


Continent

Jim Grace

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To those who say there's nothing new to be written or read, Jim Crace has responded. For this provocative collection of short stories, Crace created a whole new continent. Unnamed and unspecified, the continent nevertheless resonates with characters, developments, contradictions and examinations of the path and power of progress. In one story electricity comes to a country in the form of a giant fan; in another a government agent out to exploit a primitive people discovers the beauty of traditional life. The book, which won a Whitbread Prize, takes us to a new world in a journey that causes us look more closely at our own.

Continent Details

Date : Published October 1st 2001 by Penguin (first published 1986)

ISBN : 9780141005447

Author : Jim Crace

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Fiction, Short Stories, Literature, Fantasy, European Literature, British Literature, Novels

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Mark says

A Collection of seven short stories that all take place on a fictitious seventh continent. Things are a little different in this part of the world. Elements of this book still come back to me, like the character that attempts to stop his electric meter from spinning by shutting off items in his house. He doesn't realize what a difficult task this is until he attempts it. Think about it: You shut off all the lights and other obvious items, but then there's the hot water heater, the digital clock on the microwave. The Character decides that it's easier to go in the other direction, so he overloads the power grid achieving a blurred spinning of the meter indicator until it disintegrates.

David K. Lemons says

(I wrote a paragraph about half an hour ago and have no idea where it went. Sometimes I'm writing a review and it turns out to be a comment, sometimes a comment and it turns out to be a review. Sometimes it just vanishes.)

Basically, I said that it is an okay book. I would not refer to it again. It kind of dangled with nothing to say. I read it on Palouki Beach, Amaliada, Greece, but I don't recommend it for the beach, especially in Greece. It's a little dull, but I did finish it and felt relieved. I suggested that Crace try his hand at noire thrillers. Maybe science fiction. Not autobiography however since he is just not that interesting.

Diane S ? says

3.5 This was Crace's first book, a book of short stories that surprisingly won the Whitebread award for first fiction. Surprising because the award went to a book of short stories. These are stories that take place in a made up place, said to be the sixth continent or is it? Craces explores societies coming up against the old superstitions faced with new scientific progress. Much that happens everywhere, everyday. His stories explore the ambiguity of changes and progress on the people and this world.

I liked them, I like the way he writes. Very clear and concise, easy to follow. The stories are often an exaggeration of our most hidden fears. How things and people that are different, are looked on with suspicion. How we many times embrace the old, because it is familiar, even when it is not working. Good collection of stories.

Ivan says

Why not start from beginning? This is my first meeting with Jim Crace so I decided to start with his first novel. Continent is collection of seven stories placed on made up seventh continent. It's place in early stages of civilization where influence of western cultures is just setting in so as reacquiring theme we have clash of old and new ways. Superstition vs technology, tradition vs progress and in this fight Crace doesn't remain

neutral.

Overall short and sweet book that can be completed under two hours of reading. I can't wait to see other of his work.

Noah says

Crace is a genius. This is not his best book, not by a long shot. A lot of people think "Quarantine," his fantasy of Jesus's forty days in the desert, is his masterpiece, but I'm partial to "Being Dead" and "Harvest." Nonetheless, all three are quite a bit better than "Continent," which seems rather aimless and doesn't have the explosive language for which he's now famous. It's pretty dull, actually. Please don't read this one first because it might turn you off to one of the greatest prose stylists of the last fifty years.

Lauren says

A bit of a letdown after the wonderful Quarantine.

My expectations were perhaps not set correctly. The blurb on the back of the book says:
Jim Crace's internationally acclaimed first book explores the tribes and communities, conflicts and superstitions, flora and fauna of a wholly spellbinding place: an imaginary seventh continent.

For some reason, I was expecting something more magical, more mysterious. Something like, I don't know, rivers made up of rolling rocks. The imaginary seventh continent (wait, aren't there seven real continents?) is instead rather ordinary.

Magnus Stanke says

While I'm not a great fan of short stories per se I picked up this collection purely based on my liking of Jim Crace's style, and I wasn't disappointed. At less than 200 pages it's a fast read, and although it's his first book, his characteristic dry tone is fully developed here.

As far as I can tell the stories are all allegories about the clash between modernity (some might call it globalisation in hindsight; in the mid 80s the term wasn't really in use that much) and the 'old' world, an unnamed country (countries?) that dream(s) of technology and gets invariably disappointed when the wished for thing arrives.

Not exactly new or original in content, but you dig his style than you won't go wrong

Peter says

Seven stories for seven continents, perhaps – but not the familiar ones. If the publishers hadn't banged on about Jim Crace's "entirely imaginary realm" all over the cover, the effect would have been more subtle, since the stories could easily have been accommodated within the known world. The fact that they are not

quite is intriguing and mildly unsettling. Given the author's stated dislike for research, a cynic might suggest that imaginary realms obviate the need for any...but not I, of course. Many, if not all, the stories explore the impact of the outside world on indigenous cultures which is, as expected, destructive – even if it is only a well-meaning Canadian runner outracing a local lad on a horse where “*all the young men of the mountains rode horses.*” Or another young man, educated at a foreign university, uncertain of his status and his future: “*What must I do, fellow students? Decay here by the light of a thousand oil lamps? Or cast off my inheritance...put my faith in science and modernity?*” A similar conundrum faces the villagers in Jim Crace's later novel *Harvest*, as enclosures shut down their ancient way of life. An interesting and original collection - though perhaps a little too low-key to have any very great impact.

Miloš Kostić says

Kontinent je zbirka priča sa zajedničkom idejom i koja se radnja dešava na imaginarnom "sedmom" kontinentu koji kao da je tek otkriven od strane civilizovanog sveta. Poređenje sa Afrikom se samo nameće ali to ipak nije Afrika već nešto još starije. To su prvi, početni koraci društva u kome tek počinje da se šire obrazovanje, elektrifikacija, zamiru stari zanati, stara sujeverja i običaji, stranci istražuju zaostala plemena, širi se korupcija i strahovlada... Ukratko, tranzicija. Na samom početku Krejs navodi citat koji je retko prikladan: "Daleko, daleko, postoji sedmi kontinent – sedam naroda, sedam gospodara, sedam mora. A njihov posao su trgovina i sujeverje." (Pikletije, *Istorija*, IV, 3.) Neko bi možda očekivao da probleme u rajski vrt donose stranci ali ovde je jasno da je Krejs na strani civilizovanosti kao, uostalom, i u svim ostalim njegovim knjigama koje sam pročitao. Zato ga i toliko volim, izmeću ostalog. Jezik je čist, priče su jednostavne, u nekim trenucima sam imao utisak da su to samo skice, ali to ništa ne umanjuje, naprotiv. Upečatljivo delo. Možda ovo nije najbolja knjiga da se poredi s Krejsom ali svakako zaslužuje sve moje preporuke jer iako je prvo njegovo delo, on je u njemu već bio na svom prepoznatljivom vrhunskom nivou.

Naišao sam na jedan dugačak intervju u kome u jednom delu autor opisuje svoje književne početke i nastanak ovog dela. Vrlo mi je zanimljiv (on je u stvari osnovni razlog što sam uopšte počeo ovaj komentar) pa ću, kao zaključak, preneti taj deo:

"As I said, when those first few stories were published, I got approached by several agents and publishers. They were all posh toffs from London as far as I was concerned. But one, a publisher called David Godwin, made the trek up to Birmingham to see me. He picked up my then young son, Tom, and said, What a pretty kid! That was totally persuasive. David—who is now my agent—offered me a book contract. And so I sat down and started writing this piece of realist political fiction, set in a suburb not a lot different from the Birmingham suburb of Moseley, which is where I lived then and am still living now. It was garbage. It was a novel that my seventeen-year-old self would have wanted to write, but I was almost forty by then and I couldn't see what the next sentence should be, let alone the next paragraph, let alone what the rest of the book might be about. I was forcing this thing forward and it was appalling. David Godwin would occasionally phone up and say, How's the novel going, old chap? and I would say, It's inching forward. But it wasn't inching forward at all. It was dying on its legs.

I was doing some reviewing as well at the time, and I read a novel called *In Evil Hour* by Gabriel García Márquez—and others by him at the same time. I thought, This is great, but I don't admire it. Why don't I admire it? Because when I'm down at the pub, I'm bullshitting like this all the time. I'm making stuff up, not trying to hold a mirror up to the world—I'm just making stuff up for the sake of it, and that's all that Gabriel García Márquez is doing. I could do this in my sleep, I thought, I'm going to give it a try. So I shelved the social realism and sat down and wrote *Continent*. It was exactly the kind of book that my seventeen-year-old

self would sneer at: rhythmic prose, moralistic, bourgeois fiction. Exactly the kind of stuff I didn't want to write, but I realized at once that I had found my voice. I had no other voice. I had to play the cards that I'd been dealt.

As soon as I'd started on the first story of *Continent*, not only could I see what the next story was, or what that book could be, I knew what my next four books were. The novels stretched ahead, that's the truth of the matter, as soon as I'd reconciled myself to being a fabulist rather than a political realist. I sit here now and I know exactly what my next two books will be."

Conrad says

I'm not sure I totally "get it" with this collection of short stories but there is a certain thread of irony that runs through them all. Crace is a good story-teller but I'm not sure I would return to this for a second reading. I much prefer his later works "A Gift of Stones" and "Harvest".

Maciek says

My copy of *Continent* contains the following inscription:

*For Simon,
Christmas 1986
All the best for the
New Year & any new
continents you may
take on-*

There's a signature below it, but it's incomprehensible. The copy in question is a hardback published by William Heinemann in London in 1986, apparently a first edition - sold for £4.95 net, with a sticker saying "you can afford the journey!" put on a cover - (someone - Simon? Simon's giver? - removed it from this copy. How far have we gone - can you imagine a brand new hardcover being sold at a bookstore with the retail price of five quid?

I wondered about Simon. What kind of a person was he? The inscription implied him to be a traveler, and one who has journeyed beyond his native continent. Did he enjoy the book? This isn't a novel, but a collection of seven stories set in an unnamed, fictitious seventh continent, where old tradition clashes with unavoidable progress. Did Simon take the book with him on one of his journeys? That would make the book a traveler as well. How did it slip from his hands, and end up in mine? What has the book seen? Where has it been?

These are all questions which have been on my mind as I was reading *Continent*, Jim Crace's debut work. Each of his novel is very different from the other - he's not a writer afraid of experimenting and trying new things, and it paid off: *Continent* has won the Whitbread First Novel of the Year Award, and his later historical novels *Quarantine* and *Harvest* have both been nominated for the Booker Prize - Britain's finest. He's an accomplished and skilled writer, and *Continent* is no exception - the opening story, *Talking Skull*, a

freshly educated young man struggles with defining his future: should he embrace his education and spread ideas and wisdom, or continue to feed on the superstitions of the local, uneducated population and make a fortune - like his father? Similarly, in another story, a village scribe struggles to stay true to his art in the face of profit and greed coming from the outsiders who came to seek him for their own gains. The dreamlike continent created by Crace echoes the struggles of our own world - corruption, colonialism, and the erosion of old cultures by the new. I'm glad that I read it and I'm pretty sure that Simon appreciated it too, wherever he might be now.

Hugh says

I'm not entirely sure what to make of this first book. Jim Crace is a versatile writer - I have read five of his books and they are all very different. In this one he imagines a hybrid, mostly third world continent, much of which resembles Africa but which also has elements that are more South American and there is possibly a bit of Asia there too.

The setting is the only tangible link between the seven short stories that comprise this novella. The stories vary in tone and content, which makes it difficult to grasp the whole and the unifying themes.

It is largely about the nature of progress and civilisation, and what is lost in its acquisition. He explores many elements of less developed societies and the ways in which they cope with the new, finding humour in places and darker elements in others.

An interesting read but probably not his best work.

Vanja Šušnjar ?ankovi? says

Bome, paf! Ovo je jedna od rijetkih knjiga koja vas ostavi potpuno zate?ene, jer vam postavi toliko pitanja o kojima niste sigurni ni da želite razmišljati. I zaista ne znam šta da napišem u ovoj fazi osim onoga što ?ete mo?i pro?itati i na pole?ini knjige u Laguninom izdanju. Ali jednu stvar moram izdvojiti, budu?i da i sama ?esto razmišljam o tome. Može li se danas uopšte napisati, samim tim i pro?itati, nešto sasvim novo i originalno ili makar na druga?iji na?in? E pa, može. I da, upravo ovo, izme?u ostalog, piše na koricama, ali prvi put da to zaista ima smisla. Obi?no se na tim mjestima pišu hvalospjevi koji ?e prodati knjigu, a koji ?esto nemaju veze s pame?u. Ovo je jedna ozbiljna kritika poretka stvari u savremenim civilizacijama, surova i sablasna, pomalo naivnih i definitivno neprilago?enih likova, veoma bogatog i zadivljuju?eg stila pisanja koji vam uskomeša i misli i maštu i ?ula.

Brian says

This is how treasure is unearthed.

I'm in Florida visiting family. I find a used book store in Fort Myers; a shotgun unit in a dilapidated strip mall wedged between a nail salon and a failing pizzeria. The store is mostly pulp romance paperbacks, but there is a slim selection of "Fiction" (apparently a catch-all for everything *not* romance) - a single shelf

where used books are collected vertically to economize space. There's a Barth book I don't have wedged in the middle of a stack; my clumsiness retrieving it causes a cascade of books to hit the floor. One of these is a slim volume that lands face down - my eyes are drawn to a quote on the top by author John Hawkes: "Stunning, powerful and original." I also see *Whitbread Prize*. I don't read further; it comes along with the Barth.

And the book is a winner. I can't/won't say a thing about its subject matter - that is part of the beauty of the experience - the reader should be allowed to witness the excitement of understanding as the seven tales unfold. The writing *is* stunning (tip o' the hat, Hawkes) but I was equally impressed by the subject matter, Crace disproving the adage that there is nothing new under the sun.

If you read this, please do yourself the favor of not reading the book blurb (or anything on GR about the book) - open to the first page and be reminded anew the power and excitement of unearthing BURIED treasures.

Jay Green says

I read this book when it first came out, in 1986, as part of my research into "what makes a good writer". It features perfectly competent short stories, but despite all the publisher's claims to the work's originality, there were not, as far as I can recall, any huge surprises or twists and turns that could not be foreseen. It reminded me of one of those chairs or cabinets that a journeyman was required to produce in order to obtain membership of a guild: proof of the author's mastery of the various techniques necessary to acquire the status of craftsman. Writing not out of place in *Granta* or a myriad other gatekeeper journals protecting the reading public from independent thought about aesthetic taste and moral judgement.

Addendum: Let me confess, too, to being underwhelmed by Crace's other books that I have read, so it's perhaps my aversion to his style and subject matter that renders him uninteresting.
