

Quarantine

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Winner of the **Whitbread Novel of the Year** and a **Booker Prize** finalist.

Two thousand years ago four travellers enter the Judean desert to fast and pray for their lost souls. In the blistering heat and barren rocks they encounter the evil merchant Musa — madman, sadist, rapist, even a Satan — who holds them in his tyrannical power. Yet there is also another, a faint figure in the distance, fasting for forty days, a Galilean who they say has the power to work miracles... Here, trapped in the wilderness, their terrifying battle for survival begins...

Quarantine Details

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From Reader Review Quarantine for online ebook

Delaney Green says

Jim Crace's prose lifts you to a place that makes you feel wiser and better, yet his characters are real humans with real flaws and problems. Quarantine is an exotic blend of everyday hardship and transcendent faith.

Quarantine takes place about 30 AD in the dry scrub of the Holy Land where people in need of guidance go alone into the wilderness to seek God through a process called quarantine that involves fasting, prayer, and reflection. In the novel, a group of characters loosely band together for mutual comfort and safety, but the character who holds himself apart from them and most fervently prays for enlightenment is Jesus of Nazareth.

It is Crace's depiction of the divinity--and the humanity--of Jesus that makes Quarantine special. Crace's Jesus is young and unsure even though divine power infuses his very breath. In conveying Jesus' nature, Crace writes, "When Jesus prayed, there came a point where the words were speaking him, and he became their object, not their source. Sometimes these prayers spoke to him in Greek or Aramaic... But there were occasions, more mystifying, feverish, and blissful, when the language was unknown, a tripping, spittle-basted tongue, plosive and percussive and high-pitched. Then, if he was left undisturbed for long enough with these wild rhapsodies, he might feel his spirit soften and solidify at once. He was an egg immersed in boiling water, a fusing and dividing trinity of yolk and white and shell." This passage for me, was an "Ahh" moment.

Of the inescapable terrain the quarantiners must endure, Crace writes, "[the scrub] made no claims. It did not promise anything, except, maybe, to replicate through its array of absences the body's inner solitude and to free its tenants and its guests from their addictions and their vanities. The empty lands...were siblings to the empty spaces in the heart."

Quarantine shares a story. It reveals character. It brings readers close to a man who changed the world but suggests this man is someone one might meet any time, anywhere.

Kristijan says

"Karantin", odnosno "Iscelitelj" (kako je u Srbiji preveden ovaj roman) je moj prvi susret sa Džimom Krejsom. Ni sam ne znam zašto do tog susreta nije došlo ranije. Krejs je na mojoj listi odavno jer sam još davnih dana odlučio da prorešetam nominovane za Bukera (iako ova nagrada nije uvek data najzaslužnijem autoru i najboljem delu za datu godinu, sam spisak nominovanih krije gomilu bisera književnosti). Krejs me je kupio već na prvim stranicama. Iako sam čitao (na momente rogočitan) srpski prevod, bilo je nemoguće ne primetiti koliko autor interesantno piše.

Iako se roman proteže na nekih dvestotinjak strana, on ne može da se čita površno, niti lagano. To nije samo zbog izuzetnog stila autora već i zbog tematike koju je autor odabrao.

Radnja romana je smeštena u pustinju u Judeji, pre nekih 2000 godina. Dakle, već na osnovu ovog podatka može da se prepostavi da će roman imati nekakve veze sa Isusom i njegovim životom. Krejs od svih slika iz Isusovog života koji su opisani u Bibliji, bira onu koja je možda i najintrigantnija - Isusov odlazak u pustinju

na 40 dana, gde biva iskušavan od strane ?avola. Me?utim, Krejsov pogled na ceo taj biblijski doga?aj nije religiozan ve? profani - svetovni. On pokušava da celu ovu situaciju vidi iz jednog drugog ugla, ugla pustinje u kojoj onaj ko joj se u potpunosti preda vi?a i fatamorgane i halucinacije.

Isus nije sam u pustinji. Tu su i Musa, trgovac koji je ostavljen da umre u pustinji, kao višak tovara karavana, i njegova supruga Miri koja ?eka dete. U pustinju dolazi još ?etvoro ljudi koji traže rešenje za svoje probleme - Marta koja želi dete, Šim, Afas i Badu. Svako od njih dolazi u pustinju da bude bliži Bogu (jer od gradske vreve Bog ih možda ne ?uje) i traži ili isceljenje ili spas. Kada Musa na ?udesan na?in ozdravi on ?e svoju trgovac?ku propast i sopstvenu bolest okrenuti sebi u korist i bukvalno po?eti da maltretira sve ostale isposnike, pokazuju?i svoju mra?nu materijalisti?ku stranu. Pustinju je teško pobediti, a posebno ako je neko kao Musa tamo, da oteža tih 40 dana pakla...

Iako sam Isus ima manju "ulogu" u ovom romanu, sam završetak (koji ne želim da spojlujem) ipak ima ve?i odraz na njegov lik i ono što sledi. Ovaj roman bi mogao da se stavi u istu ravan sa Ruždijevim "Satanskim stihovima", kao Krejsov pokušaj demistifikacije i profanizacije hriš?anstva. Ovo je veoma inteligentan i odli?no napisan roman, ali u nekoliko momenata (na primer Musino ozdravljenje,...) sam autor nije mogao da izbegne koriš?enje mistifikacije i "nadnaravnog".

Apsolutno ?vrsta ?etvorka, a druženje sa Krejsom se nastavlja!

Steve says

Mid 5. This novel is a brilliant illustration of the creative craft and thought-provoking potential of literature. Crace has tackled and successfully surmounted the potentially explosive subject-matter of fictionalising Christ's forty days in the wilderness. In doing so, he has so wonderfully captured the rocky desolation of the setting, while humanising the unendurable suffering of the Galilee carpenter's fast. Indeed, the author has blended the human frailty and possible divinity of this character to leave those questions as to Jesus' historical or spiritual significance unanswered. As such, Jesus' potential miraculous restoration to life of the merchant, Musa, could equally be mere coincidence. What is clear is that the latter character constitutes the height of Crace's powers of character creation. The human embodiment of vice and corruption, not only will this despicable merchant's self-interest prey upon those others who have sought solace in this bleak landscape, but will also be the human instrument of temptation to divert Christ from his stoic fast. The novel does not attempt to reveal the truth behind Christ's divinity and leaves a tantalising duality of interpretation as to Jesus' fate in the wilderness and as to the birth of Christianity.

Szplug says

Dervish fire, serpent's smiling face,
Wind-charred, cave-dreamt, in fasting vow,
Merchant goad, hunger for the now,
Sere masters of the flesh, the base,
Soulless, formless, hell's cracked-shell space,
From body hale now withered bough,
Love's courses ne'er found room enow,
To grow, bound in faith's carapace.

Yep, that's ridiculous, but it truly is about all I can muster for Mr. Crace, a writer who has never yet risen above *so-so* for me, though I enter each book expecting big things. If *The Pesthouse* is merely merely, I do believe I shall foreswear this gentleman's words for the foreseeable future.

Gregory Milliron says

I can understand why this book won so many awards. Crace reaches out to the reader with excellent writing and a compelling story. I was not at all troubled by the components of this book which deviated from the traditional story of Jesus in the wilderness, and I feel confident that traveling through this fiction as a "possible explanation" or "reasonable telling" of the story is not the purpose of reading this book. I will say, however, that Crace does very little to tie off loose ends at close of the book. He has such an opportunity to dip his whole leg into the pool of spirituality, rather than only the foot, but he sidesteps it with a meager summing up of characters and events. I suppose that was on purpose and not done by the editor. I look forward to reading Crace's other books and recommend this one to all.

Vit Babenco says

What has one to do in the desert? Why do pilgrims, sinners, hermits and saints go there? Why had Jesus gone to the wilderness?

There was nothing else for Jesus to do, except to simplify his life. Repentance, meditation, prayer. Those were the joys of solitude. They had sustained the prophets for a thousand years. And they would be his daily companions. He started rocking with each word of prayer, putting all his body into it, speaking it out loud, concentrating on the sound, so that no part of him could be concerned with lesser matters or be reminded of the fear, the hunger and the chill. He seemed to find his adolescent rhapsodies. The prayers were in command of him. He shouted out across the valley, happy with the noise he made.

But who is nearer to you, God or Devil? Who sends all the ordeals and temptations?

He begged the devil to fly up and save him from the wind. He'd almost welcome the devil more than god. For the devil can be traded with, and exorcized. But god is ruthless and unstable.

Tyrants and God have the same nature – they are liars and they persuade their own purposes.

Maciek says

Jim Crace's short novel *Quarantine* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1997, but did not win - it lost to *The God of Small Things*. Despite not being a long novel - the Penguin edition clocks in at just 243 pages - *Quarantine* aims to achieve a high goal: retell the story of Jesus's 40 day sojourn in the desert and his temptation by the Devil.

The problem with retellings of well-known stories is precisely the fact that they are well known - the author has to show a certain degree of invention to make up for that fact. It can be done by adapting the story to the modern setting, which is what Francis Ford Coppola did to Heart of Darkness and created *Apocalypse Now*). Many foreign films have been remade for the American market, keeping the story but localizing the cast and setting. Crace does not take this road - his work is set in the Judaean Desert 2000 years ago - but the story does not follow the Biblical gospels. Crace's Jesus is all too human: he has no divine aspirations, and came to the desert to fast and grow closer to God. He throws himself totally at his mercy - with no food and water and little shelter - guided only by his faith.

Crace's Jesus is only one of several characters driven to the remoteness of the desert. The novel features six other characters, all of whom interact with Jesus in some way: the most interesting - and important - is Musa, a greedy trader and abusive man who was left in the desert by his partners to die a slow death, sickness eating him from the inside. He is accompanied by Miri, his pregnant wife who eagerly awaits his death. Although he is the most important person of the scene, Jesus is not the main character - in fact he is mostly seen through the eyes of others, who all project themselves onto him and see him through their needs. These characters are essential for Jesus to fulfill his destiny. Musa will come in contact with Jesus, and will be touched by him - all the people will be touched by Jesus in one way or another, and the impact he had on them will have consequences for the whole world.

Crace's writing has the dreamlike and hazy quality, almost hallucinatory, appropriate for the setting and theme; he focuses on the minuscule detail of the wilderness of the desert, its animals, plants and insects. Folk beliefs of the times and people play an important part: Musa's sickness is understood to have been caused by a devil who snuck inside him through his mouth, and lit a fire under his chest.

In 2011 I've read Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, which I thought was a fantastic re-telling of the story of Jesus and a fable of the rise of Christianity (and a controversial one, too, resulting in hate threats of damnation being sent to the author). In his work, Pullman not focused his story on Jesus - he split him into two distinct persons, Jesus and Christ, which I thought worked splendidly and his book impacted me greatly - something which I did not expect and was very pleasantly surprised by. I felt that Jim Crace's book lost potential impact by letting Jesus be seen largely through the eyes of other characters; they themselves are well drawn and interesting (especially Musa), but you just can't compete with the Messiah. I mean, how often do you really get to see the Son of God up close and personal?

In the end, found *Quarantine* to be a fablelike novel, stylishly written and full of symbolism, but constrained by the story it took upon itself - which is well known and holds few surprises even for those who do not know their Bible. It entered the canon of literary stories of Jesus - done by writers as different as Anne Rice and Norman Mailer - but I'm afraid that for all its quality it will remain in the background precisely because of its gentleness and meekness, overshadowed by more daring and controversial projects.

Valerie Bird says

‘Quarantine’ by Jim Crace was recommended to me after my love affair with ‘Harvest’, a novel which I will only lend to the most reliable friends who know of my possessive nature where certain books are concerned. This novel is of the same quality; the language astonishing, with descriptions of people and place as rich, as vivid. The reader is standing alongside the characters, seeing the same scene, suffering the parched earth, the bitter wind, the blistering sun, the bitter nights, the fear.

Aware that this is in some way a retelling of the ‘forty days in the wilderness’ that Jesus undertook in the

Bible from the quotation which prefaces the novel, we wonder as to who Musa and Miri might represent. This cruel and boastful man who appears to be dying in the opening pages, we wish dead as does his downtrodden wife.

The first strangers, four pilgrims who arrive to fulfil their quarantine, are not obvious contenders for roles in the original text either. Jesus arrives in Chapter 6, 'far younger than he might have seemed from a distance' 'preferring the pious habitats of lunatics and bats' determined that his God will be revealed through ecstatic prayers and fasting. His apparent miracle of making Musa well sets off a chain of events of which he is unaware.

Musa's power to bully the other pilgrims as well as his wife. builds to a climax when the apparently mad badu is sent to coax Jesus from his precipitous retreat.

Perhaps other readers identified earlier in the novel the alter egos of these characters and what might be the final outcome. I did not which meant that I was on tenterhooks, almost praying for good to overcome evil, until the last few pages. And those final revelations are immensely satisfying. Compelling and convincing; this will be another book to stay close to my bookshelf, shared with care!

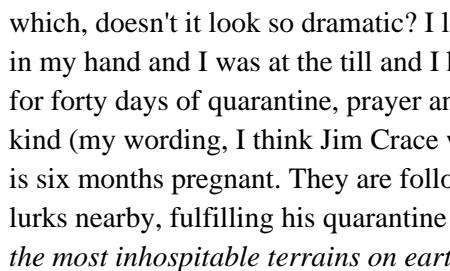
Fiona says

I feel like Jim Crace maybe shot himself in the foot a little bit with this one, as far as the star ratings go - I swung between one and four stars about every thirty pages, which is to say sometimes it was fascinating-unsettling and sometimes it was skin-crawl-unsettling and the latter is Not For Me and that is what one star means.

The skin-crawl was deliberate, though, so Crace definitely did what he set out to do. I'm still not sure I got the rating right. But there comes a point after which it really doesn't matter, so three stars it is and he's welcome to them.

I picked this up while I was ineffectively Christmas shopping - put me in Waterstones and my gift buying becomes a case of one for you, one for me. So I got Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* for my dad, and Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* for my housemate, and that was quite enough effort for one afternoon so I went for a browse and THIS HAPPENED.

The cover of my copy looks like this:



which, doesn't it look so dramatic? I love it very much. And the blurb was fascinating and then the book was in my hand and I was at the till and I had such high hopes for this book. Four strangers walk into the desert, for forty days of quarantine, prayer and fasting. They are met by an obnoxious git of the most malevolent kind (my wording, I think Jim Crace would say it a bit more elegantly but you get the gist), and his wife who is six months pregnant. They are followed into the desert by a fifth stranger, a young man from Galilee who lurks nearby, fulfilling his quarantine separately from all of them. *"So begin forty days and nights in one of the most inhospitable terrains on earth."* SHIVERS. TAKE MY MONEY.

The young Galilean is called Jesus. Jim Crace plays his cards on religion very close to his chest - apparently, Jesus was only meant to be a secondary character, until his story turned out to be interesting enough to warrant an equal billing with the others. *Quarantine* is really a study of seven people in very close quarters, having to rely on each other. It's a shame that most of them are horrible.

Here is why this book gives me second thoughts about the sort of reader I am: it was well-written. It was lyrical, the sort of thing you might want to read aloud, if only to yourself. Sometimes it was very uncomfortable and a couple of the characters ought to be dropped down a well. But Crace meant to make me think that - he wrote a thing that was interesting and clever, I just didn't want to read it. I don't like that I can't appreciate that properly, but really my brain just turns into one loud chorus of NOPE and I have to put it down and spend the rest of my bus journey staring out of the window. Is this something that I'll get better at with practice, is it a thing I should try and do more of so that I'll read books that will get me to ask more interesting questions? This book was outside my comfort zone and I really am undecided as to whether I should follow it or keep a distance because Reading Should Be Fun.

We'll see. In the meantime, I have moved on to a 1920s thriller with flappers in it, which may have just answered my own question in the short term. I don't know. This book was hard for me. I might have to process that for a bit longer yet.

Trisha says

I suspect that what many fundamentalist Christians find blasphemous about this book is precisely what I found so appealing. It's an intriguing exploration of the Biblical story of Jesus' 40 days in the desert and while there are vague similarities and references to the Biblical account, Jim Crace invites the reader to move far beyond what's found in the Gospels. Reminiscent of Kazantzakis's "Last Temptation of Christ" Crace's Jesus is wracked with doubts and uncertainties about who he is, while at the same time plagued by an almost insane desire to be united with the mysterious source of his spiritual quest. True to the Gospel narratives, he is driven into the desert to fast and deal with a series of temptations; however Matthew's, Mark's and Luke's account of what happens there pales in comparison to what Crace has done with the story. He paints a vivid picture of the dangers that await those who venture off into the desert and describes in horrifying detail what happens to the body when it is deprived of water and food for 40 days. But it's what Crace has done with the character of Jesus and the other travelers he encounters in the desert – most notably the demonic merchant Musa - that makes this book so riveting. There is much to ponder here about the nature of temptation and the will to withstand it, as well as the presence of evil and the role of compassion, suffering and hope. I was fascinated by the way Crace wove Scriptural references into his narrative –as well the connection between some of his characters and those that are familiar to anyone who has read the Gospels (Miri/Mary; Marta/Martha; Musa the tempter.) But what kept me reading was Crace's provocative treatment of the suffering, ultimately redemptive Christ-figure. While this book is not likely to show up on the Pope's Lenten reading list, as far as I'm concerned it's one of the most thought-provoking "spiritual" books I've come across in a long time.

Holly (The Grimdragon) says

Be well.

As much as I was hoping for a zombie apocalypse novel, this was a retelling of what was reputed to be Christ's 40 day fast in the desert. So.. not what I was expecting, to say the least ^_^

This book is well-written & Crace is wonderful with his attention to detail. I have only read his "The Devil's Larder" prior to this, which was a delicious, erotic collection of short stories which I highly, highly

recommend!

This? Well, it all depends. I am not a religious person, so I honestly found some of this to be a bit much. I am.. not sure what the point of this novel was. I feel as though I may have missed something in my reading of it. The writing is certainly lovely, the concept fascinating, but it comes up short.

There are a variety of characters -- Jesus, Musa, Miri, Marta, Badu, Shim, Aphas. However, I felt as though the only characters we really learned about in depth were Jesus & Musa. Musa was one of the most horrendous characters I have read about. A truly awful villain that you cannot help but continue to read on & on about. It is almost a hate read, or a rage interest in this man who I am assuming is meant to represent Satan. The other characters felt non consequential, which is a shame.

This is a hard novel to review & after writing this, I am still not sure how I felt about it!

Zaki says

Reading Jim Grace I feel like he's very aware of writing in a kind of oral tradition. He's very attentive to the music and the rhythm of the way that sentences sound like. Even though he uses simple vocabulary the percussion of each sentence is very complicated and Jim Grace attends to it very closely. There's always a drum beat running through his sentences. They are so musically and rhythmically based that you almost want to tap your feet to them.

I was really charmed by this story. It started off with five pilgrims including Jesus venturing out into the Judean desert for a forty day quarantine. They choose caves not far apart from each other to spend their quarantine in and search for enlightenment or purification. For the quarantiners are hoping to cleanse themselves of madness, cancer and infertility. What follows is a period of fasting and praying and in due course the tired and thirsty pilgrims become afflicted with religious and spiritual hallucinations. And dark visions.

Now I was under the impression that this book was very close to the traditional story of Jesus in the wilderness even though Jesus in this book was portrayed as a human with human failings. I don't know much about the bible. Quarantine looked to me like the most real story about the origin of Jesus and the Christian religion. I thought that Jim Grace could only be a devout Christian but reading up on him I've discovered that he is actually a staunch atheist and this book is not written from the Christian perspective at all.

In fact, the idea for this story came to Jim Grace from a dark and troubled place down the road from where he used to live. This place was a hostel for patients with mental health problems. The patients used to wander around his suburb and fascinate Jim Grace with their stories and illnesses. One day he sneaked into this hostel which consisted of tiny rooms like cells occupied by a community of depressives, addicts, obsessives and schizophrenics.

Jim Grace wanted to write about this community but instead of setting it in Birmingham he was looking for a parallel; a place where he could set that subject matter which would dislocate the reader. He is after all a fabulist writer. One day his friends who were visiting Palestine sent him a postcard of the Mount of Temptation. This was the place where the historical Christ spent his forty days of battling with the devil. In this postcard he noticed lots of caves and it occurred to him that at the time of Christ anyone who had a problem, any depressive, addict or obsessive, not just the Son of God, might have taken to these caves to

battle with their demons. And this became the parallel to the hostel down his road.

Indeed in Jim Grace's Quarantine Jesus' prayers seem more like epileptic fits rather than communications with God.

Sean Gainford says

A different take on Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights quarantine

A more realistic story on how an eccentric, deeply religious man, with strong will and intelligence, was mistaken to have committed a miracle and then gathered a following of people. Jesus in this story is not a flawless son of God, but very human, with his own human weaknesses and temptations. Crace set himself a difficult task of going in and out of the minds of his 7 characters, but just about pulls it off. Jesus and the greedy, evil Musa, who represents the devil with his market goods as temptations, are the most fully rounded characters. The others are a bit more superficial but the story is more on how Jesus fights off Satan's temptations, so it is rightfully so that they are more developed. The writing is high class, but the story does not always have the narrative progressive hold, making it sometimes difficult to keep going with it.

Definitely worth a read and will leave you haunted and reflective a long time after you finish the book.

Rick Urban says

....or, "When Good Miracles Happen to Bad People".

Really, I'm being reductive here of a very rich and beautifully written work, full of the most poetic and rhythmic language. And while one of the main characters is a Galilean named Jesus, he is just one of several individuals in the book who are in crisis, and, to my mind, not nearly the most interesting or important.

Crace's meditative and provocative novel is the story of five pilgrims who come to the desert back in ancient times in order to fast and meditate for the "quarantine" period of forty days (and, naturally, forty nights). The most important of these is Marta, who has come to the desert, supposedly barren, hoping for a miracle that will allow her to avoid being divorced by her husband for the crime of childlessness. Additionally, there is also fool, a traveller, an old man dying of cancer, and a carpenter trying to prove his devotion and piety to his family and the members of his village.

They all come across a vile and conniving merchant, Musa, and his oppressed and pregnant wife, Miri, abandoned by a caravan when the husband suffers a fever and descends into a coma. Miri's fervent wish is that Musa, abusive and tyrannical, will finally die and free her from a life of servitude and punishment, but then a strange thing happens: while she is out preparing his grave, Jesus comes upon the man in their tent and inadvertently, almost accidentally, heals him. Thus Christ's first miracle is to save the life of an evil and predatory man, paving the way for the man's renewed predation and violation of those around him.

Further, drastic re-imaginings of the Christ myth are woven into the narrative as the plot plays out, not least of which is Jesus's death from starvation several days before the 40-day period comes to an end. Yet in telling what can be thought of as an alternate history of the man Jesus, Crace leaves open the possibility of his divinity, from a hinted-at supernatural intervention late in the novel, to the ambiguity of whether that man

seen walking into the mountains is the resurrected Messiah.

There is no question though that the author wants to examine the personalities of those in physical and emotional extremity, and show how it is human nature to seek others in moments of crisis. And Crace, an avowed atheist, rejects an easy dismissal and belittling of belief, instead positing the idea that from the most dire and bleak of circumstances, hope can still survive, and transcendence is available where you least expect it. *Quarantine* is a sober, seductive story, full of exquisite language and a crystalline clarity of place, where humanity's struggle for survival and understanding is etched in sharp relief against an unforgiving, eternal landscape.

Mohit Chauhan says

Quarantine is an interesting book to give it the due credit. It lost to God of Small things at Booker in 1997 and is acclaimed supremely high by critics. At times next to Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Which is where I find myself having reading either the wrong books or reading the right books wrongly.

I found *Quarantine* Meek and With no beginning and no definitive end. I found it a bit scratching the surface kind of writing wherein there was a scope to hit treasure if only due deeper. The central character 'Musa' is the evil in the life of other 5 characters including 'Jesus' and still he comes out relatively better off while rest lose a part or full of them. The book also kind of undermine's women's position in the society during that time and probably that has carried over till today. Troubling to say the least.

Its a quick read and that goes in its favor. I recommend it as a reading over the weekend but not put it under your goodread shelf of must read.

Peregrine 12 says

A though-provoking book but not enjoyable. (I don't care how many medals it won.) This book had beautiful images and real-seeming characters, but the story itself wasn't that compelling. The writing was quite good (mechanically), but again - not a very gripping story. One man's opinion, anyway.

Martine says

Now *this* is how you write a gripping book.

Quarantine is what you might call a novel of ideas. It seeks to give an account of Jesus' forty-day sojourn in the desert and to explain how Christianity (or, if you will, the cult of Christ) came into being. While it's not overly blasphemous, it does present its theories in a way to which people who take the New Testament very literally might object. See, for one thing, Crace's Jesus is not the Son of God, but rather a clumsy and all too human carpenter who takes his faith more seriously than his work; for another, he is not actually the main character of the novel, nor even its most interesting character. That honour goes to Musa, surely one of the most fascinating villains in twentieth-century literature.

Quarantine is about the (apparently common in Biblical times) act of quarantining -- i.e., secluding oneself

in the desert for a while to meditate and commune with God. Jesus is only one of several characters who, on the first day of the story, arrive in an inhospitable part of the wilderness to take up lodgings in some barren caves and begin meditating. He's different from the other quarantiners, though. While the others only fast during the day and aren't averse to talking to each other when not meditating, Jesus is determined not to eat or drink anything for forty days and to stay completely on his own. But before he retreats into his cave, he touches a dying man, Musa, who promptly recovers. Needless to say, Musa is convinced Jesus is a miraculous healer, and tries to get him out of his cave to talk. But Jesus refuses, believing Musa is a devil come to tempt him. And so a fascinating battle of wills begins, which quickly works its way to a haunting (and remarkably plausible) conclusion.

Crace is a fabulous writer. His metaphor-laden prose has a breath-taking, occasionally hallucinatory quality (especially in the marvellous second half of the book), and his descriptions of pretty much anything are superb. His Judean desert is an exciting place, so vivid it almost becomes a character in itself. His descriptions of fasting and what it does to one's body and mind are terrifying. (Trust me, after reading this book you'll never consider hunger striking again.) Yet it's the characters who steal the show. Jesus' struggle against temptation and hallucinations is rendered impressively, and rather more realistically than the stories told about this in the Bible. But while Jesus is important to the story for the effect he has on the other characters, he is not the most riveting character in the book. That would be Musa, a tyrannical merchant with a frightful sense of entitlement and very little compassion for anyone, let alone a bunch of afflicted souls who have come to the desert to pray. He's a nasty piece of work, is Musa, but Crace has drawn him so well that you find yourself fascinated by his exploits, even when he sets out, over the course of several pages, to plan the rape of the lone woman among the quarantiners (some of the most riveting prose I've ever come across). No, Musa is not Satan, but it's easy to see why Jesus believes he is. He's rotten to the core, which makes what he does on the final page of the book all the more extraordinary. I found myself glued to the pages whenever the story was told from his point of view, admiring Crace for the skill with which he brought his antagonist to life without making you want to close the book in disgust. The other perspectives are less impressive, but still entirely worth reading. Crace can draw characters in just a few lines, and his way with words is such that the effect is quite dazzling. He is *quite* the storyteller.

So. Do seek this book out, people. Don't believe the baffling number of three-star reviews on this site; instead, check out the plethora of five-star reviews on Amazon.co.uk (here) and remember that *Quarantine* was voted the Whitbread Novel of the Year and short-listed for the Booker Prize. Then read the book. I promise you you won't regret it.

Mohit Parikh says

Quarantine is a good novel: the writing technique of Jim Crace is flawless, language poetic (reviewers note that he uses iambic meters to control the length of his short sentences), the characters serve their purposes well and the era he creates is too real (supposedly, a forte of Crace). And for these reasons this novel should be picked. I recommend it. I am glad that I read it. BUT, I am also left disappointed.

The author has chosen an easy way out.

The book tells Jesus's story of 40 days of quarantine (no food, no water), portraying him as a timid young unworldly devout sans any mystical powers and divine knowledge. Many chapters are devoted in the first half solely to the faith based rationalizations necessary for Jesus (or Gally, as the other hermits call him) to justify this self-chosen harshness to himself, to keep the morale up.

Cleverly (and not too cleverly) the author distances narrator from Gally's mind in the second half and

delineates him through the five other characters.

Why? It helps him evade the whole question surrounding Jesus's spiritual enlightenment, and God.

Too easy, I say. Especially because he does not shy away from suggesting that the anecdotes of Jesus's miracles are nothing but a work of Satan, a proof of power of story telling to play with the weak minds of the nincompoops, the naive nomads, the unworldly villagers in the desert. Sell belief, buy respect. Sell redemption, buy authority, power. Veracity is immaterial. In those harsh and cruel times, what people needed most was not so much the truth, but a belief in the possibility of miracles.

So, is Jesus's after-quarantine story fabulous? Was he just another man, a very noble and compassionate man albeit, who was driven by his belief of being a Son Of God? These are not questions left for readers. The authors suggests his stance within the book, shyly, slyly.

Alas! he missed out on an opportunity to explore or take a strong position on spirituality. What he offers, in the end, is neither bold nor too illuminating. Just another atheistic take.

P.S. Narrative often reminded me of Woolf's To The Lighthouse. This book has a good rare display of stream of thoughts technique.

Vilis says

?oti pies?tin?ts gabals, kas visu laiku prasm?gi balans? uz nesaprotam?bas robežas. Piecas zvaigzn?tes laikam nav t?p?c, ka d?vain? k?rt? visu laiku bija drusku j?piespiežas, lai las?tu, bet aprakst?taijem notikumiem tas laikam piem?roti.

Val says

The inspiration for the book is the account in the Bible of Jesus's fast and temptation in the desert. Five people are fasting in this story for various reasons, one of them named Jesus. He is the only one who fasts both day and night, the others break their fast after sunset.

The story and characters are both excellent, but the way the author uses biblical sources mixed with normal life makes the book outstanding.
