

Interview

What made you want to be a writer when you grew up?

It seemed like a good idea at the time. I always enjoyed writing stupid wee stories when I was a kid. If you had a choice in essay questions, one where you could write about what you did in your Summer holidays and one where you could write "a story starting with the following sentence" I'd always go for the fiction one. I always found it much easier to write fiction than to dredge up the past and put it down accurately. I just went on from there. After I stopped wanting to be A Scientist - I didn't want to specialize, but to be A Scientist: they seemed to be the most important people around - I decided if I was going to get paid for anything I enjoyed doing, writing might be the thing. There was no sudden cry of "ah, I know what I'm going to be, not an engine driver after all!" It was a very gradual process. I sort of grew into it; rather, it grew into me, like a toenail.

What's all this nonsense about wanting to write science fiction?

I've got an sf book tentatively scheduled to come out in November. It's called **Consider Phlebas** - a very arty title. It's from "The Waste Land." It's an old-fashioned sf space opera. A little more thoughtful, but with tinges of what Aldiss described as "wide-screen baroque." A bit grittier, perhaps, but unashamedly full of fast spaceships and wonderful weapons. It's told from a fairly mundane level, from the point of view of, not a soldier exactly, but someone toting a gun. It's a radical version of **Starship Troopers**. Well, it's better than that, I hope, but it's frankly about hardware. It takes very old-fashioned precepts. It does have faster than light travel, it has got ray guns, lasers, whatever. No tentacles, but three-legged aliens.

One of the things I was trying to get in, one of the things you don't have in most science-fiction novels about fighting, is the sheer amount of luck - often very bad luck - involved in real warfare, in real life. One of the things that used to annoy me a lot about stories like **Dune** is that everyone thinks the same way. It's just like a chess game. Everyone knows what they're doing. It's the way people think in terms of, you know, the Soviets are very cunning, the Pentagon knows what they're doing. Bull-shit. It's only thirty-forty years later you find out they not only didn't know what the other side was doing, they didn't know what their own side was doing.

So much of war is an awful lot of chance. Whether it works, I don't know, because all this is second hand. I've never had a shot fired at me. To me, it seems to read more realistically than most sf written in that form. If you do imagine these wonderful weapons, you should think of the things that can go wrong with them. It was envisioned as a novel that went from action sequence to action sequence, but it bloated on the way and became more complex, philosophical. It's a hardsell approach I'm taking here.

A problem with science fiction is trying to find something important enough to hold the reader without making it too important. You know, life as we know it. It's the problem with science fiction not being able to rely on the characters. It's all in the technology. If you're going to have technology you might as well have the biggest technology, if you're going to have problems and conceptual breakthroughs, they might as well be the biggest, the best. It's a bit adolescent, a bit silly. It's yet another thing I'm going to try and correct in this story. The genre bloody well ought to be out of short trousers by now. Of course a lot of people will use me writing science fiction as a way to catch me out. "Ah-hah, we knew it was rubbish all along..."

Both your novels so far, **The Wasp Factory**, and **Walking On Glass**, have had a lot of games-playing elements...

I'm a sucker for games and puzzles. It's something adults tend to carry on from their childhood, but just try to disguise more. From obvious things like the Dad buying his son the train playing with it

himself. That was the thing I was trying to bring out in **The Wasp Factory** - I don't think entirely successfully - the whole thing was to try and make Frank a type of symbol for the military establishment. One of the best banners I ever saw was from the Greenham Common women: "Take the Toys from the Boys." That's exactly the level it's on. Just because they're spending megabucks to destroy the world doesn't mean they're not essentially little kids at heart. Little kids can be extremely destructive and vindictive and total bastards a lot of the time. But it's something to worry about when you've got that much power.

At the same time, I think there's too much pressure on kids today to grow up very, very fast. You don't get the chance to go through childhood and exhaust the possibilities of play before you become an adult. The result of that is that instead of making any sort of reasonable break between the two states you end up with the childish things coming out in adulthood because they've never been exorcised. It would be possible to imagine a society in which this has been done almost deliberately, but that would be a mistake as well, to deliberately exclude the child from the adult, to make a clean break. You have some sort of manhood ceremony where you go into the woods and rape the bear and kill the squaw. That's going too far, but we're too far the other way. People with power and money tend to - almost literally, ha-ha - play with themselves.

One time, some friends and I were walking up a hill in Scotland, and we started saying "we're approaching the summit of Hill 417." We started playing soldiers. We were all about 25. We picked up these branches and developed this great game of soldiers shooting at each other. It was better than when you played it as a kid, because you were honest. When you got shot, you really fell down. It was quite a reasonable sort of game. I thought this was crazy. In Scotland, we could have been legally married and parents for about nine years. I was thinking if would be quite unusual if we'd stumbled across some kids of about nine or ten and they were all sort of sitting there fiddling about in each other's underpants or smoking. Adult games. Now, they have all these fat stockbrokers firing paint pellets at each other. They sound like total bastards. The sort of guys I'd love to put a real bullet through, the people who are going to make lots and lots of money out of the big bang. They're not just there for the fun of it, but to prove they're **real** men as well as bears of the stockbroker belt...dearie me.

Are there any themes you feel you're working out in your books?

Well, in each of my books, I've managed to mention McEwan's export. Maybe I should write to Scottish Newcastle breweries and ask for some sort of consultancy fee or something...but maybe they'd ask me for money, so I'll scrub that. I'm trying to write the books I'd want to read. If I was doing something else, I'd still like to read the kind of stuff I'm writing. Actually, I'd like to read rather **better** stuff, but it's worth a try. It's a bit of a cliche now, even the cliche has become a cliche, but, you know, the Hampstead novel...zzz...sound of author going to sleep. There doesn't seem to be a lot of stuff around that makes sense. It comes to something when something as surreal as **The Young Ones** comes to seem more like reality than a conventional sit-com. I've lived in flats not much different. I suppose it's a very sad statement on the moribund state of the BBC's light entertainment department. But that's their problem.

I'd like to write something that had the politics as an immediate subject. I've vague plans for the fourth book perhaps being a political novel. I've got some research to do on supertankers and Japan and the Panama Canal. Apart from that, it'd just be a breeze. But it'll definitely be quite overtly political on the side of the good guys. I was never very radical at university, but after I left I shifted in a fairly sinister direction and I remain set in that course. One of the few good things about the Rightward shift - clutching at straws here - is that it's shown who was Left because it was fashionable, who's a total bastard. It's flushed the rats out a bit. It's very much a backward ripple on a tidal wave though.

Your characters are fairly quick to resort to violence. Does this connect with your McEwan's Export vision of the Scots character?

Ya bastard...this tape is now finished...khhh, khh-ghhp-rrggh...

How am I suppose to transliterate that?

Ya cannae. Brackets - sound of interviewer being hit by interviewee. We do not resort to violence, Jimmie, take that - whack! - now it's back to the bourgeois voice. There's a fair amount of violence in the books, not disproportionate I hope. I'm not a violent person. I don't hit people. I can't remember the last time I hit anyone. It was a school fight or something. Very half-hearted. I'm mild-mannered Iain Banks. The violence is in the books, it's not in me. It's looking at the world - I hope this doesn't sound too pretentious - and seeing what's there. There's no point is trying to make light of it. It's what's around me. I'm lucky I've had a very sheltered upbringing in some ways. I've never had to go into the army, no wars have ever impinged themselves on me or most of my generation. That's why people can believe that the Bomb has held the peace. In fact, there's been thirty million people killed since 1945. That's a pretty big war. Unless you deliberately choose to forget about it - buy the **Sun**, watch **East-Enders** - you can't pretend it's not there.

You can only write about reality. Violence is a very large part of reality. Not as it directly affects us, but it's there indirectly. It's there inside me in a very deep sense. It's something I could perhaps be capable of, but it's certainly not something I'd resort to or have resorted to. I'm fairly well-bred and under control. I do make violence funny sometimes. That's a tricky operation. You should laugh at it first and then feel the horror, not laugh at it and forget it. I wait in fear and trembling for someone to dig up the case of some kid who tortures rabbits because he read it in a book - heh heh heh heh heh - called **The Wasp Factory**. Almost always the violence in books is mild compared to the things people really do. If you look at the case that **Psycho** is based on, it was **really** disgusting. The guy was actually skinning these women and he used to dress up in their skins. You couldn't do that in a book. Not back then, at least. People don't need these little prompts, they're quite capable of coming up with it themselves. It's one of the few levels where the apparently cretinous have untold reserves of imagination. Blockheads prison guards in Greece and Chile and Argentina and Iran and the SS used to come up with wonderfully imaginative, ingenious tortures. It's a funny old world isn't it.

The worst bit in **The Wasp Factory** wasn't made up, it was real - the kid with the maggots in his brain - it was told to me as a nursing horror story. It's supposed to have happened to some nurse in Glasgow. Maybe somebody else made it up, but it was told to me as a true story. It might have been embellished. It just happened to fit my purposes. Even that wasn't used completely gratuitously, it was there for a purpose. That's my defence and I'm sticking to it.

In the paperback of The Wasp Factory, you quote a lot of your reviews, including the murderously bad ones.

Oh yes, I think that's funny. "A piece of writing that soars to the level of mediocrity" from the **Times**. That was the best of the lot. It was the most stupid thing that was said about it. i don't care if you call the book evil, nasty, vicious, anything else. But it's **not** mediocre. His final word was "rubbish." I read it doubled up with laughter. It was a guy called Andrew Gimson. My editor looked him up and looked into his filing cabinet and come up with a bit of paper. It was a rejection letter to Andrew Gimson, rejecting this book of his. That was mildly amusing, but I took it that the guy was doing quite an honest review and you can't hold that against him. Then I found what his day job was...where he worked...heh heh heh...The Conservative Party Central Office. So I went "Yeahhh!" I didn't want a good review from those bastards. It was just priceless. Hee hee hee, it really made my day.