



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Interview with Jim Crace

Sameerah Mahmood

*Jim Crace was born in Hertfordshire in 1946 and is the author of 11 novels. I first met him at a reading event at Chichester Festival on 25 June 2013, and my interview with him took place on 10 July 2013. Before becoming a novelist, he worked as a freelance journalist, and wrote educational plays and a number of short stories between 1968 and 1986. He has won numerous awards and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1999. His success began when his first book, *Continent* (1986), won the Whitbread First Novel Award, the Guardian Fiction Prize and the David Higham Prize for Fiction. His most recent novel, *Harvest*, won him the James Tait Black Prize for fiction. Crace also won a Windham Campbell literature prize in 2014 for his career in fiction writing.*

The epigraph of Jim Crace's debut is a statement from a fictitious author: "There and beyond is a seventh continent – seven peoples, seven masters, seven seas. And its business is trade and superstition." PYCLETIUS, Histories. IV, 3¹ which introduces the subsequent worlds in his fiction. These worlds have made him a part of the mainstream of contemporary British fiction. Among British contemporary novelists, Jim Crace has made a space for himself which is uniquely his. It is known as 'Craceland', a term which describes his gift for setting his novels in mythically oriented landscapes. Crace is not holding a mirror to our real world but rather he is inventing his continent from the real world's dark corners, worlds of his own making. These worlds are as simple as his description of them, but approaching them will uncover how they conceal universal moral issues of nowhere and everywhere. His fiction is a

¹ Jim Crace, *Continent* (London: Picador, 1986).

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product of a man who knows the facts; Crace describes his fiction as dealing ‘with big issues, big moral issues, rather than smaller domestic issues. His inventions ask readers to respond to crucial universal issues rather than simple facts. His interest in natural history is obvious in his fiction, as his interest in walking and travelling inspires him to invent mythical worlds and communities.

In this interview, Crace highlights inventions as the core of his fiction, but indicates that he starts with landscapes which he considers the basis for his unlimited re-shaping of his inventions. His Craceland is rendered in a multitude of forms but with the same key words and contents. Indeed, elements of themes, tropes and means of exploring them (archetypes, ambiguity and universal big issues) are present effectively in almost all of his novels. The prototype Craceland can be found in his debut, which marks the starting point for approaching Crace’s first form of mythification, Craceland.

S.M. I’m at the beginning of my PhD and I started to read the novels *Continent*, *Gift of Stones*, *Current Time* and *Arcadia*, and I noticed these novels use the story within a story technique, can you explain this device?

J.C. First of all, in every piece of writing I think, or certainly in my writing, there are purposeful things that you know you are doing, and instinctive things that you’re not thinking about. One of the big instinctive things I recognise in my books after I’ve written them is that I have a very exaggerated and strong belief in the power of narrative. I think that narrative is one of those transforming things that distinguishes humankind from all of the other animals in the world. And there are so many narratives, we make fire, we wear clothes, we feel embarrassment, we have anger, we understand death, we have narrative. So for a very straightforward traditional novelist, that narrative is the story. However, for me, narrative is a character in everybody’s life, everybody has a narrative strand in their lives, but they also have a narrative life. So narrative has this second value in all of my books, my books are narratives, but also within all those stories, the narrative of character is an important ingredient. The fact that I have stories within stories is a reminder to myself and to my readers that narrative is powerful, but I’m not aware that I’m doing this all the time. One of the odd things about writing fiction is that sometimes I see patterns in my novels after I’ve written them, I haven’t done it on purpose, for example, in nearly all of my books a long walk is always an ingredient. Now if you were an academic or if you were a critic you would think that was a purposeful thing that I had always included in my books, in fact I only noticed it after it was done. However, I am not mystified by that because I understand why it’s there, it’s because I am a walker myself. But sometimes in a book, you can find something occurring that even you as the author can’t explain! So there’s another theme in my books which was pointed out to me, that very often the women in the books are shaven-haired. Certainly in *Being Dead* and *The Pest House* the women shave their hair, and in *Harvest* the woman has her hair shaven, so there’s this strange coincidence of theme. Now, I was not doing that on purpose, it was instinctive, so what is the instinct that makes me want to make women have their hair shaved? It’s a gender related thing. If you look at the men and the women in my books, what I’m trying

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to do is to avoid heroic, Hollywood-style clichés about men and women. So if you have the ideal of maleness which is to be strong and adventurous and brave, you will not find that in my men, most of my heroes are not cowardly, but they're timorous and very often have got some kind of physical disability which stops them being strong. So for example, both of the main characters in *Harvest* have damaged hands, which means that these characters are robbed of their Hollywood-style masculinity so that you have to think of them as being weak rather than strong. But for the women the opposite is true. I try to rob them of their Hollywood attributes, so a typical Hollywood attribute is a beautiful head of hair, so to remove the hair is also to remind the reader that this person has to be judged by other values.

So, now I'm what they call 'wise after the event', I can mention all the books that influenced me, and I can see the pattern, but when I was writing it I didn't see the pattern, it was instinctive, it was subconscious. So the same is true I think of the stories within a story, I recognise that they're there after the event, but when I was writing them it was something instinctive, and that instinctive thing I now realise is to do with the fact that I have a very deep belief in the power of narrative in all of our lives.

S.M. That's a very interesting point, because some writers have a template they follow, they have some points in mind, but you write instinctively and then find out later that these themes appeared subconsciously.

J.C. Well that's an important thing you see because if you believe, as I do, that narrative itself has a character, and it confers upon us an advantage, then you have to allow it to breathe its own oxygen, you can't force it into a straight-jacket, you can't have a template for it, and so when I write my books I like to not impose my own ideas, I like to allow the narrative itself to express itself. For example, if you look at folk tales throughout the world very often you will find an example of the young man who's made a fool of by the wise older man. It's not very often the other way around, so in a way that's quite a conservative view of the world, that older people are right and younger people are wrong. So my book *Continent* really is full of traditional conservative ideas in which the old ways of human kind are shown to be superior in many ways to the new ways of human kind, so in that instance the book is more conservative than I am; the narrative is more conservative than I am.

S.M. Philip Tew, in *Contemporary British Novelists*, states that you employ the pastoral as genre and setting. To what extent do you feel this is important to your novels?

J.C. Setting is hugely important, because none of my books get going before the setting is clear in my mind, so I know the time period and I start to get a sense of the geography and landscape. Also, it is true that if you were to look at my books and you were to ask which of my books were books set in cities and which are set in the countryside, the vast majority are set in the countryside. Though equally, three of four of my novels are set on the coast, so those are books which are not strictly pastoral. So my answer to you is that I

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think too much is made of the pastoral in my books. There are two books which deal with the pastoral, one is *Arcadia*, which is very much a debate between the pastoral ideal and the city ideal, and of course *Harvest* which is a book which is about nothing but the pastoral, it's about the loss of farmland to pastureland, so in its real sense that's right, but no, I think that the whole business of the pastoral is exaggerated.

S.M. In *Continent*, reviewers refer to the idea of progress versus price, which is an idea I was attracted to. How important do you feel this concept is throughout your novels?

J.C. This is all to do with the idea of optimism and pessimism, because some people would argue that change is always for the better and that's very much a Darwinist view. Conservatives would say change always makes things worse, but there's this middle view which I tend to agree with, which is this Jungian idea that the cost of something new worth having is the loss of something old worth keeping. In other words, there is change, and you lose things that you love, but you also gain things that you love and lose things that you hate, but you gain things that you hate, and that somehow or other this is the way the universe works. It's a self-modulating universe, and it's a very optimistic view of the world, because it suggests survival and it suggests longevity.

I'm very interested in change, and my early novels and my most recent novels are all about communities at a time when they're undergoing some sort of change in their lives. A lot of readers think that I take a pessimistic view of it, because I put my characters under a lot of hardship, but I always feel that the books leave the reader's nose pointing towards an interesting and better future. But you can't always get your readers to think what you want them to; I mean readers will bring their own optimism and their own pessimism to a book. I remember once that somebody came up to me at a festival, and asked 'why do you revel in disgust? Why do you take pleasure in disgust?' and I was very shocked by this. What she meant was that she had been reading *Being Dead* and she had read the descriptions of the bodies and the insects and the rotting dead birds and such and she had felt like I was some terrible schoolboy taking pleasure in disgusting things! And I was shocked, and I didn't have a good answer for her, because I was just so shocked by her anger, and then afterwards I realised that actually the difference between me and her was that she felt disgust at these things but I didn't. I like the natural world and because I'm interested in the natural world I know that the natural world is complicated and that it involves compost, it involves death and it involves disease as well as beautiful things like flowers and rainbows. I know that, but she was the kind of person who thought the natural world only existed for rainbows and flowers. So my point here is that she felt disgust, and I didn't feel disgust. As a writer, you cannot tell the readers what to think, they will bring their own prejudices and they will bring their own disgust or they will bring their own optimism to your books and therefore, in a way, that's what I love about literature; it's not a closed event. Narrative is a living thing and you cannot predict how it will react in anybody's mind and it will always be different from the writer's.

S.M. You also said you leave choices for the readers to interpret.

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J.C. The reader must have something to do on a small level, you have to assume the reader is intelligent so they can find complicated meanings without you shouting at them, and also, you have to leave the reader big things to do, so if the subject matter is a big issue, such as racism or death or religion, you have to leave the reader with a debate in his or her mind so that when they close the last page of the book, the debate is only just beginning.

S.M. Tew states that you have no theory of literature.² Would you agree with the statement that you're writing with no theory in mind?

J.C. When I'm writing my own fiction, I'm not thinking like an academic, I'm not thinking about theory. I like to think of it like flying a kite, there's the knowledgeable part of you that has all the skills, but then there's this great wind of narrative that flies through your hair and you don't know what games it's going to play, you don't know how mischievous it's going to be, you don't know where you're going to end up. I always tell this story of when in *Quarantine* Jesus appeared, on the day that he appeared he was not going to be a character in the book, he was just going to be an historical reference, but at the end of the day Jesus was a character in the book. He'd brought about a miracle perhaps by saving Musa's life, and then of course, once that had happened, I knew that whatever I did Jesus was going to become a character throughout the whole of the book. So if I'd come into the book with a literary theory that I wanted apply, or even with a sense of whether I was an atheist or a believer or not, that may have affected the narrative. But as a writer, you have to be patient and wait to find out what the book wants, the book itself is not interested in political theory. I think that's what you have to do with fiction; you have to just be completely intuitive.

S.M. I told my supervisor that Crace's works are powerful without the help of an external agency. By that I mean that your plots don't need modern or technological interventions to make them work. What do you think about this?

J.C. This is just one of the pleasures of writing, to shape something as beautifully as you can, to make a perfect sphere from your books so that everything is explained and everything is answered without it seeming like a lecture. The hidden ingredient is that if I was a realist novel holding a mirror up to the real world, then I would have to refer to the world beyond the books to give the books a kind of provenance. You would have to talk about 1911, and you'd have to talk about Saigon and you'd have to talk about the internal combustion machine because you need those references, but with my books what I want to do is to create a little island which is just a perfect island of its own making, in which if I want to invent something I can invent something. I want my books to be comprised of lies rather than facts, so in a way, my novels all have crusts round them like a pie, so external influences are excluded, because I used to be a journalist, and I don't approve of people

² Philip Tew, 'Jim Crace', *Contemporary British Novelists* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

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telling lies about the real world, but I'm also a keen lover of fiction, so when I tell lies, I want them to be lies in a world of my own making.

S.M. I've noticed in your novels that death is one of the major themes, and it is not only related to the decay of the human body, but it's also linked to other aspects in the lives of the characters. Can you explain this idea that death is not only corporeal?

J.C. This is not a literary point, this is a point about human kind, death is the greatest test of our optimism; we have to find some optimism in this immensely negative thing. We are on this planet for a limited number of years, and then it ends, poof! Like that. Now if you're a religious person, then you have a narrative of comfort from the religion which provides comfort to you after you've died. I'm not a religious person, but nevertheless I still have religious impulses and so I think the same impulse that has made the big religions all have narratives that provide an afterlife to make sense of death, to give meaning to death, is the same impulse that makes me want to make a narrative of comfort in the face of death. I don't call it God, I call it landscape, I call it nature, but there's not actually such a big difference. So for me, dealing with death is the big test of what all my books are about, there has to be some comfort to be found in it, and you will find in my books that something always survives the people that die, and generally it's love that survives.

S.M. The same point was made in an interview with Judith Spellman when you were talking about the idea of darkness and death, she put forward the idea that when there is death there is darkness, and you said 'no, there is ambiguity'. There is an optimistic ambiguity in your novels. Could you explain more about what you mean by this phrase optimistic ambiguity?

J.C. Well ambiguity is the lifeblood of fiction, so if you're a journalist, what you cannot have is any ambiguity, there can't be double meanings in journalism or in a non-fiction book, the sentences have to be ice-cold in their meaning, so that anyone who reads it, anywhere in the world, can take the same meaning from it. That's what good journalism is. I'm sure there are examples which disprove that but it's a general rule. Whereas in fiction, exactly the opposite is true, there has to be an ambiguity to it, there have to be several meanings, it has to be nuanced, when you encounter something, your mind should split in two. So what I don't want to do when I write about death is to come up with a theory which pretends to be absolute; anything I say about anything in my books is instinctively ambiguous. That's what fiction is about, fiction is about leaving you with a debate just beginning, not with a debate just ended. That's why I think I used the phrase 'ambiguous optimism' there. If you go along to a religious ceremony for example, or a political meeting, in which someone believes one hundred percent in something, there's no ambiguity in what they're saying, they are saying 'Brother! When you die, you will go to heaven, and you will answer for your sins!' or they will say 'vote Communist otherwise the world will go to hell' there's no ambiguity in it, it's sloganising. Whereas I might be like

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that when I'm not writing, in my politics, but novels die if they take on that tone of voice, because they alienate the reader, they give the reader nothing to do.

S.M. When I read your novels, they're ambiguous, but at the same time they have a moralistic tone. Can you explain how a narrative can be so ambiguous and at the same time moralistic?

J.C. Because the novel's purpose is to deal with big issues, big moral issues, rather than smaller domestic issues. There is a convention in British literature, and here I generalise, which distinguishes it from say continental literature, that the personal and the autobiographical drive the narrative. There are lots of wonderful great novels which are about the breakup of marriages or they're about the loss of work, or they're about how well men have behaved in a war, but essentially they're private and individual stories, autobiographical stories, stories about small worlds and small families. My books aren't really about individuals, they're about big lofty moral issues, I'm embarrassed to say it because it sounds pretentious, but you know, some novels you'll say 'that's about the breakup of a marriage' but my novels would never be like that. My novels are about the end of industry, they're about the inevitability of death, they're about the importance of religious belief, they're about the decline of the Western world, they're about the collapse of civilisation, they're about love and our loyalty towards the land, and these are all big moralistic issues. However, being moralistic is not the same as being dogmatic or doctrinaire, so that's the difference. I might be dogmatic and doctrinaire when I'm not writing books, but in books being dogmatic is the death of fiction. So if you are going to be moralistic, you have to be moralistic in a nuanced and in an ambiguous way.

S.M. Would you say that animals or other living things have a function in your novels?

J.C. They do. I think that one of the things that underscores my attitude towards the natural world, and one of the things that helps me get a sense of what humankind is all about on a personal level, and makes me comfortable with notions of death, is how much humankind, despite the fact that we have all of these attainments that are different from all of the other animals, are still animals. So on the one hand there's this list of things which make us different from other animals, consciousness, knowledge of death, making fire, wearing clothes, you know, it's a long long list, but in the end, we're still animals and that tension between those two things for me is absolutely fascinating. Another central part of all of my books is the tension between how we're different from animals, and why we're the same as animals, and I take great comfort in that conflict. So if I wanted to blur the edges between what animals are like and what human beings are like, then you'd expect me to give human beings some animal attributes, and you'd expect me to give to animals some human attributes, so that's what's going on.

If you look at the mythologies of the world, they would have a wise animal very often relating to a human being, you think of the Minotaur legends in Greece the Minotaur is an animal, of course he is, but he's also someone who can speak and has consciousness and

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has knowledge and has wisdom. Traditional literature throughout the world is full of the personification of animals, and mythology with animals in it is very very common.

S.M. You create characters or myths in your novels, but your myth-making process is not only related to human beings.

J.C. No, that's right; I'm interested in animals anyway, so if I'm going to tell lies, I'm interested in telling lies about those things. But remember that to some extent all animals are an invention, even if it's a real animal it's an invention, because they have no existence without human consciousness, seeing them and associating with them not only with stories but with a word. For example think of a bird, a nightingale, and you would call it 'bulbul' what does that mean if you break that word down in Arabic?

S.M. Maybe it's from its voice, 'bulbul' it burbles.

J.C. Exactly, it's from its voice, so just in that very world 'bulbul' for nightingale there's a little story, there's a little narrative, which has taken a creature which has never given itself a name – it's just a bird, it doesn't have consciousness – and given it a narrative. With the word 'bulbul' you can hear it, now that bird is massive, it fills our imagination, it has a purpose within songs, it has a purpose within natural history, it's huge. In England it's called a nightingale, 'night in gale' so it's called a night in a storm and that's because it tends to sing at night and it sings like a storm, so here's a different story, exactly the same bird but a different story. So these are real birds, but somehow they've been invented by language, it's the language that gives them narrative. Now it is true that any living object in the world is transformed by language and the word that we associate with it, and this is a game that languages throughout the world have played; why would I not want to play the same game? Why would I not want to find some animals of my own and give them titles of my own? Because it's too wonderful a game not to play, so in *Continent* I could have used all real animals, but I invented the swag beetle. The word swag in the English has three meanings, it means to boast, it means a bag full of the things that a robber has stolen, and it's also Australian slang for a bag that you carry all of your possessions in. So there are three meanings, but also the word swag is half way between two English words, swamp and bog which are two types of landscape, very sweaty and very damp and very muddy, so the swag beetle is something like that, with all of those connotations. The swag beetle feeds on dead bodies, so you have a creature boastfully swaggering onto the body, stealing meat and going away with the meat on his back, so all those meanings are sort of there. Language behaves like that, and it's great fun for me to behave like that as well. I remember when I invented the swag beetle I thought, if there isn't a swag beetle, there should be and so that's why I do that.

S.M. How do you see men and women differently in your novels?

J.C. I think my impulses are to be critical of male attitudes towards women, and in order to be critical of male attitudes towards women I have to have men behaving badly

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towards women, and so there are not many post-feminist women in my books. But what I hope there are in my books, are women who are full of promise and full of character and full of adventure and full of skills.

S.M. Like Martha and Miriam in *Quarantine*?

J.C. Yes, sisterly women, those are my two favourite characters in *Quarantine*, and I want people to go away from *Quarantine* feeling optimistic about those two women who have saved their lives in some way.

S.M. In an interview with Minna Proctor from *BOMB*, you compared your works to religious stories, what link do you see between religious stories and your narratives³?

J.C. Well any kind of literature is part of the oratory tradition. For example, if you want to warn people in a community that eating pork can kill you, because pork has got tapeworms in it, you can go to this audience, who are perhaps all illiterate, and you can give them a lecture on medicine and science and they're going to believe it or they're not going to believe it. But if you come up with a story, which they will remember, which is 'one day a small boy called Joseph discovered a pig dying in the desert, and he thought "this is a gift from God, I will take it back to my parents"', and already you've got a story. You tell the story about what happens, and the moral of this story is don't eat pork. So what happens is the people who hear the story go home and they retell the story and it's disseminated and so that's how giving information through myth is a powerful way of persuading people how to behave in a certain way. Narrative is how you smuggle into people's consciousness something you want them to believe, something you want them to discuss. The old tradition has died out because it's been destroyed by the written tradition in many respects, but the old tradition has been with us for thousands upon thousands of years and it's powerful and it still works. You know a rumour can spread like wildfire without being written down just by people telling each other. If you hear a fantastic story from someone you'll tell somebody else and they'll tell somebody else 'did you hear about?' 'Did you hear about?' 'Did you hear about?'

S.M. Andrew Lawless referred to your works as retellings of other stories. How can you explain this?

J.C. It's true, and it's looking like a pattern isn't it? I didn't realise this until subsequently again, but if you do believe that narrative is powerful, as I do, and if you are the kind of writer who has stories within stories, then inevitably your stories will have been told before in a different form. If you think that stories are powerful, then it's going to be important to you that stories are also true and moralistic, so when you see a traditional

³ Minna Proctor, 'Jim Crace,' *BOMB* 71 (2000) Spring 2000 <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2311/jim-crace>

storytelling which is harmful, then you are going to want to correct it. So if you think about the tradition of storytelling in Hollywood films, the portrayal of women, then what you're doing by retelling it is going to war with what you think is a bad tradition of storytelling. The same is true, for example, of *Quarantine*, which takes a story within the *Bible* and retells it, it kind of kidnaps the story to some extent, because it uses all of the same devices that the story in the *Bible* does, but it puts it to different use. There are many examples where this happens, if you look at most literature in America it's about going westwards, *Grapes of Wrath*, *On the Road*, the American narrative myth is about people going west, pioneers going west, immigrants going west, that's what the story's about. Now if I wanted to have a war with America, which is what I did over the Iraq war quite frankly, I was very unhappy about the Iraq war, then how could I have a debate with America, except by unstitching their narrative? So I write a story about America in which America wasn't going east to west, America was going west to east, so that's an exact example as you say in which I was retelling a story, but it's not conscious, it's subconscious.

S.M. Can we call you a magical realist? From your interviews I know that you moved from journalism to fiction writing and during this time you were reviewing a book by Márquez,⁴ and you decided you wanted to write something like him⁵.

J.C. I was writing a political realist novel, which was hopeless, and then I read this book and it was just like a revelation to me. I don't call myself a magical realist, I tend to call myself a sort of fabulist, so in other words I try to write moral fables, and I can't call myself a magical realist because I don't think there's any realist aspects in my work, I'm not trying to be realist at all. I think a magical realist is taking realism and giving it fireworks and I think that my game is more traditional than that, I think I'm more of a fabulist. I don't mind being called a magical realist, although I feel forced because I feel that magical realism is something that belongs to the third world as we used to call it, I believe that it's Asian and I believe it's African and I believe it's South American, I don't think it's European. I feel that there's something colonial about calling yourself a magical realist, because that belongs to other cultures, and I don't want the West to appropriate magical realism. In the same way, I wouldn't call myself a feminist, I would call myself an anti-sexist, because I think women are feminists and it's called the women's movement, it's not called the men's movement, and if men get their hands on it, it's lost.

S.M. Tew, writing about your works, said not only myth, but also that fable and parable can be found in your novels, do you agree?

⁴ Gabriel García Márquez, *In Evil Hour* (London: Harper Perennial, 1991)

⁵ Adam Begley, 'Jim Crace, The Art of Fiction No. 179' *the Paris Review* 167 (2003) Fall 2003

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/122/the-art-of-fiction-no-179-jim-crace>

J.C. Well when fable started no-one really had any sense of the world, no-one knew whether the world was round, if you were a religious person or you were a story-teller you could say anything and people would believe you. The example I always give is the religious man on the top of the hill and there's thunder and lightning and he says 'that is evidence of God's anger' or 'God's indigestion', and you can say what you want and people will believe you because there's no information to tell you any different. So the fables that they told in those days could be totally believed, you could think there was a Minotaur, because you were never going to travel and find there was not a Minotaur. Anything could be true. But if you're a fabulist now you can't behave like that, because all the information is there, and so if you're a fabulist now, you've got to behave in a different way, you've got to be more cunning, you've got to adopt the tone of voice of a realist when you're not really a realist. So when you invent animals, such as I did in *Being Dead* and in *Continent*, you've got to write about them as if you're a natural historian and you're telling the truth, because people are less easily fooled. So if you're going to fool people, you have to make much more effort these days to fool them, so that's the difference, to be a fabulist these days demands a different kind of writing style.

S.M. How do you choose the titles of the books?

J.C. Sometimes you know exactly what the title's going to be and very often it's almost the first thing that comes to you, so with *Being Dead* I knew absolutely that it was going to be the title, and I kind of knew that it was going to provide the last two words in the last sentence of the book. So with *Being Dead* the first thing I wrote was 'and these are the never ending days of being dead',⁶ and of course 'being dead' is an ambiguous phrase, so I always knew that it was going to be the title of the book. It was Dylan Thomas who said that when he wrote poems he would make a list of the rhyme words first and he would reverse the sentences into them, so with *Being Dead* it was as if I was reversing the whole novel in order to get to that last sentence. But sometimes you have a book in which the title is completely wrong, and you never get the right title, so with *Six* for example, when I was writing it, it was called *Genesis*. Now it's called *Genesis* in America and it's called *Six* here, the British hated the title *Genesis*, they said it was too religious, no-one would buy it, but the people in America hated the title *Six*, they said it should be called *Genesis*, but both titles are bad. When the book came out in Europe, three countries took a line from the book and they called it *The City of Kisses, Stadt der Küsse*; that should have been the title of the book. So sometimes you make mistakes, you get the wrong title.

S.M. How do you structure your novels?

J.C. Well it's interesting, structure is important, the architecture of a novel is important, and some writers that I admire are really relaxed about it and anarchic about it, and they don't care about shape, and we can think of famous novels which are kind of shapeless

⁶ Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (London: Picador, 1999) 210.

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but my instincts again are to have patterns and to have architecture. So I suppose that even though when I start a novel I haven't made a sketch of the pattern and the shape of the novel, when I'm writing the novel, I'm looking for patterns. It's quite scary to start writing a book of 80,000 words, and in a way you're in a big rough sea of anything can happen, you can do anything you want and you're looking for things to hang on to, you're looking for some security, because it's scary. You've got to make the characters work, you've got to bring out the theme, it's got to be beautiful, it's got to be interesting, it's got to be different, it's scary! And so I think that what's happening is that I'm just looking for structure to give myself confidence, so the result is that my books are very very highly structured, in *Being Dead* you've got the whole structure running backwards across several themes, the structure is very complicated.

S.M. Is there a special relationship between the structure as you see it, and the content? For example in *Six*, you said it has six chapters and it's related to the character who is going to have six children.

J.C. I believe there is. If you think about the calligrapher in *Continent*, he talks about the relationship between meaning and form, and this is something that is understood in music. How would you ever write a piece of music that had no structure? Even the most atonal music is about structure, even if it's turning its back on structure it's about structure. So in all of the other arts meaning and composition are like twins. So I think that meaning strengthens form and I believe that form strengthens meaning, they are Siamese twins and they are joined at the heart. But a lot of critics and a lot of readers hate that about my books, they would say they're over-schematic, they wear an iron jacket in terms of structure, and I recognise that, that's a good criticism, and it's a fair criticism, however that's not what I want to do, I love structure.

S.M. Do you think that irony is found in your narratives?

J.C. Well there is irony there of course, but not in the English sense. Irony is such a typical English form because the English are very embarrassed about seriousness, about being intellectual. If you were to say to a Frenchman 'you are an intellectual' he'd be so pleased, or she would be so pleased, but if you say to an Englishman 'you're an intellectual' she will say 'no, no I'm not, I'm just interested' you know, we would deny it. I noticed that when I used to go for lunches with David Lloyd and other writers in Birmingham, these are all published important writers that I would go to lunch with, if any one of those people was serious for too long, someone would make a joke or would start an anecdote to get rid of the embarrassment of seriousness. That is not true as far as I know anywhere else in the world. This is where irony comes in, irony is a way of being serious whilst seeming to make a joke. My books aren't like that, my books are serious and unembarrassedly serious, they're very continental in that respect, they're very moralistic. You will find irony in my books, of course you will, but irony is not the driving force, whereas I think in English

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literature, post-Jane Austen, irony is the driving force, which is the distinguishing tone of voice of English literature.

S.M. In one of your interviews⁷ you said that your influences are not bookish, you said ‘I like walking, I like natural history’ can you elaborate on this point?

J.C. Well, there is a tradition that says that reading books is the single best thing you can possibly do, and I know with my own children, when they didn’t have their noses in books when they were young we’d say ‘oh God, what’s going to happen to them? They’re going to end up in prison! They’re not reading’ but I realised that reading is not the most important thing in the world. Therefore I try to distance myself from the dictatorship of reading, because if reading were the most important thing in the world, then illiterate people, or people who didn’t like fiction, would never have any value to their lives, and clearly that is crazy. The important thing I think in life is that everybody, in order to be fulfilled, needs some passion, they need something which diverts them and which satisfies them in which they can be king or queen. It may be reading or it may be gardening or it may be cooking or it may be speaking French or it may be travelling or may be making pots or it may be loving your dog. Everyone needs transcendence, and so what I don’t want to do is to be the kind of writer whose books only come from books, because I don’t believe in books that much. So of course I’ve read lots of books, and of course I will continue to read lots of books, but I don’t see that as a recipe for success in everybody’s life, although I would like everyone to buy one of mine!

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The Devil’s Larder (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

⁷ Jason Beattie, ‘The Rites and Wrongs of Making up Stories,’ *Birmingham Post* 11 September 1999, 61.

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