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The Gift of Stones

By Jim Crace

Charles Scribner's Sons

Rich in character and carefully spare of plot, Jim Crace's short second novel relates a pre-historic legend that hits with the psychological impact of myth.

At the dusk of the Stone Age, a villageful of flint workers ply their trade, making stone into tools and weapons. Horsemen roam and pillage, but the flint workers remain impervious to attack, for they have the gift of stones. Anyone can ride a horse and freeze the air with ferocious cries, "but once they wanted more, to pierce and slice, to cut and scrape, to remove the flesh from the inner side of pelts for making clothes, to have harpoons and arrows light and sharp enough to fly and kill," they needed the flint workers.

One day a boy of seven passes some riders who are leaving his village empty-handed, one of whom capriciously wounds him with an arrow, resulting in the amputation of much of the boy's arm. Barely fit now for flintworking, the boy discovers his calling as he fashions colorful tales explaining his lost arm. He is to be a storyteller. While his neighbors became artisans, he becomes an artist, the Homer of his community, the only one whose mind is capable of roaming beyond the confines of the village.

So, too, is his body. Some years later, he ventures a moderate distance from the village and meets Doe. Living with only her daughter, Doe is drawn and haggard but still marginally nubile enough to barter her body for occasional food from wandering horsemen. The three become something of a family, and eventually he brings Doe and the girl, who narrates those parts of the story we don't hear directly from the storyteller, back to the village. Doe, at first a mistrusted outcast, joins the flint-gathering economy but continues to go off with various men into the heavy brush. On one such tryst, a horseman wounds her with an arrow.

After Doe has bled to death, the storyteller finds her and removes the arrowhead. Its shine and keen edge explain why trade in flint had slowed drastically of late and what world-transforming cargo the ships had been bringing to the land. The bronze reflects a sun that is setting on the villagers' way of life.

That is the story. But Crace's novel is not about merely that story, stirring enough as far as it goes. This book is about what stories are, what they do, what value they and art in general have in the human community. As such, this slender volume is larger than the glut of books about writers that line our shelves. Its view takes in not only the intensity of the close-up details of one storyteller but the panoramic sweep that reveals the artist's complex and often estranged role in society.

Alienated by his one-armed uselessness for pounding flint and so sharing in the gift of stones, the boy offers the village the tales and lies that are his gift of imagination. They value this gift highly. Hard at labor with their picks, his neighbors listen as he conjures a tale to describe a horseback ride beyond the village. "For all they knew or cared he had been relieving himself behind a bush . . . [but] who there,

amongst the hundred on the hill, did not take a journey on that day? . . . The body is engaged. But the mind is like the hawk that father summoned for the image of the paths and the waterfall. It can fly. If one of the men had clapped his hands at one instant in the deepening of the pit and asked, 'Where are you?' not one would answer, 'Hard at work upon the hill.' They were elsewhere. Kings and heroes. Young again. Out at sea. In love. Winning arguments that they had lost the night before. Eating well. Rich. Walking in the forest to the plume of smoke that beckoned there. Hunting scallops with their toes." His was a gift that could not be bartered, for the storyteller's "rudder-tongue could steer us free from our small world."

Poets, Shelley claimed, are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. They read the world more perceptively, see its future unfold more quickly. Their lies are not falsehoods but actually the truth cast, in Keats' words, in finer tones. Even when they paint a world surrealistically, they assure us they are simply trying to create something more true than mere fact, reproducing the act of walking by inventing the wheel, which does walk better than the leg. In *The Gift of Stones*, our poet "could not (they said) even pick his nose with his one helpless arm. He couldn't shell an egg. Yet, with his tongue, he could concoct from, say, geese, ships and smells, a world more real than real."

But not all storytellers know the secret personified by Lear's fool: that if you are going to reveal truths which pain your listener you must cushion it within enough folds of riddling entertainment that they will not hate you for it. Otherwise, like Cassandra, you will be hooted at, shunned, unbelieving.

When the bronze arrowhead foretells the end of their world, the storyteller feels his community must understand its meaning: "At last the truth was plain. My father broke his silence to pass his wisdom on. 'So now you know,' he said. 'You cannot eat stone. You cannot make clothes from flint. You'll have to leave this village or you'll die.' His audience told him, 'Hold your tongue.' They preferred—we all preferred—the entertainment of his lies."

Jim Crace has written a short tale that takes us out of our time while it burrows to the heart of why archetypes float beneath our conscious mind, where things are so intuitively and profoundly true that words can suggest but not define their shape. By the end, we know why we both love and hate our best storytellers, one of whom Crace seems on his way to becoming.