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SIGNALS OF DISTRESS

By Jim Crace

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 277 pp.

With each new book, British novelist Jim Crace displays more clearly his versatility and virtuosity. While his wide-ranging settings have extended even to the dawn of history (in *The Gift of Stones*), his focus always remains fixed on moments of cultural transition and their effect on communal and individual psyches.

In *Signals of Distress*, Crace once again proves himself a contemporary master of parable, shaping a large idea into poignant drama through an historical habitation and indelible characters.

It is November, 1836, and the quickening Industrial Revolution promises to change the face of coastal English seafaring villages like Wherrytown. A tempest has flung two ships into harbor there. One, the badly damaged *Belle of Wilmington*, loosens a rowdy crew of American sailors, their African slave Otto, and a herd of cattle upon the community. The tempest has swept onto the shore a new meadow of kelp, from which the villagers wring a meager living by burning it for soda ash which the local agent, Walter Howells, sells to Hector Smith & Sons, makers of fine British soaps. The other ship, coincidentally, has brought the elder of Hector Smith's sons, Aymer, to Wherryton with grave news: because a French chemist has found a cheap way to extract soda ash from common salt, the company will no longer employ Wherrytown's services.

Aymer didn't have to come. A letter to Howells could have severed the business connection. But honorable merchant Aymer Smith believes you do not break trust with people without looking them in the eye.

The novel's protagonist, Aymer should, in fact, be its hero. Unlike his avaricious and consequently more respected brother, the bookish Aymer is conspicuous for his benevolence. He's an Amender, one who believes he should atone for every act of selfishness or evil by performing a corrective act of charity. He supports his workers' efforts to organize for better conditions ("He's hell set on damaging his one true brother in the selfish interests of fraternity" is his sister-in-law's oxymoronic view of Aymer's compassion). He frees the slave, Otto. And he intends to give money to every Wherrytown family about to lose his company's patronage.

But, at 42, Aymer is far from heroic. A bachelor and virgin, he's an alienated figure whose wit is thought oppressive, whose charity is construed as officiousness,

whose clumsy attempts at geniality inspire only aversion. He has always been asleep at the wheel of his own life.

In Wherrytown, idealistic Aymer finds himself awash in a sea of pragmatists. There's Mrs. Yapp, the matronly blithe spirit who runs the village's sole inn, always ready for a bawdy night with any interested male. There's dreamy 17 year-old Miggy Bowe, who, in an age that gilded dreams with added romance by clipping female wings soon after birth, hopes to escape her barren surroundings and sail to America on the arm of Billy Budd-like sailor Ralph Parkiss. There's local preacher Phipps, who knows the thorny way to heaven but is above treating the wounds of an African, knowing the Gospels' lyrics but not their music. There's hopeful Robert Norris and his lovely new bride Katie about to emigrate to Canada. And there's Howells, principal beneficiary of Aymer's principled sympathy, who turns Aymer into the target of his own brutality and greed.

Like the stonemasons in Crace's *Gift of Stones*, whose way of life is doomed by the encroachment of bronze, these fishers and gatherers live in a dramatically changing world. The objective correlative Crace shows this by is an 80-ton stone, Cradle Rock, perched since the Ice Age so that when pushed it rocks slightly back and forth. When the *Belle's* sailors permanently dislodge the stone, they create visible proof that the present has broken from the past.

As Aymer stumbles through Wherrytown, seeking to make amends with its Dickensian people, daydreaming quixotically about its women, Crace weaves a progressive magic onto this mythic plot by masterful detail, luminous prose and haunting characterization.

Despite an isolated anachronism, Crace, who has elsewhere admitted a willingness to forgo research and contrive details as he goes along, evokes the period vividly, scaling a ship's mizzen topmast, setting tables with Mrs. Yapp's squab pies and horse bread, even placing a beautiful woman above a chamber pot.

His prose teems with richer imagery than most poetry. A foundering vessel "had lifted before the wind that night as if it meant to leave the water and find a firmer passage in the clouds." A mild November day "must have lost its gloves and gone back to October to look for them." Even when a metaphor seems inapt, like one sailor's voice "macadamized by nicotine," Crace makes an imaginative try.

Applied to character and wedded to his empathy for this lusty cross-section of England one year before Victoria, Crace's skill with detail molds some of contemporary literature's most clearly defined people, the kind you wish you could meet again, who

linger and revisit the mind even when you are miles from the book. Flawed and insular, they form a colorful assortment, few of whom are guilty of any sin greater than hope.

There's genteel Katie Norris sitting at a parlor table with rough sailors "on a seat with a straight, spindled back, and a laced cushion, much like a governess with eight slow learners." There's nubile Miggy with likely Ralph Parkiss's hand on her back as she lets "his fingers tell a rosary of vertebrae down to her waist."

And always moving among them, trying to be part of the human community, is the melancholy spectre of Aymer Smith, the kind of man who dreams about someday seeing Katie Norris again in Canada, admiring her young body in candlelight through a pane of cottage glass, her body's tones "split in curving arcs of flesh, orange-warm from the candle flame, pink-cold from the window light. She was the salmon and the thrush. Her hair was sand. She sang." For, though staring into a private hell of loneliness, even Aymer is unwilling to abandon his hope.

While Aymer's contemporary, poet Percy Shelley, suggested that hope could create out of its own wreck the thing it contemplates, Crace is less the optimistic romantic. In a swiftly changing world where even the eternally steadfast Cradle Rock can be dislodged, where "its eminence was now declivity...[and] the coast would never be the same," change means endings as well as beginnings. Both the sanguine Canada-bound pilgrims and the magnanimous Aymer may find that hope, however boundless, is not enough to prepare them for the sinister new rocks their ships are heading toward.