

# Interview

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It had to happen! Scottish media love object, Iain Banks, the UK's best selling author of the Culture series gives us the low down on his science fiction space operas par excellence. Fellow Jock, Ken McLeod, author of the rather fab Stone Canal snuck in too.

Interviewing them was Stephen Hunt, author of *For The Crown* and *The Dragon*, the WH Smith New Talent Award novel that kicked off the flintlock fantasy genre in the early '90s. Our Hunt is only 50% Scottish on his mother's side, but when cornered at a party, he can do a fine slurring Sean Connery accent.

*Can you give us a quick potted history of your careers for readers who might not be familiar with your works?*

**Iain:**

For me, it was spending the first 14 years trying to get published and writing about a million words. Finally I did a second draft of the *Wasp Factory* which was accepted in 1983, then published in 1984.

Since then it has been about a book a year published, and for the last few years I have been alternating between a mainstream novel and science fiction work. The famous M.

*Did you have the normal collection of rejection slips from publishers?*

**Iain:**

Yeah, the best was back in the 1970s and there were still queues for bread in the Soviet Union, queues for sugar here and there was also a raw paper shortage. I got a rejection slip saying Dear Mr Banks, due to the paper shortage dot dot dot ... yes lots of rejection letters.

*How about you, Ken?*

**Ken:**

Well now, I've been attempting to write almost as long as Iain has actually been writing, and in my case it wasn't so much difficulty with writing the second draft, as finishing the first one. With my first novel, the *Star Faction*, the book went through multiple drafts and changed completely with no luck.

Then it was delivered to Iain's agent and he delivered really useful and cultured criticism - such as, for example, that while he liked the ideas and the language and so on, some work needed to be done on the motivations of my main characters and plot.

So I started rewriting it, and later on it was taken down to John Jarrold at Legend and he bought it that week. The *Star Faction* was followed by the *Stone Canal*, then the *Cassini Division*, and now the *Sky Road*.

Four books that are all related to each, they are not a chronological series or in any particular order. But if you read them all you will get a bigger picture.

*So how long had you been writing before you got the break?*

**Ken:**

Well, I had written short stories, starting off with one that was sent to New Worlds, which was then one of the main SF magazines in Britain.

This was when I think I was still at school, and the tale was based on the stunningly original idea of a star ship visiting an alien planet that turned out to be earth.

New Worlds sent me a polite rejection note, which I think I still have somewhere. Later on while I was at University I wrote some short stories and sent them to Interzone magazine. They got rejected, but on the last one they suggested I try a fanzine or the small press.

This I did and they rejected it, which was when I started writing a novel. Looking back on the stories now it is very easy to see why they were rejected. I like to think I might do a better job if I was writing them now.

*So do you and Ian know each other?*

**Ken:**

Yes from high school. Back in the 70s it must have been.

*Is there much of a writing scene up there? I know the national cons are held up there now*

**Iain:**

Yes, and the Eastercons. There's a lively SF fan scene in Glasgow.

*Are you working on any new science fiction books?*

**Iain:**

Yes there's one coming out shortly, a mainstream novel, The Business. The next science fiction novel will be out at around this time next year. I'll start thinking about this in the summer.

*Do you tend to write to an outline?*

**Iain:**

Yes definitely. Making it up as you go along doesn't work for me, I like to know what I'm doing. You allow yourself some leeway and sometimes things go off in an unexpected direction. Having said that my new novel The Business didn't quite work that way and turned out the most different to all of my works.

I remember sitting over at Ken's house last year saying I don't know what I'm doing here. The Business did have an outline, but it was more honored in the departure than the execution of it. It turned out fine and it actually looked like it was all totally planned. Which was probably more luck than anything else. It was a slightly unsettling experience.

*Is there much difference in the amount of research you have to between the books grounded in reality and the science fiction?*

**Iain:**

I do as little as possible for both. The sort of science fiction I like is effectively so far future you don't have to do much research.

*How about you, Ken do you tend to write to a an outline?*

**Ken:**

A bit of both. I do have an outline consisting of notes, lots and lots of notes.

This varies depending where I am in it. The next book isn't going to be set in the same universe as the Stone Canal. I wanted to break out and do something a bit different.

I do work to an outline but it can change. In fact, with all my books, there is always a moment near the end when you're writing to a deadline and the editor's not getting chapters in on time and they're getting worried.

It's like constructing a bridge and you don't know where you are going to make it until you do, then you hopefully see the solution and sometimes it's the actual resolution of the plot.

In the Sky Road, my latest book, there's two story threads, set hundreds of years apart and the only way they meet is because they're in some ways about the same person. One's about the main character's life and one's about that character's impact upon the plot. The way I tied them up came as quite a divergence to my plan.

*Do either of you tend to read much science fiction yourselves?*

**Iain:**

Yes one day it'll be a science fiction novel, another a mainstream novel. The last book I read was actually Ken's.

**Ken:**

I try to keep up with current SF. Usually for reading long books what I do is take them with me on holiday. For Instance Kim Stanley Robinson's Red and Green Mars and Peter Hamilton's The Reality Dysfunction. You can imagine what it was like reading books like that by the pool-side. I actually polished them all off in ten days. When I finished them, the entire scenery where I was in turkey had taken on the patina of Robinson's mars.

*Do you know how your respective works been received in America compared to over here?*

**Iain:**

I don't write the kind of thing the American markets likes and it's as simple as that. I think all my science fiction has found homes in the States - but not my mainstream works. Espedair Street hasn't been published, or the Crow Road. In America, books go onto the shelves and if it hasn't sold enough by ten days, it's taken off and pulped. I can't blame my publishers. I have had so many different US publishers and they've all tried, it's just not the right place.

*How about you, Ken?*

**Ken:**

What happened is that Tor's Patrick Hayden had read the Cassini Division and he was very enthusiastic about it. He contacted my agent and we rapidly signed a contract. I'm now publishing in the following order, the Cassini Division, the Stone Canal, and the Sky Road.

Leaving out the Star Faction, which remains too impenetrably British - the funny thing is it's already on the American market through a Publisher who are selling it as libertarian science fiction.

*Have either of your books been optioned for film or TV?*

**Iain:**

There was the Crow Road on the BBC, of course. It's been suggested that my SF would make good

anime - it certainly would get around the budget problem.

*Do you handle your own fan mail directly these days?*

**Iain:**

Oh yes. There's a fair bit of it. Split about fifty fifty between the SF and mainstream.

**Ken:**

I haven't received bucket loads of fan mail, although I've got a few and I of course answer them. The most amusing piece of fan mail I got was a hand written letter from a chap who introduced himself as a hacker.

He said they really enjoyed the Star Faction and it was very nice to read a book about hacking by someone who knew what they were talking about. In fact, all my work had been in mundane data processing, and when I wrote the Star Faction, I wasn't even on the Internet. These days I get fan emails.

*How about you Iain, are you online?*

**Iain:**

No I have resisted so far. I have this fear of spending all my time online. I think we're going to solve the problem because my mom and dad who live next door to me are going to go online. So my dad is going to spend all his day online!

*Do you do your writing on a PC?*

**Iain:**

No Apple Mac. I laugh at the Y2k problem.

**Ken:**

I use a PC, but I don't have any strong religious views on the question. One of our friends, Charles Stross, who writes for Interzone - if you give him half a chance he will evangelize about LINUX.

*Do you write full time now?*

**Ken:**

Yes I do now. I used to be a programmer, which I enjoyed. I was quite good at it, and it paid well. But there came a point when I decided I was going to make a go of it as a writer.

It was less brave a step than you think, because right now I could always go back into programming as a contractor part time. Of course, the longer you write, the more out of date your skills become.

*Do you know how your books have been selling?*

**Ken:**

The sales have been steady. The Stone Canal didn't do as well as I thought it should have done, but when it came out it kind of fell between two lists.

The Cassini Division is doing very well. In fact, I have just spent most of this morning signing stock. It looks good now, when you can see the four books together in a big pile.

