

Interview

Iain Banks frowns and leans closer to the small, black dictaphone machine sitting upright on the table between us. "It's a very public fact that I write books and I'm Scottish. Trying to put all egotism aside, which is difficult, I sometimes read lists that mention Scottish writers and I'm not on them." He shrugs his shoulders determined to remain philosophical about the whole thing. "It doesn't really bother me. If I was doing what I'm doing and it wasn't getting any critical or commercial success I'd start thinking, What the hell's the point? As it is, the books sell very well and I can pay the mortgage quite happily. That makes up for me maybe not getting my full measure of critical recognition. Besides, the only real recognition there is people continuing to read your work."

He gazes around the room at all the tourists and shoppers eating, drinking and chatting noisily and then slowly turns his attention back towards myself and Jason, the photographer. As he studies the two scruffy-looking, young fellow-Scots sitting in awe before him he smiles. It must be obvious that we're feeling a little out-of-place gulping at our pints in such an up-market establishment as Edinburgh's Cafe Acanthus. I'm fairly certain that this might not be Iain's first choice of venue either if he were planning a good old knees-up but it's situated close enough to the Waverly Station for convenience. Banks and his publicist, Michelle, have just suffered a long, tiring train journey all the way from Dundee and there is a strict schedule to stick to. There's still a mountainous pile of books to sign before Whit - his 14th publication in only 11 years - is officially launched at James Thins' bookstore this evening. Scratching his beard thoughtfully he continues: "I get a real buzz out of reading a letter that's obviously been written drunkenly by a bunch of students in a flat and they're going: 'Hey, Banksie! We just read your book and we think you're fucking great. Except for Jimmy - he thinks you're shite.'. I like that just as much as getting a glowing review from some respected broad-sheet critic."

Why don't you use these letters on the dust-jackets instead of the Times or the Observer reviews? Just leave out the parts about Jimmy.

Banks cackles loudly. "Well, that's what we do as far as the reviews are concerned - just cut out all the negative bits."

Jason puts the remnants of his pint of Guinness down and leans across the table so the dictaphone can pick up his voice over the sound of all those yapping tourists. (The festival is long finished but, for some reason, there are still hordes of them swarming the city.) "Have you ever been paranoid - considering some of the books you've written - that you're going to be a magnet for any unstable individuals that might be going about?"

The writer nods. "I was a wee bit worried about that with The Wasp Factory but it never happened. For years I assumed that Macmillan - who were my hardback publishers at the time - were censoring my mail. I assumed they had cellars full of my hate-letters. It was only years later, with a casual remark, that I realised they'd just been sending stuff straight on to me. They hadn't even looked at it at all, which entirely altered my views about my readership. I now suspect that the nutter-quotient of my fans is microscopic compared to that of society in general.

"The only annoying letters I get are from people basically asking me to write their theses for them. I don't mind answering fairly specific and detailed questions - preferably not too many of them - but I get people asking, 'What are the major themes of your work?' What the fuck do you want me to say? This is your job. I write the books - you tell me what the themes are.

"I've only ever had one or two letters where people are obviously a bit strange. Fairly harmlessly so - they weren't threatening or anything. I just thought, Hmn! I don't think I'd like to sit beside you on a long railway journey." Popping his glasses further down onto the end of his nose and comically

screwing up his face, Banks affects his best high-pitched, trainspotter shriek: "The other interesting thing about anoraks is that they're made from brown paper which originates on the planet Tharg!."

*Ever since the publication of his controversial first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, in 1984 Iain Banks has continued to entertain, intrigue and often shock his audience. His keen understanding of such student concerns as rock 'n' roll, sex, drugs, alcohol, fast cars, warped psychology and black humour has ensured a steadily increasing cult following for his work. With the publication of *Consider Phlebas* in 1987 (and with the addition of an 'M' to his name) Banks broke into the science fiction field. Since then he has alternated his mainstream books with tales about a future-society known as *The Culture*. He is now greatly respected in SF circles.*

*With his most recent mainstream novel, *Whit*, Banks tells the story of Isis - Elect of God and granddaughter of the founder of the Luskentyrian sect based near Stirling. One month before the cult's 4-yearly Festival of Love she is dispatched out into the world of "the unsaved" to track down her wayward cousin Morag who appears to have renounced her faith.*

In your new novel you've created a completely new religion. Did you grow at all fond of it?

"No!" *snarls Banks with a great deal of venom.* "I despise all religions - whether they're cute or not. I suppose there's a kind of appreciation for anything you create that you think works well - even if the basic idea of it is something that doesn't appeal to you. In a narcissistic way, I was quite proud that I'd developed a religion that I thought was quite convincing. It was just daft enough to be believable. But, no, I didn't actually like it. I'm not L. Ron Hubbard, you know!"

How would you feel if people used the cult's set of beliefs as a philosophy for life?

"I think I'd have a bloody good giggle to myself - I'd think, poor, credulous fools."

You could make yourself huge sums of money.

Banks scowls. "No, I'd rather have a clear conscience, thankyou very much. That's more important than a healthy bank account. This is why I vote Labour even though I should vote Tory and pay less tax. I want to contribute to the World's store of rationality - not its store of idiocy."

The holy objects in your book - like the lard and the tea - are a bit silly really but the Grandfather has attached great significance to them. Was the idea to show how meaningless other religious symbols like the cross are?

"That was certainly part of the idea," *smiles Banks - his short outburst of vitriol over.* "The same happens in *The Wasp Factory* - the fact that Frank has all these ludicrous symbols, totems and objects of significance like the belly-button fluff, shavings off his Dad's stick or the skull of the old dog.

"One of my main inspirations with *Whit* was this German pilot, I can't remember his name, who was shot down during the war. He was saved because they wrapped him in felt and he always had a soft-spot for felt after that. I took that as a kind of template."

I've not read *Canal Dreams* yet, and Frank in *The Wasp Factory* doesn't really count as being a woman. How did you go about getting inside the female mind for Isis' character?

"I didn't. I just wrote it. There's another book, *Against a Dark Background*, which is written from a female point of view as well. I just do it by winging it, basically. For a long time the central character in *Whit* was going to be called Joshua and was going to be male. A few weeks before I began writing - when I was still at the end of the planning process - I suddenly thought it'd make more sense if the central character was female. It's quite possible that Isis is actually quite a male sort of female. I didn't want her to be ultra-feminine."

When I first read *The Wasp Factory* it reminded me a lot of Ian McEwan's early short stories - particularly the idea of the penis preserved in the jar. Was he a big influence on you?

"Probably, yeah. I remember thinking before I started writing that book that it'd be a bit like Ian McEwan and Martin Amis. That was the feel I was aiming for. It wasn't really meant to be as much of a horror story as people took it to be.."

You've said that you wrote five novels before *The Wasp Factory* was published. What became of them?

"Well," *says Banks*, "The last three - *Use of Weapons*, *Against a Dark Background* and *Player of Games* - were published after extensive re-writes. *Player of Games*, which I wrote just before *The Wasp Factory*, came pretty close to being published itself back in 1979. A publisher thought about it very long and hard and even got as far as the editorial board before he decided it wasn't for them. *Use of Weapons* was abandoned as a bad job for years. I never managed to get back to it until a friend of mine - a chap called Ken McLoud who's an author himself - said he'd like to re-read it. He came back with this brilliant idea of making the two time-streams go in different directions. I think that makes it the second best of all my books - regardless of genre.

"The *Bridge* is the one I'm proudest of in terms of the craft of the novel, then *Use of Weapons*. I certainly have a very affectionate feeling for *The Wasp Factory* it's very lean and elegant as a novel. That was the first book I did a second draft for - always a good idea." *He laughs and sips at his lemonade.*

"I'm gradually warming more and more to *The Crow Road*," *he continues*. "For a long time I tended to dismiss it because it wasn't cynical enough. But I think the only book I could've done a whole lot better is *Canal Dreams*. I'm not ashamed of it - it just doesn't seem to work as well as it ought to, for some reason. Something like *Consider Phlebas* - which is the total opposite of *The Bridge* in that it's all over the place... a total rag-bag with flimsily imposed structures on it - is, never-the-less, the one I always go back to when I get really drunk and want to read a bit of my own work. It's just got a huge amount of energy and zillions of ideas.

"It's a bit like the way you have different friends for different reasons. A book can be a friend 'cause you have a really intense discussion about the deepest moral, political, sociological, cosmological questions. *Consider Phlebas* would be like somebody who wouldn't know what most of those words mean but is a roaringly good friend to go and get steaming drunk with. You have to evaluate them in different ways."

What age were you when you realised you wanted to be a writer?

"The earliest documented evidence points to me being 11."

How long did it take you to develop your skills?

Banks shrugs his shoulders. "I suppose 41 years and counting would have to be the answer to that one. I'm hoping I'll continue to develop."

But do you think the fact you'd written five books before *The Wasp Factory* meant that you'd learned enough skills as a writer to make it work this time?

"Oh, yeah! That book marked a real water-shed. I used to always give the manuscripts for stuff I was writing to long-suffering friends and at least two of them said, 'It was just like reading a real book,' which is a kind of back-handed compliment, in a way."

I've always felt that your mainstream novels are closer to the New Wave science fiction writers like JG Ballard, Brian Aldiss and Michael Moorcock than your SF ones are.

He nods. "I think that's true. Walking on Glass and The Bridge are certainly akin to the New Wave of SF. Before I wrote The Wasp Factory I thought of myself as a science fiction writer. With that first novel I was deliberately writing something non-SF. It was a bit arcane, bizarre and weird but there were no real science fiction or fantastical elements in it. I still thought of myself as an SF writer after that but I was expected to continue doing mainstream books which is where that tension comes from. I was trying to sneak the science fictional elements into my books in almost a disguised form.

"The tension finally broke when Macmillan decided to publish Consider Phlebas which I'd written just after The Wasp Factory. So, the mainstream became more mainstream 'cause I knew I could get my SF fix every two years."

Jason leans forward again. **"Do you have to get into a different frame of mind when you're writing different kinds of novel? Do you approach SF and mainstream in different ways?"**

"No, I don't differentiate between them. I'm just writing a book. When I was doing Complicity I didn't suddenly find Prentice from The Crow Road popping up unbidden. That applies whether I'm writing mainstream or SF. The difference is between individual books not between genres.

"By the time I start writing, my thoughts are so saturated with the whole feel and energy of a particular book that there's no danger of anything else intruding."

Did you develop The Culture with Consider Phlebas?

Banks shakes his head. "It actually came about with the first draft of Use of Weapons. I was trying to make up a suitable society to justify the actions of the central character - to make him genuinely on the right side. I wanted him to be benign and progressive in the best sense - not just a disguised imperialist. It all gradually came together starting in the mid-'70s. Other writers' future histories and societies, their dystopias, kind of found a home in The Culture. I'd think: That's how we'd fix that problem in my society."

Would you say you fully understand The Culture now? Do you get an idea for a story and go ahead and write it or do you have to think: How does this fit in with what I've written before?

"I still manage to get things wrong with the date and time systems in different books. But apart from that it's fairly consistent 'cause I'd worked it all out in my head in great detail before I wrote Consider Phlebas."

Jason raises his hand and butts in: **"How do you research your books?"**

"I don't."

The photographer's jaw drops in disbelief. **"Really? 'Cause I could imagine with Whit that you looked up all the most bizarre cults from around the World."**

"Nah! All you have to do is just live, pay attention to the media and very occasionally maybe take notes. I know enough about bizarre sects just from watching the news. You sit there thinking, Fuck! People actually believe that shit? Nothing in the Luskintyrian creed is any weirder than the stuff they've got in the Mormon creeds or the Scientologist philosophies, for fucksake! I'm afraid the research comes to you. You just turn on the TV screen and there it is." *He laughs.* "It even comes knocking on your door."

Why do you think experimental styles have been such an important part of Scottish fiction - Alasdair Gray mixing SF, realism and post-modernism or James Kelman mucking about with punctuation?

"Because the Scots respect cleverness in a way that the English don't. In large parts of English society it's a real, genuine and damning criticism to tell somebody they're 'too bloody clever'. In

Scotland there's always been a respect for intelligence and for trying new things. That comes across in the writing which is more adventurous and less formal. Our writers are more likely to try things that a more cautious, more calculating mind wouldn't. Also, to a degree, we generally don't care that what we're doing won't give us access to the highest levels of whatever activity we happen to be engaged in. We might not get the chair at some University. We might not get the highest prizes - although, James Kelman has shown that it can be done, and good on him."

Do you think you'll ever explore any other genres of fiction?

Banks smiles. "Well, token suggestions have been made about me writing Westerns as Iain Z Banks and Pornography as Iain X Banks but I very much doubt it. The reason I write in the SF genre is because it's a major interest of mine."

I believe one of your other interests is creating music on your home computer. Do you play any instruments as such? Have you ever been in a band?

His face lights up at the mention of music and a child-like grin spreads from ear to ear.

"No, I've never played in a band - for which the music-listening public should be eternally grateful - but just last weekend I finally worked out how to use my midi equipment. I've got a music program, a guitar synthesiser and keyboard, sound modules and a reverb unit. I started writing my first proper tune the other day on the midi notator. This is still an on-going process. It'll take a long, long time to get it together."

Will you actually sing your own songs?

"Nah, I won't be singing but the songs in Espedair Street actually exist - they have tunes and everything. They were whistled onto cassette tapes 20 years ago. Demo versions of these will be going to any sucker stupid enough to want to make Espedair Street into a film."

Were you a punk when you were younger?

"Some bright young thing, about half my age, once stood up at the Cambridge rotary society and in a very high and patronising manner told me I was 'too young to be a hippy and too old to be a punk', and I thought: Fuck, yeah! That's true."

"I was always a bit contemptuous of uniforms and people dressing the same way, so I doubt I'd ever have been something as identifiable as a punk. I did have my stage of wearing bright yellow jackets and purple loon-pants but I don't like to dwell on that too much."

What do you listen to these days?

"Whatever's around at the moment plus a smattering of older stuff. Just now I'm listening to Neil Young, Oasis, The Levellers, Björk and The Silencers. You get a good idea of what I've been listening to recently from what's mentioned in my mainstream novel."

"I go through these phases of buying lots of CDs. I don't buy them for quite a while and then I'll go into the Mega-store and just go into a feeding frenzy and walk up to the check-out with CDs stacked from my groin to my chin. It really pisses off all those penniless students standing beside me clutching one CD each. They're probably standing there thinking, Who's this rich bastard?"

OK. We've got a few more questions to ask. What's the most embarrassing record in your possession?

"Sorry but I've got to go and do some proper work now." *With that Iain S(for "sonic") Banks up and leaves with his publicist following close behind.*

Jason and I decide to venture out into Edinburgh's soggy streets - determined to track down a less refined establishment for our evening's alcoholic consumption.
