



of America. You will find this is an unambiguously optimistic book.'

Despite the dark side of his books, Jim Crace declares he is generally optimistic and cheerful. He does not accept that his books are dark. 'No,' he says, firmly, 'but that is exactly what people feel about my books and people can't be wrong. They are serious books which is perhaps against the spirit of English irony. The English traditions are that you make a joke of being serious and that's where we get the wonderful tone of irony in our best literature and the tone of irony in our social life. I am like that in my private life but in my writing life I'm very un-English and very unembarrassed-ly serious.'

He is also one of those people who thinks that optimism cannot be easily won; it has to be found in dark places. 'For example, in *Being Dead*, my book about death, it seems to me that it is hardly optimistic to say that when we die it will be fine because we are all going to heaven and will be listening to harp music and eating honey and yogurt, because it is not true. Its optimism is not well earned. But if you look death hard in the eye and really consider what it is, biologically and emotionally, and don't flinch, that's very, very dark and that's very, very pessimistic in tone. If you find optimism in that, then the optimism is massive.'

*The Pesthouse* is a book about optimism but you will not know this at the beginning because Jim makes you travel through some very dark places in order to reach the optimism. 'I fully recognise what you say in that my books are very dark,' he says, 'but the darkness is an optimistic darkness.'

It is true that Jim Crace changes when he writes. When you meet him you expect to discover a very serious, intense, driven man but he is not like that at all. He is lively and funny, interesting, and a family man whose writing comes second. It is a dichotomy that is hard to accept.

'First of all, you have to make sense of why it is I am such a non-serious person in the flesh and

why I am such a serious person as a writer,' he says. 'The key to that is a simple one; I'm not an autobiographical writer. One of the major decisions you make as a writer is whether you are going to be autobiographical. When the autobiographical writer comes away from the office at four, or five or six o'clock or whatever the time, they take the subject matter with them. When they argue with their wife or their husband or their dog, the subject matter is sitting on their shoulders. When they go for a walk to the supermarket, they take the subject matter with them.'

As Jim's subject matter is not himself, he can leave it behind on the computer screen and this allows him to be very different from the books he writes.

'If I were an autobiographical writer and I went to my publisher and told them my next book was an autobiographical novel, they would ask what it was about and would soon be screaming. An autobiographical book about me would be a happy childhood – I never heard my parents swear, was never hit, I was loved as a kid, loved my parents, I've been married for 30-odd years and never strayed, have children I love. That would make the worst novel in the world because fiction doesn't like marriage, it prefers divorce; fiction doesn't like good health, it likes illness; fiction doesn't like years of plenty and inactivity, it likes disaster and traumas.'

But fiction also likes people overcoming these things, yet as he says, you have to have them first. In his fiction he believes he allows himself to be serious in a way that English society does not encourage. He can experience things through fiction with which his life has not confronted him, dark things, ugly things, unsuccessful things. It is a weird kind of escapism, not from a dark life to a light one but the other way round.

'My writing is not a constant presence for me,' he says. 'I'm not a very driven writer although I'm very serious about what I do. I am

not the kind of person who has to write even if I weren't published. I am not the kind of person who says I will be writing until the day I die. I know I am going to stop writing in a couple of books' time.'

## 'If you abandon your book to narrative, then you will write the book the narrative wants you to write'

He began as a journalist and says he would still be a journalist if he had been more successful and had not fallen out with an editor on a political issue. He recognised he was never going to be a very distinguished journalist although he was writing for *The Sunday Times* and *The Sunday Telegraph* and making a good living. 'My nature is not that of a truth-teller. Because of my moralistic attitude towards the world, I couldn't be a journalist and exaggerate. I had to tell the truth and so I was a very straight-batted journalist because I think that facts are eloquent and you shouldn't embellish them or tell lies. If you have an agenda it is best served by the true facts.'

Here again you find the dichotomy of the man. 'As a journalist, I didn't tell any lies but I hope I was inventive but truthful. That's against my nature because all my life I've been a fibber, a liar and an ornament and that's ever since I was a small kid. I had a sense of humour and I did tell some outrageous stories. So to be a journalist was against my nature and when I became a fiction writer it was almost returning to my own nature which is why my writing is not realistic. It's not a mirror held up to the real world.'

If he had imagined when he was seventeen that he would one day become a writer, a novelist, the kind of novelist he would have expected to be was a political novelist such as Jack London, George Orwell or John

