A remarkable and inspired short volume, consisting of prose poems devoted to the mysterious boxes Joseph Cornell conceived and constructed over the course of his life.

Mr. Cornell’s singular creations, some of which are reproduced in the book, were assembled out of found objects and thrift store knick-knacks. These “irrational juxtapositions” were the products of a man who received no formal training in the arts. Many relate to his obsession with 19th century ballerinas and film starlets that caught his restless eye. He was a surrealist by nature and temperament, although never a formal acolyte of the movement. A reclusive and intensely shy man, he counted among his acquaintances Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dali.

In his brief Preface to *Dime-Store Alchemy*, Charles Simic praises the “genius and originality” of Mr. Cornell and, it is clear, his literary responses are homages not only the actual works but the man—and mind—responsible for them. A good number of the proems in *Dime-Store Alchemy* are reminiscent of the “automatic writing” championed by the surrealist movement. There’s an intuitive and unfettered quality to the pieces, the way they so successfully emulate the dreamlike world Mr. Cornell inhabited and delineated—fanciful, perplexing but never trifling or fey.

It is the perfect marriage of two great minds. Mr. Simic is a poet renowned for his minimalist approach to writing and that spare, unadorned style is well-suited for the task at hand. His enormous regard for Mr. Cornell’s vision and untutored talent is apparent in every word. There are sentences/stanzas (what does one call them?) that are perfect capsule summaries of the Cornellian universe:

“The father of our solitude is a child.”

“Making deities is what we do in our reverie.”

“To submit to chance is to reveal the self and its obsessions.”

“The forest is a place in which everything your heart fears and desires lives.”
“Every art is about the longing of the One for the Other. Orphans that we are, we make our sibling kin out of anything we can find. The labor of art is the slow and painful metamorphosis of the One into the Other.”

With *Dime-Store Alchemy*, Mr. Simic enters the mind of a master artisan and with great care and empathy offers a fitting tribute to an artist who made no great pronouncements, affected no airs and left only puzzling artifacts to mark his passage in the world. Out of his solitude he brought forth cryptic montages, evocations of lost times. His lonely endeavors led him to produce insoluble puzzles, boxes of trinkets and bric-a-brac, manifestations of a mind “without precedent, eccentric, original and thoroughly American”.

Mr. Simic respects the integrity and inviolability of Joseph Cornell’s secret and sequestered life while still managing to hint at the man’s motivations and sources of inspiration. The combined effect of these short pieces is a portrait that is graceful and impressionistic, respectful and convincing, as close to truthful representation as fiction can be.

**Falling Man**  
*by Don DeLillo*  
(*Scribner; Hardcover; $32.00*)

“These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after…”  
(*Falling Man; pg. 138*)

The events of September 11, 2001 horrified the Western world and permanently altered its sense of invulnerability and comfortable complacency. Our way of life was now firmly within the crosshairs of cruel, resolute enemies, our cities and reservoirs and power installations potential targets for attack. A state of siege followed, emergency measures declared, laws enacted, constitutional limits exceeded, all in the name of national security.

In the six years since that sense of urgency and fear has abated but, as we are frequently reminded, threats still exist and plotters are hard at work in their secret lairs and redoubts, devising new means of inflicting terror and chaos on a grand scale.

This past week, while waiting for an appointment at my bank, I happened to pick up a copy of an American news magazine. I flipped through it and came across a three or four line dismissal of the latest Don DeLillo novel, which is set against the backdrop of the World Trade Centre attacks. The unnamed commentator curtly opined that although the book relived those terrible days, *Falling Man* was not the great 9/11 novel we’ve all (apparently) been waiting for…
I was appalled that one of America’s pre-eminent writers was accorded such shabby treatment—a few lines devoted to latest DeLillo?—but what bothered me most was that the reviewer believed Mr. DeLillo, an author of unsurpassed poise and intelligence, would give serious thought to attempting some grand, definitive take on September 11, 2001.

*Falling Man*, compared to Mr. DeLillo’s epically proportioned *Underworld*, is a modest offering, an account of how the events of that fateful day affected the lives of the Neudecker family: Keith, his estranged wife Lianne and their seven year old son, Justin. Keith worked as a lawyer for a firm in the North Tower, the second to fall, and his escape and odyssey through the rain of ash and debris make for harrowing reading. Those scenes frame the book, beginning and ending it, an effective structural device.

What Keith experiences that day has a profound affect on him. He is reconciled with his wife and child, although he maintains enough emotional distance to embark on an ill-advised affair with a fellow survivor whose briefcase he carried with him as the Tower threatened to collapse around him. Keith has little interest in returning to his pre-9/11 existence and gradually spins out of the close orbit of family life, taking up professional high stakes gambling and flitting about America in search of poker tournaments. Lianne is a freelance editor and serves as a volunteer with a support group for elderly men and women suffering the initial onset of senile dementia. It’s a tough assignment, watching week by week as her charges lose themselves, personality and memory on a steep “slide away from the adhesive friction that makes an individual possible” (*Falling Man*; pg. 30).

Forgetfulness and coping are important components of *Falling Man*. People, as a necessary survival mechanism, wish to escape the raw emotions associated with traumatic events; beta blockers are often prescribed to dull the intensity of searing memories. The “falling man” referred to in the title is a performance artist who suspends himself from buildings and venues throughout New York, assuming the posture and attitude of those who plummeted from the heights of the Trade Centre towers, ghastly images that remain with many of us to this day. His appearances outrage New Yorkers anxious to get on with their lives. He will not let them forget the last moments of those doomed men and women and is arrested, even pummeled, following his unannounced exhibitions.

While the intensity of 9/11 fades, the emotional and psychic effects of that day persist—for the survivors and everyone else old enough to remember. Keith’s reintegration with his family and society is, in the end, impossible to manage—he has seen things they will never understand. He is not a part of them, their lives, any more. Mr. DeLillo is too good a writer to provide a comforting conclusion to his novel and throughout his distinguished career has never resorted to treacle or, as fellow author Rick Moody puts it, “…appeals to sympathy (that are the) only allowable response. This is precisely how melodrama and sentimentality do their worst”. 
Those expecting, like the anonymous reviewer, a big, soppy, emotional take on 9/11 (a la Oliver Stone’s bombastic “World Trade Centre”) had best look elsewhere. Don DeLillo would not be so stupid and deftless to attempt such a thing. In the days, months, years following the destruction of the towers, Keith Neudecker’s awareness of the small, insignificant gestures and details of life is heightened but, in the final analysis, the events of 9/11 do not ennoble him or make him a better person. Instead he chooses to remove himself from his family, the rituals and banalities of ordinary existence. It is Lianne who finds reluctant solace in such things, even returning to the church of her childhood despite intellectual misgivings, existential doubts.

“But isn’t it the world itself that brings you to God? Beauty, grief, terror, the empty desert, the Bach cantatas. Others bring you closer, church brings you closer, the stained glass windows of a church, the pigments inherent in glass, the metallic oxides fused onto the glass, God in clay and stone, or was she babbling to herself to pass the time?” (Falling Man; pg. 234)

Lianne’s spiritual groping is nothing like the certainty and religious fervour that possessed Mohamed Atta and his eighteen co-conspirators as they unerringly steered their planes into the Towers, making course corrections right up to the last second. Mr. DeLillo has Atta and his fellowship of death make fleeting cameo appearances at several points during the novel—he felt the necessity to at least partially convey the thoughts of those who served such pivotal roles in that day’s destructive narrative.

The rabid faith of the terrorists was an important motivating factor, to be sure. It provided them with the moral rage they required to carry out their heinous acts. Their twisted beliefs, perverse interpretations of religious doctrine, precipitated enormous loss of life and suffering. Lianne’s grasp of the essence and necessity of God is, by comparison, far more tentative and precarious. For her, religion is a source of comfort for the weary, solace for the forlorn. Her faith, as flimsy as it may be, threatens no one and offers no possibility of harm or offense. In these dangerous, fraught times, that kind of spirituality is eminently preferable to literal truths and blind obedience.

**The Pesthouse**

*by Jim Crace*

*(Doubleday; Hardcover; $32.95)*

It always fascinates me when authors cross genre boundaries, boldly venturing forth into other branches of writing. Science fiction, in particular, attracts numerous mainstream scribes with its various and diverse worlds, the infinite permutations and possibilities they present. Sometimes the results are mixed—P.D. James’ *Children of Men* comes to mind, an admirable effort that turned on a neat concept but suffered from flaccid, bloodless prose and an overly optimistic resolution.
In some instances the dabblers achieve spectacular success and here I’m thinking of Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker*, Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* and, most recently, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. These offerings are thrilling reminders of what speculative fiction can produce when you combine creativity, intellectual vigour and transcendent prose. Literary writers are technically and aesthetically superior to their genre-dwelling colleagues, capable of composing evocative, daring prose, imagineering plausible worlds and fully-formed, three dimensional characters. The abilities of Messrs. McCarthy, Auster and Hoban reveal the weaknesses and bad habits many SF hacks have accumulated due to laziness, stupidity and the minimal demands of their eccentric fan base.

Count Jim Crace as another of the successful dabblers. The English author has never shied away from big ideas and never failed to deliver on them. His first novel envisioned a seventh continent and he provided it with a history, eco-system and topography, populating it with denizens boasting their own mythologies and unique stories. He has also taken us into the Judean desert and explored the psychologies and beliefs of the early Christian mystics who sought out their god in remote, hostile places and paid a daunting price for a face to face meeting with their pitiless deity (*Quarantine*).

*The Pesthouse*, Mr. Crace’s ninth novel, is his most ambitious yet. He presents us with a future America that has fallen from predominance, regressing to savagery due to some unknown, unnamed disaster. America is now longer a place to come to, a haven for the poor and weary, but a place to flee from—

“…nothing familiar was in sight, not a single building, not a reminiscent shape, not even any cultivated land, and only the footings of ancient walls and lines of metal spikes, rusted thin, as evidence that this had once been farmed many years before but now was wilderness. People had been here in better times, had lived there possibly, had died, but there was little chance that anyone would come again. People were becoming scarce. America was emptying. The land was living only for itself.” (*The Pesthouse*; pg. 142)

The only “Americans” left to eke out an existence are those too old, infirm or unskilled to emigrate, board the tall ships that voyage across the ocean to the new, old world for a fresh start, a second chance…or, just as likely, a lifetime of indentured servitude. But what alternative is there? To remain in a lawless environment where raiders steal your last possession and slavers pluck up those hardy enough to work and kill the rest? Plagues are rampant, superstition rife, the structures of society and civility swept aside by the need to survive, safeguard those precious resources that make survival possible.

As they journey through this barren expanse, Mr. Crace’s characters bear witness to terrible scenes, experience close brushes with death (or worse) and come to see the “dreaming road” and fabled ships for what they are. Through the eyes of his
protagonist, Margaret, we experience a world that has reduced her sex to mere chattel. She is thrown into a partnership of convenience with Franklin, a big man with the heart and spirit of a boy. A strange bond forms between them and, in time, they become a formidable team, determined to do what they must to preserve their undistinguished lives and cling tenaciously to whatever existence this blasted terrain allows. They will scratch out a modest future for themselves even if that means abandoning their dreams and reclaiming a past they thought they’d left behind. It is a courageous choice and possibly a foolish one but circumstances deny them all but the most meager aspirations.

*The Pesthouse* does not conclude in false optimism and for that we’re grateful. Margaret and Franklin are attractive creations but not entirely deserving of redemption. We do come to like and accept them, despite their character flaws and foibles, which Mr. Crace exposes with skill and discretion.

Science fiction hacks would have stretched this book into a fat tome (or even a bloated series), positing all sorts of strange societies and enclaves, straining our credulity with far-fetched accounts of mutants living in the crumbling ruins of abandoned cities, fantastical beings of all shapes and sizes. Jim Crace resists such silly notions and, instead, offers a credible vision of an America in decline, a ruined dystopia made up of the hopeless and unwanted. In this bitter landscape metal and technology languish and civilization and all its attractions exist elsewhere, on far, unreachable shores.

If the Americans are to prevail, restore their blighted legacy, they have daunting work ahead of them. History has been lost, science relegated to myth…it is only the will and strength of those who remain that will win the day. The prospects aren’t promising, Mr. Crace has seen to that.

In the end, all we can do is leave Margaret and Franklin to their difficult endeavors and wish them the very best. Better a life of quiet desperation than no life at all. For the odd, mismatched couple, that impossibly slender reed of hope will have to suffice…