

Interview

Iain M. Banks needs no introduction. Without doubt one of the most daring, imaginative and compelling writers of his generation, his science fiction novels are always major events in the publishing calendar, and INVERSIONS, published in paperback in May, is no exception.

Ken MacLeod's first three novels have established him as one of the most exciting new British SF writers to emerge in recent years, and his new novel, THE SKY ROAD, is published in hardback in June, along with THE CASSINI DIVISION in paperback.

We put a series of questions about life, love and the universe (and each other) to both authors, and this is what they said:

1. When did you first meet?

Ken:

1970 or thereabouts, when we were both at Greenock High School. I used to read Private Eye over Iain's shoulder in registration class. Discreetly, of course, which is why he has a different story.

Iain:

1970, when we were both in 5th year at Greenock High School.

2. How does your latest novel relate to your other novels?

Ken:

It's 'alternate history within the future history' where the world of the other novels gets switched on a different course. And the Greens, much maligned in my other novels, get their turn at being the good guys.

Iain:

Distantly, (whistles, inspects fingernails closely).

3. What did you do before you started writing full-time?

Ken:

Most recently, I was an analyst/programmer in Management Information Services at Edinburgh University. I've worked in laboratories, offices, factories, and a Ford truck depot, and a road-mending gang in Ross-shire. Any hunting, fishing, or smuggling I've done was just recreational.

Iain:

Lots of stuff, but the day job I gave up was that of a Law Costs Draughtsman (or costing clerk to give it its less grandiose title).

4. What three words would you use to describe your own novel?

Ken (on THE SKY ROAD):

Dark, ironic, hopeful.

Iain (on INVERSIONS):

Novel, science fiction

5. *What three words would you use to describe the other's novel?*

Ken (on INVERSIONS):

Fast, cool, sharp.

Iain (on THE SKY ROAD):

Pretty damn spiffing.

6. *Which of your books have you enjoyed writing most?*

Ken:

The Stone Canal

Iain:

The Player of Games

7. *How big is your computer?*

Ken:

About 8 cubic feet, I think.

Iain:

Power Mac 4400/200 with 48Mb/1.2Gb: 17" screen, HP Deskjet 870Cxi. No modem, no games. I use Claris for WP and MOTV Freestyle for MIDI. So there.

8. *What's your favourite shop?*

Ken:

I have to assume that both Rog Peyton and Dick Jude will see this, so I'll say it's a toss-up between Andromeda in Birmingham and Forbidden Planet in London.

Iain:

KaDeWe in Berlin. Specifically, the top two floors (the Food Hall - it makes Harrods' look like a corner shop).

9. *What was the last book you bought?*

Ken:

The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System, by Henryk Grossmann. Published in 1927, but strangely topical. Remember, you heard it here first.

Iain:

Soft by Rupert Thomson.

10. *Where are you going to spend the millennium?*

Ken:

I don't know yet - somewhere in the streets of Edinburgh, probably.

Iain:

Next door, at the farmhouse my parents recently moved into (look, they've got an open fire, okay?). Then on the 1st, we'll be driving up to the Highlands to visit pals and drink too much.

11. Do you think mankind will ever colonise other planets in our Solar System? If so, which one do you think will be first and when do you think it will happen?

Ken:

Yes. I expect a Moon colony within thirty years. After that, Mars. Those guys with the tentacles and heat rays will be sorry they ever messed with Woking, mark my words.

Iain:

Colonise is perhaps not the right word. We certainly ought to be in a position to colonise them (or we're crap) but it might make more sense to create our own artificial habitats in space and leave the planets largely as they are. In any event, Mars is the obvious one (and technically terraformable), plus the moon (depending on whether you count it as a planet or not) too, using lots of domes and tunnels and stuff. Though for what it would cost to equip Mars with a breathable atmosphere or honeycomb the Moon, you'd be a lot better off for a long time producing more habitable space - fractually - on Earth. Looking further ahead, Venus could be a possibility, Triton too, and gas-tight habitats floating in the atmospheres of the giant planets might be interesting, though a few trifling physiological changes would probably be advisable. Time scale? Oh, sometime in the next millennium I'd guess.

12. If you were to appear on Mastermind, what would you choose as your specialist subject?

Ken:

The far left in Britain.

Iain:

Male bovine waste linguistic parallels, expressing thereof.
