkness*, in particular, is an appalling slur on the whole of the continent, creating a whole continent of savagery. Because I don't want to slur any real places, I'm encouraged to invent. I will make it so that this is not a mirror up to a real world which locates you in the real world, but a dislocation. You are conjuring something that sounds real, it's got all of the places that you can go to on a bus or on a plane, but it's not lifted. It's just a bit of fun, that's all.

A: There also seems to be a peripatetic mode of narrative and happening in several of your works, most notably in *The Pesthouse*, but also in *Quarantine*, *Harvest* and others; even in *Being Dead*, it is as if the narrator is circling round the dead bodies of the protagonists and slowly extracting vital clues as to their lifeless conclusion on the beach. What is the place of peripateticism in your work?

JC: I didn't plan, at the head of my writing career, that I was going to write a thousand novels and they'd all have walks in them. But you're right; every one of my novels does have a walk in it. Even in *Arcadia* there is the walk from the marketplace to the office block and back; in *Being Dead*, it's along the coast and back. The police do it, the lovers do it, the daughter does it, and the murderer does it. *Quarantine* is exactly the same, with the walk up through to Qumran and then beyond. *The Pesthouse* is all walking too, isn't it? I didn't plan that, it just bubbles through. I think that it's because everybody, when they write, has their characteristics come through—not in any planned way, but in an intuitive way. What is it that makes me have walking in all of my books? It's because I'm a big walker. And it's an indulgence. When I'm not walking in the real world, I'm walking in the written one. Honestly, it's not very complicated, it's very straightforward. Walking is such an indulgent act. And it's for the same reason that you can look for meaning in the fact that there's always a lot of natural history in my novels. But actually, there's not much meaning to be found. It's there because that's my interest. The peripatetic is useful because it makes the reader restless and familiar with the landscape. If you take the reader through the landscape to and fro, by the end of the novel, it's almost like a familiar walk that they've done with their dog.

A: There is something uncanny about your work: for example, your treatment of the corpse in *Being Dead*, your reimagining of the figure of Jesus in *Quarantine*, and your appropriation of something as unlikely as the Stone Age in *The Gift of Stones*. Can you comment further on this?

JC: Well, a book can be full of lies if you've invented landscapes, animals and forms of vegetation and foliage**.** My books are a concoction and in no way a mirror of the real world. You want to mess with people's heads and you want them not to be able to tell the difference between the truth and the lies, because you don't want that division to be made; you want them to buy it all. And so, if you present the lies in a really realistic way, then that sets a certain set of expectations. And then you can present some truths about the world, but you do that in a hazy way, so that lies seem better formed than the truth. That is the uncanniness. In my novels, the lies are more convincing than the truth and that is something I do on purpose, just to be playful and mischievous. Literature and storytelling have got to have wisdoms and insights, they've got to be useful; but if they're mischievous, then that is really valuable. The dead bodies in *Being Dead*…we think we don't know anything about dead bodies, we think they're uncanny, but we are very familiar with dead bodies. It's just that we're not familiar with the dead bodies of human beings. I couldn't possibly go on any walk in the countryside without encountering dead beetles and frogs and birds and rabbits, and rotting sheep. We will go over and look at those dead bodies with some interest. If you saw a dead body you'd have a little look at it, wouldn't you? You might even turn it over and have a longer look at it. And I don't think there's anything ghoulish or negative about that. We just think: that bird had flown and died and that's the natural process of things. We are familiar with death, just not *human* death. Actually, part of the point of *Being Dead* was to remind readers that even though we have consciousness which makes us different from all the other animals in the world—the 7.9 million species that there are, and rising—we are still animals. That is a comfort and a solace, not a reductive thing to say, I think.

A: Walter Thirsk in *Harvest* is perhaps your most sympathetic creation to date. It does not seem that you are particularly interested in sympathetic characters, or in engaging your reader's attention through the use of sympathetic characters. Would you agree with this?

JC: I am interested in sympathetic characters; it's just that I don't find Hollywood characters sympathetic. The truth of the world is that we are all complicated and there are plenty of reasons for everyone in this room not to be liked by some people. This may sound very pious, but we're all blemished. If the only people worthy of love were those who are perfect, we would be without love in this room. It is not my purpose to do what Hollywood does, which is to present characters who are so outrageously good-looking you'd think they're so virtuous and that they're going to have all the good luck and all the good fortune. The purpose of my books is to present characters who are hard to like and hope that, in the end, we have sympathies for them. Because that's what happens to everybody in life. We're all hard to like but the great optimism and triumph of human kind is that, hard to like though we are, most of us end up being loved and loving. I refuse to have perfect characters because there are no perfect characters.

Walther Thirsk is certainly not perfect—he has one major fault, and that is that he's cowardly and unadventurous. He goes with the tide, he never stands up and he is not strong. There are strong characters in *Being Dead*, but they are blemished in other ways. Mr Quill, for instance, doesn't look like a hero in any way. He's lame and he's nerdish, he's not handsome—he's a bit foolish. But at least he's the one person that stands up against the flow and he tries to look after the woman who's in the pillory.

A: The rendition of animal casualties in your novels, such as the donkey in *Quarantine* and the mare in *Harvest*, are very striking and possibly more sympathetic than the death of human characters. Would you agree with this?

JC: That's interesting. You might be right. There is a special sentiment that is associated with the death of animals, isn't there? Whereas the death of bad people, like the father who dies in *Harvest* at the pillory…we don't feel his death as viscerally. Perhaps that is the outcome of the natural historian. I remember once someone had accused me very angrily... They had come from some Donkey Welfare Organisation. She had come along especially to a reading I was doing in Oxford to give me a good telling off about cruelty to donkeys in *Quarantine*.

I was rather shocked by this because I chose donkeys for two reasons. First, because I love donkeys. I think donkeys are foolish and handsome, and they all have the cross on their backs, and they're docile but still unpredictable. There is something particular about donkeys amongst the horse world, as it were. So, the reason I killed off a donkey is because I'm especially fond of donkeys. My favourite donkey in literature is Modestine in R.L. Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey*. But of course, there's another reason I chose donkeys and that is that donkeys are present in the story of Christ. It's a donkey that takes Christ down to his crucifixion on Palm Sunday. Killing the donkey at the beginning of the novel is the same thing as killing Christ. It's robbing the Bible story of two of its main characters: the

donkey and the Messiah. But yes, you're right. Maybe there is more feeling put into the death of animals rather than there is in the death of human beings...

A: What was it like writing from the focal point of death in *Being Dead*? How much is an unflinching look at the natural processes of death, which are indifferent to human sentiment, a way of accepting the uncompromising nature of death?

JC: Death is uncompromising. We've got two things in common in this room. The first is that we're hard to love, as we've already said. The second is we're all going to die. How do we cope with dying? Given that we have consciousness as human beings, we are very aware form the age of ten, say, of the inevitability of death. But the extraordinary thing is, I don't think anyone in this room spends twenty-three hours a day curled up in a ball screaming, 'I'm going to die'. We are very modulated. I'm going to be seventy soon, and even I'm not scared. And it's very close for me, you know. Not too close, but it's much much closer—and it still is not making me scream with fear.

And that is because human kind has put some narratives in place which make us come to terms with death. The religions are very good at this, the big narrative religions: Islam, Judaism, Christianity, even the Indian religions. They're all very good at coming up with stories about death and they provide real comfort. But we're living in a world—except in the Muslim world—where belief in religion is decreasing rather than increasing. So does that mean that the people without religion are going to learn to be terrified of death? No, because what we need for those people is a new set of narratives which also provide comfort, so the point of me writing that book was to try and come up with new narratives of comfort for people who don't believe in God. Reasons to make sense of the world, to make sense of the brief span we have on it, to celebrate the fact that we're here at all, and to provide strategies of being familiar with death.

So I hope that *Being Dead* is an optimistic book. But it's not optimistic in the way that people might think if they didn't think about it for long. Optimism is not about easy answers. Optimism is about hard questions and quests. Optimism is going to the darkest recesses of the world, into the murkiest corners of existence, and still coming away full of hope. If you meet someone who was born into money, who was born handsome, who has created a huge career as a famous TV star, and they say 'I'm an optimistic person'; well, of course you are, you idiot. Nothing has ever gone wrong for you, nothing has ever been tested for you. But when you encounter somebody that was born handicapped, that has had to struggle with poverty or an illness and such, and the human spirit has still made those people optimistic—and of course there are plenty of people like that—then that's the triumph of optimism. They've been to dark places and they still feel positive about this business of being alive.

My books are full of dark places and death and things that strike challenging notes, but life's like that. Life isn't a bed of roses. And you don't want to read a book about a bed of roses either.

A: You have suggested, in other interviews, that your life is too stable and dull to make for good fiction. Why wouldn't reading about a dull and stable life, or a bed of roses, for example, provide some kind of palliative or consolatory pleasure?

JC: It does, but not literary fiction. There are lots of people who will read a book for a happy ending and popular fiction does that all the time. Boy meets girl, girl gets boy, mum has children, boy wins the lottery. Literature is something different; it has loftier intentions. I'm always pleading this, but I think that for good Darwinist reasons; the only reason that storytelling has survived is because it confers to human kind an advantage. If this wasn't so, then storytelling would have died out and we wouldn't be storytellers. Ever since there was fire, people used to sit around it with hot faces and cold backs and there was the impulse to listen to and tell each other stories. The advantage that literary fiction provides us with is that it helps you make sense of the world, enables you to encounter experiences without having the experiences. For example, before falling in love, I knew what falling in love was all about because I'd read books about it. Before anyone in my family died, I knew what death was about because I'd read about death in books. People who go through a breakup of a relationship, marriage or whatever it is, would have encountered that in narrative before: not only in books, but also in films, TV shows and theatre, Shakespeare and everything. So basically, literature is there to rehearse us for the things in life that will test us.

A: You once described *Continent* as 'the kind of book that [your] seventeen-year-old self would sneer at: rhythmic prose, moralistic, bourgeois fiction'.[4] You then say, however, that this is when and where you had 'found your voice'.[5] How did your definition of and judgment on what you call bourgeois fiction change, subject to the writing of your first novel?

JC: Actually, I say that about all my novels, and the reason I say that is to do with my background. I come from a working class family in North London. We lived in a ground floor apartment and no one read at that time. My dad was a reader but he was unusual. The things that we valued were politics. My dad was a socialist, a very principled man. He'd drive me mad; sometimes his principles were too much. This was the 1950s, when I was a kid, and he wasn't homophobic or racist—that was rare in those days—but he was really dogmatic. We weren't allowed to have comics or wear jeans. We weren't allowed to have milk chocolate; we could only have dark chocolate, which tasted horrible. His many socialist heroes included Dom Mintoff. I understand that Dom Mintoff is not necessarily a hero in retrospect, but at the time, he was a tough trade union working class bloke that spoke his mind and was articulate and great at giving speeches. That was my first awareness of Malta. Somehow I think I must have seen him on the news or at the cinema or something, because I have a very clear image of Dom Mintoff giving speeches.

My idea of working class fiction was fiction that engaged with politics: fiction like a leaflet or a placard, the intention of which was to campaign for socialism, to change the way people vote, to change people's thought in their hearts and minds. Of course there are more works that have done this: George Orwell was successful at it, Jack London (though he was quite a racist, I have to say), John Steinbeck, Robert Tressell... Those were the types of books that I devoured when I was sixteen or seventeen. They were books about putting the world to right, and wearing their hearts on their sleeves. You always knew what the writer meant. He wasn't

[4] See 'Jim Crace, The Art of Fiction No. 179', *The Paris Review* (2003).
[5] ibid.

embarrassed about hiding what he believed under a metaphor or such like. That's the kind of book I aspired to write as a very politically active young man. But when I started writing that book, and I did try to write that political book, I didn't know what the end of the sentence was going to be: let alone the end of the paragraph, let alone the end of the chapter, let alone ever finishing that book. It wasn't my voice. It was my voice at demonstrations and political meetings—I could do that. But turning it into fiction didn't work for me. It was clunky and clichéd.

Then, by complete chance, I discovered this inventive world of making things up and this rhyming prose and the poetic voice. And you must admit that's not a working class form of writing. It's not the kind of thing that a political seventeen-year-old would write. So I ended up writing these things and it was my natural voice and I'm good at it, I think. But my seventeen-year-old self would hate it, and with good reason.

A: In *The Secrets of My Success*, your narrator gives a would-be author seeking his guidance the following advice: 'If you want to change the world or even your locality, do not put your politics into a book, but put your politics into Politics.'[6] Would you agree, then, with W. H. Auden's claim that 'poetry makes nothing happen'?[7]

JC: No. Poetry makes things happen in places where freedom of expression is curtailed. For example, in Russia, before the Iron Curtain came down, if you wanted to organise protests, you weren't going to do it through the press because you weren't allowed to. There was a newspaper called *Pravda*, Russian for the word "Truth". You'd never find any truth in *Pravda*. In Russia, behind the Iron Curtain, the organisation voices were Yevtushenko, Akhmatova, Pasternak. In that kind of repressed society, poetry and fiction can be immensely powerful.

Another area where they can be powerful is, for example, if you are writing in the West where you can express yourself freely, if you've got a constituency as well as readers. In other words, if you've got a community that relates to you for reasons which are not literary, then poetry can make a difference. If you're a black writer, then you have readers, but you also have a constituency of black people whose cause you are taking up. Think of someone like Toni Morrison and how important the novel *Beloved* was for making a wide selection of people understand the horrors of slavery. Even if you're a woman writer: for instance the explosion of women writers in the 1970s and 1980s where feminism was given a voice... So those are writers that have readers and a constituency. If you have gay writers, from James Baldwin forwards, there are important books that express the rights of gay and lesbian people to have equal freedom of expression like everybody else.

My problem is that I am a white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual male. I live in a bourgeois democracy where I have the vote where there are newspapers that are pretty crap, and the Snowden thing just happened. These things are open. I don't fit into a situation where

[6] Crace, 'The Secrets of My Success', *The Guardian* (2005). http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview33 [accessed 4 November 2014].
[7] W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', in A. Norman Jeffares, ed., *The Critical Heritage—W. B. Yeats* (London and New York, NY: Routledge 1997), p. 435.

my writing is powerful, and I know it's not. When I was a journalist, the last paper I worked for was *The Sunday Times*, and the idea was that every Sunday three million people could be reading my articles. Those three million people wouldn't all think the same as me. There might be racists, homophobes, sexists, right-wingers, Tories. There is the sense that your writing is engaging with people who don't have the same views as you and you might change their attitude, so it feels really useful.

Whereas if I travel around in England, and I see someone reading one of my books, which does happen, I can look at them and I can know that they are almost a vegetarian, I know how they voted in the general election, where they probably go on holiday, their attitude towards soft drugs... In other words, they are clones of me. Can my kind of writing change people's minds? No, because the people that read my books already think the same way as me. And if they don't, they're going to stop reading. That's my main reason for feeling that journalism is sometimes more important than fiction.

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