

The Judith Spelman interview



Jim Crace

talks to **Judith Spelman** about his escape to the dark side...

Jim Crace is a distinguished writer whose books have disturbing concepts that take the imagination of the reader in unexpected directions. There is a richness about his prose that draws the reader into unfamiliar territory. A rhythmic writer, his books are schematic and his early work as a journalist is evident in his tightly written prose. As he says, things are never there except for a reason.

His first novel, *Continent*, won three major literary prizes; the Whitbread First Novel Award, The Guardian Fiction Prize and the David Higham Prize for Fiction. He went on to win nine further awards

of Parliament which said any ship coming in to the English Channel which had any suggestion of plague or infection on board should pull across and put anyone with it in this building until they got better or until they died.'

Jim thought it was an intriguing idea for a book; the idea of hopes dashed. 'Someone who has come a long distance to arrive in Bristol for a new life had their hopes dashed 30 miles from the coast. So that was one thing that struck me. And the next thing was the title – *The Pesthouse*.'

He was walking around the Scillies and started to notice the metal that

in which technology and devices get more complicated and global becomes intergalactic. 'Actually, we live in an age when we are constantly being told that Avian 'flu can kill eighteen million people in this country, that global warming can wipe out whole populations, that nuclear war can finish civilisation. So it is just as likely that the future is medieval. Instead of the "global becomes intergalactic", it might be that the "global becomes the local" again.'

That was one thought. The other thought he had in his mind was his love/hate relationship with America. 'I have always loved being in America; I have always loved its generosity and hospitality. But in the last ten years I have found that my hatred was stronger than my love for it. I wanted to address that. So, take the issue of a destroyed community, place it in America and give it a medieval future. All of those issues are in the book.'

He intended to be punitive towards America, to punish it for its foreign policy, to take it from the top of the pile and to the bottom of technology. 'This,' he says, 'would be my political statement and finally I would write a political book. But as you read you discover that the book will not allow me to. The moment of abandonment came to me, this is not a lament about your hatred of America, it is a love song about your adoration

'I was a very straight journalist, I didn't tell any lies but I hope I was inventive but truthful'

including being shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction.

He is writing his twelfth novel and says there will only be two more to come. Shame.

This year Picador published *The Pesthouse*, a disturbing yet compulsive book to read. What drew him to this as a setting?

'I spent a lot of time in the Isles of Scilly where there is a pesthouse,' he says. 'It is on the island of St Helens which is an uninhabited island and it is a quarantine station. In the 18th century there was an Act

was lying around, much of it over 100 years old. He noticed how metal left its mark in the natural world and the way in which metal could be taken back into the landscape almost to look like something natural. Because he is a landscape writer, the idea of metal in the landscape interested him. 'These things just grew; they roast slowly in your head,' he says.

Then he began to think about two other issues that interested him; one, that people were predicting a future for the world