Iain Banks is one of Britain's most versatile and ambitious novelists, the recipient of an enviable combination of popular and critical acclaim. A restless experimenter, at home in a host of genres which he effortlessly hybridizes, he has, as Iain M. Banks, produced a stream of major SF novels. Pyrotechnic, action-filled, satiric, outlandish, deep and frivolous all at once, these bravura space operas and planetary romances juggle galactic scale, political argument and personal perspective with a revelatory energy rarely matched in speculative fiction.

Dominating Banks' SF output is the Culture series, seven loosely linked examinations of how a vast interstellar utopia—in essence human, governed by wise artificial intelligences, post-scarcity, non-propertarian, alluringly hedonistic—conducts itself in the barbaric regions beyond its frontiers. How can utopians avoid arrogance and condescension in their dealings with technologically less developed, hierarchical, sometimes oppressive civilizations? How can they be sure their benign manipulations will yield beneficial fruit?

Banks' analyses are complex and at times heart-rending; the Culture's Contact Section and its Special Circumstances operatives, mirroring the CIA in disconcerting ways, are very far from infallible. Their adventures feature in Consider Phlebas (1987), The Player of Games (1988), The State of the Art (1989), Use of Weapons (1990), Excession (1996), Inversions (1998) and Look to Windward (2000). Two novels not concerning the Culture, Against a Dark Background (1993) and Feersum Endjinn (1994), are equally colorful and thought-provoking, darkly playful looks at exotic societies plagued by entropy.

The Iain Banks label borne by Banks's mainstream fiction adorns several works of a distinctly fantastic bent: The Wasp Factory (1984), Walking on Glass (1985), The Bridge (1986; a classic of psychological surrealism including one of the most penetrating and hilarious sword-and-sorcery parodies ever), Canal Dreams (1989) and A Song of Stone (1997).

Despite the great variety of approaches you adopt in your fiction writing, you've achieved an immense and consistent popularity. To what qualities in your work do you ascribe such extraordinary success? As a young, beginning author, hopefully submitting manuscripts, did you ever anticipate anything like this?

Banks: *This is one of those questions I'm probably one of the least qualified people to answer (a seeing-wood-for-trees issue). I think I've got a good imagination, plus I gradually just got better at writing as a craft, which is something to do with determination, I guess, as it took 14 years, 1,000,000 words and five novels before I got one published. A cast-iron ego may be of help here: Believing in the teeth of all the available evidence that you are right and they—those pesky publishers who keep returning your manuscripts—are wrong. Of course, later you realize they were right, when you re-read the stuff you thought was so wonderful at the time. You were right that you were going to be a published writer one day, but not right about the particular work.*

I think having read a great deal helps, too; and reading with enthusiasm rather than an ever-critical eye, but on the other hand, not reading in the letting-it-wash-all-over-you sense either; keeping the analytical parts of the mind switched on at the same time. So you enjoy reading and appreciate what other writers have done, but you're always thinking how they've achieved their effects and how you might do something similar, but different (or, attempt to say something that profoundly disagrees with what they've written).

Oh, yes: the realist is just hoping to get one book published, and then maybe some more, and perhaps make a modest living from it, but the wild dreamer is already rehearsing his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

Famously, you early on divided your authorial persona in two: mainstream Iain Banks, and science-fiction-writing Iain M. Banks. Do you attach equal value to each? How do your two streams of output differ qualitatively, and to what extent are they simply different idioms for the same concerns?

Banks: *I attach equal value to each. But I still hear people talking about "your novels" as opposed to "the science fiction" (or worse still, "the sci-fi"), and there's no point pretending they're evaluated in similar terms, especially in the UK. To me they're all novels and they all get the same amount of attention and thought. The SF feels more natural and free and so is more enjoyable, while the mainstream stuff is a little harder and so more rewarding to get right. The SF is more polemical as a rule (though the new mainstream book, Dead Air, is very polemical indeed) and basically banging the drum for the future being better than most of the futures we tend to imagine—and, where it meets posited futures of apparently equivalent civilizational ease, arguing for a quite different economic structure. Both strands, in their own ways, attempt to rage against our general stupidity, our tendency towards bigotry and selfishness and our lack of compassion.*

You and, lately, your old friend Ken MacLeod, have put Scottish SF very firmly on the map. What is it about Scotland and contemporary Scottish experience that feeds so powerfully into SF?

Banks: *Coincidence, perhaps. Though as Scots we kind of get the best of both worlds; all the positives of writing in English and being hooked into the UK market without feeling that post-Imperial guilt and ennui that English writers can sometimes suffer from. The comparison with Irish writing is maybe more instructive. (There's a thesis or several in there, I bet, though I'm not the guy to write any of them.) Arguably, there was a golden age of growing up when Ken and I were going through the education system; the Scottish state schools were objects of some pride and then when we went to university a student loan was when you asked somebody for a fiver in the bar. Much had changed. Another thesis, maybe.*

You've published seven books set in the universe of the Culture. When did the concept of the Culture first come to you, and by what stages has it evolved since? Is it now darker, less sanguine, than it was at first?

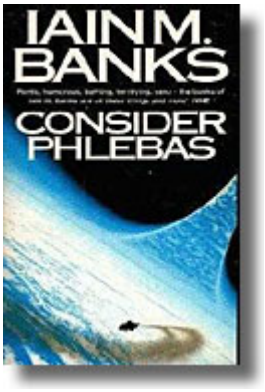
Banks: *The Culture goes back to the first draft of Use of Weapons, which was written in 1974. It was originally just the background for the story of Cheradenine Zakalwe; I wanted him to be working for the unarguably good guys so that the emphasis would be on his morality, not theirs. But then it became the seed point for a lot of stuff I'd been thinking about. Most of my criticisms of and replies to the SF I'd been reading until then became encapsulated in the Culture and I started to think of other stories that could be written in the context of such a society.*

Mostly, the Culture's just got more complicated and morally complex. It was pretty dark—in places—from the start, employing people like Zakalwe, and I always knew that what I was going to write about it would never in any sense faithfully represent what I was imagining, just because what I was imagining was a functioning utopia, and therefore pretty boring to read about. The interesting stuff was all at the far—and very thin—fringes, where the action and excitement was and dirty tricks could happen.

The Culture is a technological utopia of abundance, rather than the sort of utopia of scarcity described by, for example, Ursula Le Guin. As such, how practically useful is the Culture as a utopian construct and guide? Isn't it simply an impossible goal, a make-believe Wonderland, utterly beyond our capacity?

Banks: *At my most hubristic I'd argue that it's practically useful for those who believe in reason in the same way that the idea of heaven is useful for those who have faith: it represents hope for the future. As a goal, of course it's not impossible. Well, with the possible exception of the FTL, obviously. Though I still dream ... As for being beyond our capacity: this is just defeatism. With any luck at all the future will make the Culture look tawdry, bland and unexciting. Anyway, the point is that the Culture is saying the future might be a great place to live, without exploitation of people or AIs, with fabulous abundance, without capitalism and with the acknowledgement that we might create something—actually, lots of somethings—greater and wiser than ourselves, and so ourselves grow morally in the process.*

The first Culture novel, Consider Phlebas, is fascinating for its view of events outside the Culture, of what the Culture is not. When you wrote the book, was the Idiran empire your image of dystopia, of all the errors a civilization can make?



Banks: *Pretty much. The Idiran empire was to be the antithesis of the Culture: deeply religious, racist (well, speciesist), centralist, warlike and basically fascistic. Also, the book was always going to be space opera in the style Brian Aldiss described as widescreen baroque, and so I needed operatically obvious black-hatted bad guys.*

The second Culture book, The Player of Games, is much more about the Culture's internal politics and values; we see directly how these shape the Culture's foreign policy. To what extent does the Culture's status as an authentic utopia depend on the morality of what it does beyond its frontiers? This question is all the more urgent in Use of Weapons. ...

Banks: *Profoundly. The Culture is aware that, in a sense, it's easy to have an internal utopia once you get beyond a certain technological stage and your aims are not too immodest (so that the Culture has Orbitals rather than Dyson spheres, for example). The tricky bit is trying to be externally helpful, even moral, without being hegemonistic; encouraging the spread of pan-cultural lessons without even accidentally imposing cultural sameness at the expense of diversity. (One idea I'm coming round to is the notion that the Culture as it's so far been described is just the stage that its own mongrel-human civilization has got to; that this exists alongside somewhere between several and many other Cultures, rooted far enough back in the history and physiology [and physiologically influenced psychology] of their progenitors to be appreciably different from the Culture that I've written about, but sharing enough of the Culture's ideology and morality to be—from a distance, as it were—pretty similar, probably more similar than the UN looks, full of roughly similar nation states.)*

The Culture would say its actions should be judged by statistics: at the end of any given historically relevant period, can it be proved beyond reasonable doubt that its policy of interference has made life appreciably better for more people, or not (using fairly unambiguous criteria—albeit with suitable weightings for behavioral differences—like life expectancy, suicide rates, relative prosperity levels, prison populations, plus an analysis of any otherwise inexplicable disparities within the above criteria between races, genders, people of different belief systems or other distinct groups)? Hence Special Circumstances, people like Zakalwe, and Earth being used as part of a control group in The State of the Art.

The narrative structure of Use of Weapons is remarkable, a sort of spiral exposure of the surprising essence of the protagonist, Zakalwe. How did you contrive this approach? Is Zakalwe's obsession, his underlying falseness, by extension an indictment of the entire Culture that employs him?

Banks: *The original 1974 draft of Use of Weapons was just absurdly complicated. It was packed with purple prose and it had this insane structure it was impossible to comprehend without thinking in six dimensions. One of my unfortunate friends bludgeoned into reading this piece of nonsense was a school pal called Ken MacLeod; he did his best to suggest improvements to the book, but basically it was hopelessly flawed. I effectively left the thing to rot.*

Then, over 10 years later, after Wasp Factory was published, Ken asked to read it again. I told him he was mad.

He read it and came back and told me there was a good novel in there struggling to get out. I told him he was mad again.

So he came up with two suggestions. First, putting the climax of the book at the end. It had been in the middle, because that's where the structure said it had to be, and such is my blinkeredness this idea of putting it where logic—and narrative drive—dictated it ought to go seemed totally radical when he suggested it, though of course also completely impossible, because of the all-important structure. But then he (second) suggested this two-stream idea, with one strand going forward in time and the other going back, both leading to their own climax, so that you'd get the identity revelation at the end—where it always had been—and the whole thing with the besieged battleship and so on at the end as well, where it belonged.

It was one of those filmic moments when I just sort of looked at him and then said, "By Jiminy, old buddy, that might just work ... " Or so I recall.

Actually, knowing me, I probably told him he was mad again and tried to argue that the preposterous structure had to stay ... Anyway, because of that I can't take full credit for the book's strengths, and hence the acknowledgement at the start.

The second part of your question: No; Zakalwe is a weapon and the Culture uses him, but the deceit is all on Zakalwe's side (not that what he's kept secret would necessarily have excluded him from working for the Culture, though his fascination factor as a kind of moral grotesque would have been off the scale). He has responsibility for his own actions, no matter what. Special Circumstances needs people like Zakalwe for a very limited number of operations and it isn't allowed to just make them so it has to find them elsewhere, after the damage to them has been done (and done by somebody else). And it has, as part of the Culture, to offer the possibility of what we would term absolution, forgiveness, to the individual it uses.

Your Culture novella, "The State of the Art," brings utopian observers to Earth as, as you put it, a "control group" exercise. You hint at our benighted planet's eventual awakening to, contact with, galactic civilization. Can Earth, as you described it then, as it is now, ever become a part of the Culture?

Banks: *Well, if the Culture did actually exist, I don't see why not. Though if it turns out that we have an -ism gene (for things like racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc.), Contact may well come with a heavy hint that a little light gene therapy might not go amiss ...*

Some light relief: your alien names are, well, long, and sometimes hard to pronounce. How do you go about thinking up all these exotic monikers?

Banks: *I could tell you, but then I'd have to wipe your memory.*

After the initial set of Culture novels, you embarked, in the mid-'90s, on other, unrelated, projects: The ornate but very bleak space opera, Against a Dark Background, and the lighter but still ominous far-future romance, Feersum Endjinn. Are these books intimations of how badly human destiny might go wrong, specifically in the absence of a utopian prospect like the Culture?

Banks: *Darn! Never thought of that. Against a Dark Background is a dressed-up, darkened-down fantasy yarn about being alone. Feersum Endjinn ... I think it's just my attempt at a far-future novel based on Earth rather than anywhere else. Though even I'm not sure what's really going on.*

You returned to the Culture sequence with Excession, and then Inversions. Did you consciously conceive of these two novels as matching perspectives: the Culture from above, and then from below?

Banks: *Again, this had to be pointed out to me. Inversions was an attempt to write a Culture novel that wasn't. Also I enjoyed the discipline of writing about a non-historical time without instant communication and smart-ass machines (and also without enchanted swords and other assorted pixie-associated-stuff ... though also with the capability of using an enchanted dagger if I chose to ...).*

Excession is particularly popular because of its copious detail concerning the Ships and Minds of the Culture, its great AIs: their outrageous names, their dangerous senses of humor. Is this what gods would actually be like?

Banks: *If we're lucky.*

Look to Windward, the most recent Culture novel, is very much about terrorism: its causes and courses. Do you think the book's relevance has increased since September 11, 2001?

Banks: *Sadly, yes. Not exactly prescient, but the book did end up having an additional contemporary cultural relevance I hadn't counted on.*

You've had a sabbatical from writing, and are now at work again. What can we expect next? Will your parallel mainstream/SF career pattern continue?

Banks: *The new mainstream novel, Dead Air, is published in the UK in September (in the US, probably never). The book after that is contractually supposed to be SF, so I suppose it will be; however it's two-and-a-bit years away, so I haven't started thinking about it yet.*

Finally: words of farewell. Probably your most fantastical mainstream novel is The Bridge, fondly remembered for its barbarian, essentially Conan with a Glaswegian accent. If he were speaking for you here, what message would he have for your legions of readers?

Banks: *Rite, that's enuf from that basturt writer guy, let me tell ye. Fukin goan on an on like that about his fukin books! Jeez ma skudzers! See these people showin off just because the basturts can read? Make me fukin sick, so they dae! So fukin what, eh? Pen mightier than*

the sword, zat right? Gie us a straight fight an see which you'd prefer tae huv in yer scabburd, pal.

Oh, an by the way: Ah want tae have a few wurds with this Banks guy. Seems this basturt might have had something tae dae wi me gettin intae all them scrapes and so-fukin-called adventures an that. Fukin nerve, eh? Who the fuk does he think he is, Ah'd like tae know? Sittin there in his fancy chair and goan plinky-plink-plink all dainty like on this wee key-board hoodjie while Ah'm oot there wi a sord in ma fist an a fukin know-all munky on ma showder bendin ma ear day an night an me daen all the fukin durty wurk an riskin life an limb an getting buggir all by way of reward an he's gluggin shampain and munchin madelaines. Just wait till Ah get ma haunds on him. Basturt.
