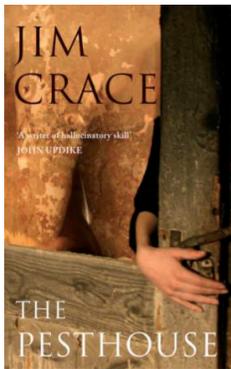


# The Judith Spelman interview



Steinbeck. 'But I haven't become that; I have turned into the kind of writer that my seventeen-year old self would have sneered at,' he says. 'My work has political content; it's rhythmic, moralistic, metaphorical, fabulist, bourgeois fiction. It's important to remind yourself that what you are doing is not grander than it is.'

Journalist and novelist are different writing pathways. As a journalist Jim admits he learned a lot.

'There are some things you learn and there are some things you have to unlearn when you write novels. When I was a journalist I knew that every word had to count. They would give you 1,400 words to do and you would hand in 1,600. The 200 words to go would be your favourite; the jokes, the adjectives, the clever little asides, the things that make your writing really writer-ly are the things that go.

'I learned how to construct sentences so that there was nothing slack and that they were all doing their work. And if you have three adjectives, in this wonderful language of ours there is one word that does the work of all three. That was an important thing to learn.'

What he had to unlearn was adherence to the truth and that, he says, came to him as naturally as breathing oxygen.

'In that first book, *Continent*, there were so many invented creatures. If I wanted to have an insect, I would make one up. Invention to me seems to be such wonderful, mischievous, sweet, joyful thing to do. It was a self-indulgence of invention.'

*Continent* is made up of seven interconnected stories set on an imaginary seventh continent in which he explores Western attitudes to the Third World.

As he continued to write, so his approach changed. 'I think its bound to change,' he says. 'When you start off you are very naïve. I started off and I expected nothing and then when that first book sold in the States for a lot of money and it won three prizes in one week, I took that as being the most natural thing in the world. When my next book

came out – which I think is a much superior book – it didn't win a prize, it hardly had a review and then I realised it was a game of chance. It was then I became fearful of the next project and I think as I have progressed through all these books the fear has not diminished.'

Jim Crace is a writer who does

writing a book. 'There are all sorts of emotions going on at the same time; there is this great truculent arrogance that you are someone important on the international scene. You know that's false and won't help you but it does empower you in some way. There is also the fear that it's absolute

**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.**

not plan his books which is why, he believes the fear remains.

'I have the subject and nothing else. If you are someone who writes a book according to a template and you work all your chapters out before you start, really the fear has been removed. But what I do is choose a subject matter that interests me and that I don't know the answer to and I use the writing to try and find the answer.

'Because I'm very serious about things, I always raise the hurdles high. I won't write a book about the death of somebody, I'll write a book about the nature of death. The higher you raise the hurdles, the greater the fear but if you clear them the better the result.'

While he is writing he says that at the start he is frightened he has set himself too high or too arrogant a task.

'You never know whether you have or you haven't until you reach the moment of abandonment. The moment of abandonment is where the novel itself, the narrative itself, starts to take over. That is when you, the writer, are abandoned and the narrative becomes more powerful than you. Then the fear disappears because you are in good hands. It might not happen until late in the book but it might happen very early.'

For Jim there is not only one way of thinking when you are

rubbish at the same time. The more important of those two things for me – and I think all writers – is the fear. In a way you should hang on to the fear as long as you can because if you start to fall in love with your prose, then you stop changing it, you stop fixing it. While you think it's bad, you'll fix it.'

Sometimes a writer can change the prose so many times it has little bearing on its original form and you have not written what you wanted to write. Jim says he has never written what he wanted to write.

'If you abandon your book to narrative, then you will write the book the narrative wants you to write. For example, my first book, *Continent*, is a very conservative book. It always takes the side of traditional ways of human kind at the expense of the modern ways. I abandoned myself to the book and the book did not want to be traditional.

'I wrote *Quarantine*, about Christ in the wilderness, a very scriptural book. I allowed the narrative to write itself.'

There are two kinds of writers; those who are disciplined and those who are not. It is pretty obvious to which category Jim belongs...

'You know no one is going to do it if you don't. I can prevaricate but in the end I am never late. You learn that as a journalist.'

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