

Interview

To some, his books are sadistic, evil and sick. To others, they are works of humour, excitement and insight into the alienation of modern youth. Liam Fay meets Iain Banks controversial author of **The Wasp Factory**, **The Crow Road** and **Complicity**, and a master of a hundred fiendish ways to torture and kill a fluffy animal.

THE ONLY reason truth is thought to be **stranger** than fiction is that it is so much more uncommon. The real problem gnawing away at the guts of a depressing bulk of contemporary fiction is that it strives so hard to reduce monotonous, mundane reality to dull, dismal, dingy, dreary reality. When all is said and nothing done, art is supposed to create order from chaos, not just clothe the mess in natty adjectives.

Iain Banks writes novels with plots so fantastic they almost make the Bible sound plausible. His books are extraordinary in every sense of the word. They are also action-packed in the best sense. Where other authors go weak with exhaustion at the idea of getting a character out of bed and over to the cooker to put the kettle on, Banks likes to cram in four garrottings, six asphyxiations and a spontaneous human combustion or two before you get to the end of the prologue.

Nevertheless, as will be gleefully attested by any of the loyal legions who ensure that his tomes disappear from bookshop shelves like sods in a flood, there is more, yes, truth about the alienation of modern youth to be found amid the smoke and flames of Banks' pyrotechnics than you'll find in an entire library of worthy, sedate *zeitgeist* gabfests.

"If you're credible and intellectual, you don't read a novel for the plot," insists Iain Banks, his eyes flashing contemptuously behind chemistry student specs. "And to surrender the idea of a decent plot to Jeffrey Archer strikes me as moral suicide. Character is important, setting fine, but I demand a good plot. The idea that the form is more important than the content is just crap. That's why I love science fiction and hate the continuous ghettoisation of it, the bizarre idea that only psychological fiction is the pinnacle of writing expertise."

Iain Banks first detonated into the hearts of sick minds everywhere just over a decade ago with his gloriously demented shockathon, **The Wasp Factory**. Set amid the wilds of the world's wilds capital, Banks' native Scotland, the story revolves around a hopelessly dysfunctional family in which the chief protagonist, Frank, and his deranged half-brother, Eric, invent bizarre methods of torturing and murdering people, fluffy animals and wasps. One critic dubbed it, "A work of unparalleled depravity," but Banks (who proudly displays his worst reviews alongside the best on his dust jackets) had found his *métier*, and his audience.

In eleven years, Iain Banks has produced fourteen novels, ranging from the atmospheric thriller, **Canal Dreams**, through the sprawling family saga of **The Crow Road** to the stylish, serial-killer whodunit, **Complicity**, not to mention such sci-fi space operas as **Consider Phlebas**, **The Player Of Games** and **Use Of Weapons**. He never writes the same book twice but his work is instantly recognisable, aglow with hip, sexy humour, fiendish plots and violence to die for. Little wonder that Banks is regarded as a publishing phenomenon, with fans that are seen as among the most devoted in the literary world.

"I get a hell of a lot of letters," he asserts, sipping a pint of Murphy's through his thick pelt of beard, and looking like the last guy on Earth capable of unparalleled depravity. "I try to answer them all. The only ones that are a bit iffy are the ones that are basically asking me to write their dissertation or their thesis for them. I've got a template document on my word processor, the title of which is DIY - Do It Yourself. It's couched in the most polite terms, but that's the gist of it. I'm always happy to answer specific questions. People say, 'What the hell **is** going on at the end of **Walking On Glass**'? I've actually got a template document for that as well, I've answered it so often (**laughs**).

But there are some letters that are just plain, bloody cheeky: 'Dear Mr. Banks, what are your major themes? Explain the major motives in your work?'.

"I've had one or two slightly odd letters from people who may be slightly disturbed but nothing too weird or worrying. I seem to have a very sensible readership, actually, more sensible than the average. If you took out a hundred of my readers, you'll probably find that they're more sensible than any hundred people chosen at random from the standard population. I have remarkably sane readers, it would appear. Unless, of course, the ones who are insane are too incensed to write in the first place."

Banks draft to be dispatched from this (story) teller's vault of dark ingenuity is **Whit**. Already his fastest bestseller yet, it is a witty, jaundiced tale of religious mania and unsafe sects. Its heroine is a nineteen-year-old woman called Isis; Is for short, or The Blessed Very Reverend Gaia-Marie Isis Saraswati Minerva Mirza Whit of Luskentyre, Beloved Elect of God 111 for not-so-short.

Isis belongs to the Luskentyrians, a loopy cult (forgive the tautology) founded by her grandfather and based near Stirling, in Scotland. The Luskentyrians hate modern technology but rarely say no to a spot of carnal abandon. As their once-in-four-yearly Festival Of Love approaches, it emerges that the Guest of Honour, Isis' cousin Morag, has run away to heathen London. Isis is sent to bring her back but her mission is complicated when the joys and miseries of '90s Britain start to intrude, and some very putrid beans are ultimately spilled about the faith of her forefathers.

"I wanted to write about faith and the nature of belief," explains Iain Banks. "I find that fascinating, being an evangelical atheist myself. There was also the sheer fun of making up a new religion. I felt like L. Ron Hubbard. He did it for real, I know. But he started out being serious about it and then he eventually started saying things that were just so utterly absurd that he thought, 'Well, they can't possibly swallow this. It's so stupid'. There is considerable fun to be had devising a religion. I recommend it."

In writing **Whit**, Banks arrived at a rather obvious but convincing theory as to why even the daftest of cults possess such appeal for so many otherwise intelligent people, and young people in particular?

"It's the same as the appeal of joining the army, or joining any highly-disciplined organisation that takes away choice," he asserts. "The more sophisticated and complex society gets, the more choices you have to make and the more confused you can get. Some people just throw up their hands in horror and escape, to a monastery or a nunnery or the army or whatever. There they'll tell you what to do, they tell you what's right and what's wrong, and even how to behave - that's the appeal of cults. We live in such an uncertain time, simply on the level of technological change, that people crave certainty even if it's a specious certainty."

Banks agrees that virtually all cults are run by people with the ethics of killer sharks. 'Put your trust in the Lord', goes their always unspoken motto, 'your ass belongs to us'.

"Of course," he says. "The cults will give you an horrendous amount of work to do. You'll have to spend sixteen hours a day standing on a street corner selling a crappy magazine or trying to inveigle other stupid gits like yourself to come along and join up. You won't get enough sleep and you'll be told who to have a relationship with and who to have sex with and who to marry. People pay a very high price for the freedom of not having to make their own decisions."

One female character in **Whit** suggests that the reason sects and faiths are predominantly devised by men is that males suffer from "ovary envy." Women have the power of creation inside them, men have to fantasise about it, just to compensate. Is this Iain Banks' own view?

"I think there's a lot in that argument but I wouldn't go all the way with it," he avers. "I think that cults and sects and religions tend to be set up by men because they're a power trip, quite honestly. I'm very, very cynical about them. Look at David Koresh of Waco fame. He tried to be a rock star and failed. As a prophet though, he got the rock star life, the sex and drugs and worship, without

having to be one. Hog heaven, and you don't even have to be able to sing! A lot of people who set these things up don't believe in what they're saying at all. I don't even think they are religious. They're just power-hungry bastards."

Banks says he went through a religious phase himself when he was about eleven years old but that it was short-lived. His enthusiastic embracing of atheism during late adolescence coincided, he insists, with his evolving political awareness. "I used to be quite conservative and was still reading **Readers Digest** when I was in my early teens," he grins. "It took me a while to figure out in my own head what was actually going on in the world rather than just believing what I was being told, even by institutions as august as **Readers Digest**."

Iain Banks' distaste for all things Tory crackles through his work like a static current. Even the utopian civilisations portrayed in his sci-fi books are recognisably left wing, almost communist. What then does he make of Tony Blair, the leader of what used to be the British Labour party?

"Oh God," replies Banks, his beard parting to release a pantomime grimace. "I guess he's got the best chance yet of producing a Labour government but it'll be such a lily-livered, mild pink, watered down government that I already kinda despair of it. Anything is better than the Tories but I don't like New Labour, I don't like the modernisations. I don't trust them. Every Labour government that gets in always does less than they say they'll do. They always move to the right once they get in, and this lot are already so far to the right.

"I've toyed for a long time with the idea of voting for the Scottish Nationalist Party. I'm not an ardent nationalist or anything but I think that Scotland could be comfortable in Europe in a way that obviously the English aren't, or at least English Tories aren't. There's a delicious irony for us Scots listening to English Tories bleating about how (**adopts plummy shire tones**), 'We don't want our decisions made for us by some do-gooding headquarters four hundred miles away in a different city that speaks a different language from us'. Us Scots are going, 'Wait a minute, that sounds familiar. We've had to put up with this for the last two hundred and ninety years, ye bastards!'"

Disillusionment, however, is an indulgence that Iain Banks believes idealists can ill afford. "I don't think you can be disillusioned with politics," he declares. "Politics is just the manipulation of power. Inevitably, one is going to live through times when it's not that interesting. But if you've been a Tory over the last twenty years, it's been a great time to be alive. Things have been going absolutely swimmingly, thank you very much. People of my generation have been unlucky in that respect but it'll all come round again. There's a lot of cycles involved in this sort of stuff."

Iain Menzies Banks was born in Fife in 1954, the only son of an Admiralty officer and a former professional ice skater. Having studied literature with philosophy and psychology at Stirling University, he took a series of Mcjobs (hospital porter, roadworker, dustman, gardener) to keep beer on the table while pursuing the only ambition he ever remembers having, fiction writing. He had completed three unpublished sci-fi novels when, at age twenty-six, he migrated to London where while working as a solicitor's clerk by day, he wrote **The Wasp Factory** by night.

"People say that I do low-life student existence really well in my novels and so deduce that my student days must have been great fun," muses Banks. "They weren't. I suppose I have a misplaced nostalgia for something I never really had at the time. I was actually a rather boring student. I had a pretty minimal social life. I was very bookish, but not very successful academically. I was trying to write novels all the time. I wrote at least two books at university. It was only when I left university that I really got into my sleazy, student life phase, and I'm still in it."

When, much to Banks' bemused surprise, the illustrious imprint Macmillan agreed to publish **The Wasp Factory**, in 1984, his editor decreed the name 'Iain M. Banks' "too fussy," and asked if he would mind being just plain Iain Banks. Grateful to find a publisher after over a half dozen rejections, he acceded to the request, but his relations in Scotland, of whom there are many, flipped their kilts in horror. Was he ashamed of his heritage, they clamoured? Since 1987, however, Iain has reclaimed his birthright by alternating his 'mainstream' books with more strictly sci-fi novels proudly penned under the name Iain M. Banks.

Despite his reputation for prolificacy, Banks' leisurely working regime would be the envy of a backbench TD. Pledged to deliver one book a year, he spends two months planning, three to four months writing and the rest of the time slacking.

"I could slack for Scotland," he proclaims. "I go out drinking, eating curries, falling over, normal sorts of activities, except I do them a bit more often. I write very quickly when I get started. It takes me two or three months to do a first draft. And that's by working only office hours, so I can meet my pals at the weekends. I've got a basic goal of doing about 15, 000 words a week. I tend to write from October through to December when there are few other distractions. But I usually try and get the whole thing tidied up by the 22nd or 23rd of December. My Christmases are important.

"I've certainly got lots of ideas for books, so I save time by not having to strain for plot-lines. I've got a stockpile of ideas that would last me for a couple of decades, if I eked them out. I've stopped doing short stories. Ideas that might have ended up as short stories now end up in novels, doing more work as it were. That works better for me."

Banks also saves time by avoiding that vortex of inconsequentiality known as the literary whirl. "I don't do reviews," he affirms. "I don't interview people for magazines or journals. I'm not involved in that continual process of having a retainer from a national newspaper to write so many articles a year. I'm not interested in literary hackwork so I don't have a day job. It boils down to laziness, simple as that. I can get away with doing a book a year so I don't need to do all the rest of the stuff. "I don't want to live in London and that makes a difference as well. I was never really invited to be part of the literary world and that suits me fine. The people I see most regularly are people I've known for twenty-five years. That's enough. If I had to start socialising with writers and such, I had have to start dumping some of my old friends, and I certainly don't want to do that."

The novels of Iain Banks would seem to be sitters for adaptation to the movie screen. For some time, **The Wasp Factory** appeared to be a green light project but the last time anything was heard of an actual screenplay, the story had been re-set in Manhattan and the names mooted for the lead roles were Jodie Foster and - get this - Julian Lennon! Not surprisingly therefore, the author tends not to get too excited about his prospects of coming soon to a cinema near you. Describing his personal tastes as "leaning more towards **Red Heat** than **Babette's Feast**," Banks says his dream directorial choice would be the Coen Brothers.

"**The Wasp Factory** was bought outright for seven years, six and two thirds years ago," he states. "It was originally sold to Strongbow, the Irish company who made **Eat The Peach**, but they were bought over by another company. That company was in turn bought by another company who are based in Hollywood, and selling the rights of my books to Hollywood is something I've always tried to avoid. So, I'm just hoping that they don't start making it within the next four months because then my agent can start selling it all over again. She's already looking forward to that a lot, I can tell you. It has a preliminary interest from a British-based concern, people who we think could do a very good job of it. But obviously we can't sign anything until the rights revert to me in January 1996.

"I'd love to see some of the sci-fi books, especially **Consider Phlebas**, made properly with good special effects. They could be great. And Hollywood **can** do sci-fi well when it tries. I've also toyed with the idea of doing original screenplays. There's one I've been thinking of writing for about fifteen years but I haven't done it yet so I probably won't. It's not particularly deep, it's just a romantic comedy but the hero is a nice drug dealer. (Pause) Maybe now that I come to think, that's why I haven't written it. Nobody I've ever told about it has said, 'That's a great idea, Banksy, you should write that!'"

Rock music punctuates every Iain Banks novel the way some of his characters punctuate each other with shiny, sharp objects from the Sheffield Steel product range.

"You can write two or three pages of description of a time or place or mood or you can mention a single," he says. "A single single! Music is the form of sensuality most of us relate to best. It can bring an entire era back to you in an instant. It's still the big constant in my life. I don't have any

time for fashion though, that's only for people who don't have any taste. My books always tend to reflect my taste at the time. I'm a fan. I still buy far too many CDs and forget to listen to them or buy them twice and have to give them away to people."

Banks' quick mental inventory of the discs he most recently liberated from his home stack (**Mirror Ball** by Neil Young and Pearl Jam, Oasis' **Definitely, Maybe**, an old Stones compilation and an album of "crazy diddly-diddly fiddle music" by The Wiggley Sisters from Orkney) confirms the relish for diversity that is evident throughout his books.

In the novels, the references are invariably more than mere narrative shorthand but are also woven into the characterisation, and even plot. For instance, Prentice McHoan in **The Crow Road** realises he is suitably stoned when he can understand Cocteau Twins lyrics. In **Whit**, Isis is described as a dead ringer for Dolores O'Riordan (**sans** peroxide phase) and her unfamiliarity with The Cranberries discloses the extent of her sheltered life to an acquaintance.

Rare among credible contemporary authors, Banks doesn't strike bum notes when he writes about music, any kind of music. And with good reason.

"I wanted to be a composer when I was younger," he confides. "I still have thoughts in that direction. That's my daydream really. I buy lots of MIDI gear - Musical Instrument Digital Imaging, I'll have you know. It's music processing software basically and I have all the hardware to go with it which does what the software tells it to do. One of my ideas is to make demo tapes of a soundtrack for a book like **Espedair Street**. Then, when some movie people come looking to buy the rights, I can say, 'Okay you can have the rights **if** I get the rights to write the music'. A proposition which will no doubt initiate gales of laughter.

"I've thought up a lot of music over the years, classical, instrumental, songs. The lyrics have been jotted down in old schoolbooks from up to twenty years ago. Music tends to suggest itself as I write my books. A character who I'm happy with and can really identify with, like Cameron say in **Complicity**, it's quite easy to come up with music that he would listen to or would maybe reveal something about him.

"Perhaps, I shouldn't really be telling you this. I can hear people going, 'Oh, poor old Banksy, poor sad, deluded Banksy!'"
