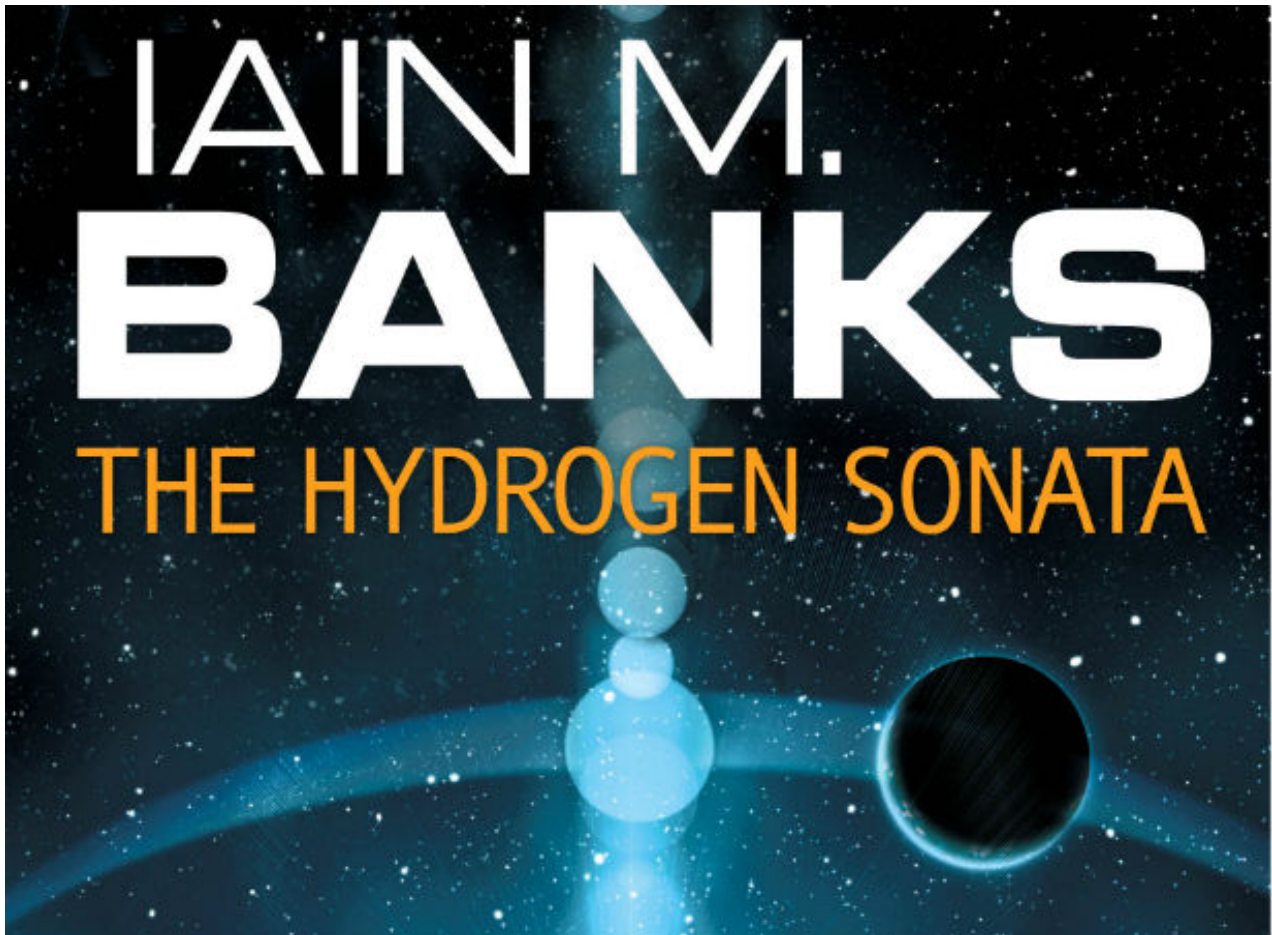


Iain M Banks talks about his early career

web.archive.org/web/20200814140930/https://www.scifinow.co.uk/interviews/iain-m-banks-talks-about-his-early-career

September 21, 2012



The Hydrogen Sonata by Iain M Banks is out 4 October 2012

We spoke to space opera icon Iain M Banks a few years ago, and to celebrate the release of his epic new book *The Hydrogen Sonata* – [pre-order it now from Amazon.co.uk for £10](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0099560000) – we’ve dug this classic chat out of the archives, and why not? To really appreciate where the Culture is going... you have to know where it’s come from.

Your first releases were non-genre – *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking On Glass*, *The Bridge* – and then *Consider Phlebas*, of course. Was it always your intention to write science fiction?

Oh no, I started out writing when I was 14, and when I was 16 I wrote a spy novel, based on a lot of the spy programs that were on television at the time. The next one I wrote, when I was 18, was more influenced by *Catch-22*, it was an immensely long and overwritten near-future satire. It wasn’t really science fiction at all, it was near future. And the next few novels were all science fiction, and I even thought of myself as a science fiction writer by the time that I wrote *The Wasp Factory*. I had a big internal debate with

myself on whether it was right to abandon the genre that I loved and that I'd dedicated myself to, to write this mainstream stuff partly just to try to get published, because I was fed up with getting rejection slips from the same half-dozen publishers in London.

It was a long process then?

Yeah, I mean *The Wasp Factory* was done after I'd written my million words or so of rubbish. My apprenticeship! So I'd sort of accidentally started out on my career as a mainstream writer, but that gradually took on more and more science fiction aspects, certainly science fiction/fantasy – *Walking On Glass* more so I think, and *The Bridge*. I think *Consider Phlebas* had been written before *The Wasp Factory*... no, after *The Wasp Factory* but before it was published, before I even knew I was going to get published, because there was a year between being accepted and being published. So yeah, I thought of myself as a science fiction writer who was deigning to dabble in mainstream. It was back to front – everyone thinks it goes one way, but I went completely the other. But I've always loved science fiction, I've loved the freedom of writing science fiction, but also being able to write in two different genres, one of which I've exploited ruthlessly.

Can you give us an idea of what sort of writers influenced you growing up?

Oh God loads, endless numbers. There are the writers that you think you've been influenced by, or you'd like to think you've been influenced by – Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen! I think the aforementioned *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*. Just the wealth of humour in both, and they had a serious point as well. It's hard enough to do comedy, it's hard also to do something that makes people laugh and are viciously realistic as well. But I think that everything you read, good or bad, influences you. With the bad stuff you think 'Right, I'm not going to do that', but you hope that in some way you're influenced by the good stuff and what you love. Actually I was influenced by the non-literary things as well, like the Marx Brothers movies, the radio, Monty Python, these things had an effect. Brian Aldiss is also one outstanding example, I loved that he straddled that post-war boom and into the New Wave, which he embraced enthusiastically and with such effect. M John Harrison, definitely, and all of the standard names – Heinlein, Asimov onwards.