

Interview: Changing society, imagining the future



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Matter is the seventh science fiction novel by Iain Banks about "the Culture". He talks to Patrick Ward about writing, utopias, and New Labour.

What is the Culture?

Well it's not us, although most protagonists in *Matter* are humanoid. The idea is that human - or what would pass for human - is a common body type throughout the galaxy. It's an advanced, post-scarcity society. I suppose you could call it communist or socialist; the state has to a large extent withered away. They don't have money, everything is free, and you work because it's a hobby, because you enjoy it. This is either ludicrous pie-in-the-sky nonsense, or a really prescient piece of forward thinking on my part, although I don't expect to be around to be told I was wrong.

They are basically do-gooders, wishy-washy liberals with fabulous weaponry. In a sense it is an anarchic society that doesn't collapse - politically, technically or anything else. One is, for example, free to choose one's gender. It is part of your birthright, the Culture having profoundly meddled with its own genetic inheritance. Things like drugs - we have drug glands - the drugs manufactured by these glands come effectively without side-effects. So it's not as though you can have a drug economy because no one's going to pay for them.

There's also the stuff about how power is distributed, but part of the guarantee is that there's a whole class of drones, or conscious machines, who are slightly more intelligent than humans, as a rule. When the Culture talks about "people" that means them as well, and they are inherently more rational, less exposed to emotionalism than people. And then of course there are the Minds - with a capital "M" in the finest tradition of fantasy - who are super-ultra-madly intelligent, well mainly, and way beyond either the human equivalent drones or humans themselves. They are a very, very advanced society with quite good morals really. They occasionally resort to dirty tricks, but they can always prove it was the right thing to do because they use statistics.

Is the Culture your vision of what humanity could, or should, be in the future?

Yes! We'll be lucky ever to achieve it. I think the only way a species like us could ever get to be like the Culture in the first place would be through genetic manipulation. Suppose there is some sort of mix of genes that predisposes us to racism, sexism and homophobia - I think we'd need to knock that out and we could become quite nice people.

That's one reason for me not making the Culture our future - I'm not that confident we're capable of getting somewhere that benign. I'd certainly like to think we could; one can't despair; one has to assume that a better society is possible. It means I don't have to argue that the Culture can come from us; it's coming from something that's like us.

But for me it's the ideal functioning utopia. It's what ought to be the end state of any decent political system and in one sense you should get there no matter what. Highly advanced capitalism will produce the Culture whether it likes it or not, but of course it won't like it. The idea of not having money is anathema to capitalism. You might be aiming there deliberately through communism or socialism, and that might make it easier to achieve, or not. The experiment to find out will take some simulating.

It's been eight years since your last Culture novel, and a lot has happened on this planet. Has that worked its way into *Matter*?

Not really, but you can never get rid of these influences entirely. Obviously I write from within a wee planet's culture, and things affect you. All the things we have learnt over the last few years about how stupid and barbaric politicians can be and the idea that war and imperialistic aggression will never go out of fashion - when you have neocon libertarian dickheads in charge - are built into the Culture who know that's how certain societies work. I'm sure there are one or two places in the book where the last few years, especially the Iraq war, have had influence. The Culture is a political idea in a sense, and the books have a purpose overall, but it doesn't really come down to detailed examples. The war has been such a disgrace and a disaster that unless I tackle it head on, and make it about that in the first place, it would almost be pointless to do it as an aside.

You touched on it quite a bit in *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, didn't you?

I'm quite a frustrated political writer. I don't have the gift to properly embed politics in the book. Characters come along and spout what is obviously my rant. It's an eternal frustration.

The approach of Alban, the central character in *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, was originally cautiously for the war, and I never was. I was against it right from the beginning. But I wanted to give him a sense of being betrayed, and looking back on it to think, "Oh dear, I was one of the useful idiots." That was the phrase that applied to those who resisted the war, but I think we know now who the useful idiots really were - the people supposedly of the left who actually supported it. There aren't so many left: people like Christopher Hitchens, if he really is of the left. I think there are people who are just too proud to admit that they were effectively outwitted by George W Bush, and you can kind of understand that being embarrassing.

You spoke to *Socialist Review* ten years ago just after Labour came into power, and you'll be happy to know you said you had no illusions in Tony Blair, so I think you've been vindicated there.

It wasn't difficult to call that. I wouldn't say I had any powerful prescience. Blair was quite upfront about what he was doing. I think you could still be cautiously optimistic at the time and hope it would turn out better but you would never bet on it. He was very clear about being very close to business, providing a very slightly pinker version of conservatism, and it was clear that any fights he picked would be against the left and against people who weren't able to fight back, certainly not against business.

I think the surprise with Blair was just how blatant it became. The real crunch, obviously not in terms of its importance - it was one of the most trivial things - was when he went on holiday at Berlusconi's Mediterranean villa. If you are absolutely determined to stick with US foreign policy no matter what, then everything else falls into place, like making friends with Berlusconi because he was on the side of the US in the war as well.

It was as though he wanted to rub the noses of the still desperately clinging on Labour supporters in it. That's how mad he was. He deliberately went on holiday to Berlusconi's pad! There was absolutely no need for that whatsoever. He did it just for the hell of it, to say, "Yes, I'm a right wing bastard." It was actually kind of funny. It made you hate him with a bit more visceral. The thing that got me in 1997 was that the party that came into government was slightly to the right of Edward Heath. It was an easy one to call.

You famously cut up your passport in protest as well.

Yes, in 2003 to protest against the war. I actually got it back a couple of weeks after Blair left office - that was my criterion - and I was expecting a bit of fuss about it. It was difficult to explain on the form. They didn't have an option for cutting it up for political reasons. I had to squeeze my explanation into the small box that they give you: "Sent to PM in protest at Iraq war." When they said "Where did you lose your passport?" it was somewhere between the local post box and 10 Downing Street.

So you don't have any plans to tear up your new passport for Gordon Brown?

Well no, you can do it once, but doing it twice is just petulance frankly. It was more just sheer anger. I couldn't think of any other attachment to the British state I had that I could do anything with. Once I abandoned the idea of crashing my Land Rover through the gates of Fife dockyard, after spotting the guys armed with machine guns, I decided to self-harm instead.

You've said before that you prefer writing science fiction, but you still alternate between that genre and mainstream fiction.

I enjoy writing science fiction, but there's not a great amount in it. In a way the mainstream is more rewarding because it's more difficult, I've got to restrain my imagination a bit more and rein it in. So I get a lot of pleasure writing both, but I also get a lot of pleasure independently from being able to write in two genres. It's great for me and hilarious being able to have done that. But there was a point about a year before I wrote *The Algebraist* when I thought, "Oh, science fiction, it's a young man's game." I think you get fewer ideas when you get older, but you do get better at using the ones you have.

Writing science fiction relies heavily on ideas - you can write a perfectly good mainstream novel with no original ideas; you just have to tell an interesting story with interesting characters who have something to say. I don't mean that as a criticism either: that's perfectly valid, but you can't do that with science fiction; you have to have completely new ideas in there somewhere or it doesn't really cut it as proper SF and I was a bit concerned about that.

Usually I'm quite a sunny optimistic kind of person, but I backed myself into a slightly shadowy corner and convinced myself it wasn't going to work and I would have to give up writing science fiction in a few years. However, I set myself the goal to offer a new non-Culture civilisation for the next science fiction novel and came up with *The Algebraist*.

It just restored my faith in my own imagination, that it'll still be around for a few years. So for the foreseeable future I'm going to continue writing mainstream and science fiction. It might still be the case that science fiction will be the one to go first. But for the next ten, 20 years or so, presuming I'm still lucky enough to keep getting published, the gradual intervals between books will become longer as I get older. When I get to my 80s I can't imagine doing more than a book every five years or something.

Do you have a project lined up for the future?

Well, I'm thinking about thinking about the next book. I'm going to start typing it in October. So I'm not thinking about it. I'm thinking about thinking about it. There's a distinction I hope you appreciate. So I haven't got any idea whatsoever - it'll be mainstream, that's it.

Anything to add...?

One of the things that comes from being of a reasonably ripe old age, is what goes around comes around. At the moment it's important not to despair at the state of the world. It can look quite bleak, especially in this country. In terms of parliamentary democracy we almost have three right wing parties and it doesn't look like we have the chance to vote for anyone with any sort of reasonable progressive policies. But these things always change and there's an awful lot of stuff that's going to be happening with the US economy and so on.

I don't think capitalism is going to look quite so clever in a few years time. We shall see. You should never underestimate capitalism: it manages to make bucks out of failure. But it's not as set in stone as outright capitalists would like to have it. There may well be an argument for "thin capitalism". You can have capitalism of different flavours and the stuff we've got, and have had historically, is particularly cruel. So there's potential for a change in capitalism itself which could be interesting in all sorts of ways.

Ultimately, I may be a short term pessimist, but I maintain that I am a long term optimist. We shall see. We'll get to something like the Culture eventually.

Matter is published by Orbit, £18.99 and is reviewed [here](#)