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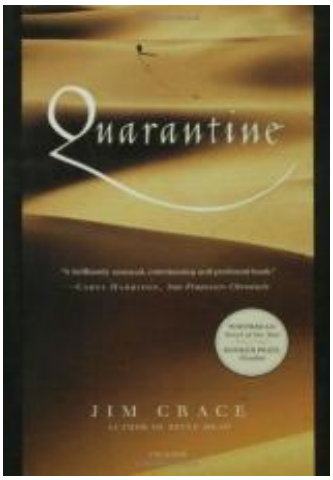
Quarantine

by Jim Crace



About the Book

Judea, two thousand years ago: it is the first new moon of spring. Several travelers have gathered at a group of remote desert caves: an aged Jew stricken by cancer, a wild desert dweller, a handsome blond man searching for enlightenment, and a childless woman who longs for a baby. The final, and most mysterious, pilgrim is a young Galilean named Jesus who hopes, perhaps alone among them, to come face-to-face with god.

Crace?s compelling rendition of the forty-day ?quarantine? is a first-rate work of literature, a repository of poetry, powerful images, and gritty realism. Furthermore, it is also a bold philosophical statement, an unconventional and sometimes shocking recasting of the nebulous, rumor-shrouded events that have molded and influenced much of the world?s character and history for the past two thousand years.

Discussion Guide

1. Crace uses the following epigraph from The Limits of Mortality at the beginning of the book: ?An ordinary man of average weight and fitness embarking on a total fast--that is, a fast during which he refuses both his food and drink--could not expect to live for more than thirty days, nor to be conscious for more than twenty-five. For him, the forty days of fasting described in religious texts would not be achievable--except with divine help, of course. History, however, does not record an intervention of that kind, and medicine opposes it.? Why do you think Crace uses this for an epigraph, and what does this tell us about his intentions?

2. ?The scrubland welcomed Miri?(p.8). By what means does Crace give the landscape a character, and what sort of character is it? Who thrives in this landscape; what human characteristics does it favor? What does the landscape?s welcoming of Miri tell us about Miri herself? Do you feel that the author loves, hates, or fears the desert? What words and terms does he use to describe the landscape?s peculiar sensuality?

3. Why does Crace use ?quarantine? as a term for the traditional forty-day fast period, and why do you think he has chosen it as the title for his book?

4. Telling of Jesus? past, the narrator says, ?He had been standing at the window of his father?s workshop and god had called his name? (p.22). Here, and in later portions of the book, does the narrator imply that this calling came purely and simply from Jesus? imagination? Why has Crace chosen not to capitalize the word ?god??

5. In Musa?s tent, Jesus tells himself: ?He had to leave this sick man on his own to die. Otherwise he?d never reach the cave; he?d miss the start of quarantine? (p.26). Is this decision a cowardly or selfish one on Jesus? part? Does it invalidate what he was trying to achieve by his quarantine? Does the author imply that Jesus? touch healed Musa, or that Musa would have recovered anyway?

6. What do the lives of Marta and Miri tell us about the condition of women in their culture? What was their role, and how were they regarded by the male half of the population? What is their opinion of men and marriage? In what fundamental ways do the women in this novel differ in character from the men?

7. ?But Jesus had not come this far to witness only godless routines of the sun and sky and sea. He had to take each shift of light, each colouring, each shadow of a bird to be the evidence of god. He had to persuade himself, before the forty days were up, that he?d been awarded a brief view of god?s kingdom? (p.81). Jesus was ?a man who was in the mood to divine grand meanings in the simplest acts. There?d be no god without such men? (p.128). What do these quotations imply about the nature of Jesus as a human being? About the nature of religion as a phenomenon?

8. During Jesus? sufferings, he mistakes Musa for the devil. Is Jesus? identification of Musa as the devil possibly a correct one; that is, is Musa purely evil? In what ways does Musa resemble, or not resemble, the New Testament devil?

9. Just before he dies, Jesus hears a voice ?not Jewish and not Greek? (p.192). ?The voice took charge of him. It walked him to the row of distant caves.? To what extent does the narrator make you believe, or disbelieve, in Jesus? supernatural inspiration?

10. Musa has a vision of Jesus after Jesus? death (pp.204-6). Is Musa changed in any substantial way after this vision? Are any of the others fundamentally changed after their quarantine? If so, in what way? Do these changes occur as a result of Jesus? presence?

11. What do you think will happen to the characters after the novel closes? What will Musa do, and what role will he have in the propagation of the ?Jesus sect? and, eventually, the birth of Christianity? What role, if any, will the other quarantine participants have in it?

12. Does Crace?s narrative strike you as a feasible version of the real events? In your opinion, does it contain psychological truth?

13. What is religion or the religious impulse, as Crace describes it? Is it superstition and fear, or are there other, more genuinely spiritual elements?

14. In an interview (The Guardian, June 12, 1997), Crace says that he?s a ?post-Dawkins scientific atheist? but that his

?novels are free to express, and always do express, a different viewpoint? from his own. Would you say that this is true of **Quarantine**--that the novel expresses a different viewpoint from that of pure atheism?

Author Bio

Jim Crace is the author of **Continent** (1986), **The Gift of Stones** (1988), **Arcadia** (1992), and **Signals of Distress** (1994). He has been the recipient of the Whitbread First Novel Prize, the E.M. Forster Award, and the GAP International Prize for Literature. **Quarantine** was short-listed for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Novel of the Year award. Crace?s novels have been translated into fourteen languages. He lives in Birmingham, England, with his wife and two children.

Critical Praise

"A serious and skillfully crafted novel about folly, faith, and a radically new relationship between a people and its god. "

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