

Author Iain M. Banks: 'Humanity's future is blister-free calluses!'

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LINCOLN, England (CNN) -- Author Iain M. Banks, whose "Culture" novels have made him one of science fiction's leading lights, has created a utopian universe where altruistic robot spaceships care for genetically-enhanced humanoids, where no one wants for anything and where people are freed from the chores of daily life to express themselves as they choose.



Author Iain M. Banks

Banks, who also writes non-science-fiction as Iain Banks, found inspiration as a boy in science fiction and the space race.

He spoke to CNN's Linnie Rawlinson in an exclusive interview at the Lincoln Book Festival about the moon landings, his inspiration and the potential for humanity to reach the stars. Read the edited interview below.

CNN: As someone who writes both science fiction and, for want of a better phrase, mainstream fiction, what's the appeal of science fiction as a genre?

Iain M. Banks: I guess it's the freedom that you get in science fiction, that you can basically go anywhere. I think it's closely linked to the pleasure that I got when I started reading science fiction in my early teens: when you open a book of science fiction, especially short stories, you simply don't know where you're going to be taken. It could be the past, it could be in the far future, you could be out in space, it could even be maybe told from the point of view of an alien. I love that freedom: it's freedom for the writer and it's exciting for the reader.

The other thing is that mainstream is a bit like playing the piano. A conventional piano is a fabulously expressive instrument, one of the great instruments of the classical world. Science fiction has this great sense of an organ filling a cathedral: you've got three keyboards, not just one, you've got stops you can pull out, there's an extra keyboard

under your feet, you can start playing that as well! It's not incredibly subtle in the way that a piano can be, but by god, it's good for impressive, wide-screen baroque, as Brian Aldiss once described it, and I think there's still that feeling of the epic that's easier to get in science fiction. [Watch our exclusive interview with Iain M. Banks »](#)

CNN: Which science fiction writers inspired you when you were younger, and which do you look up to?

Iain M. Banks: I guess the usual suspects, in terms of when I was growing up, people like Heinlein and Asimov, but probably a bit more Arthur C. Clarke and Brian Aldiss. I still probably regard Aldiss as the greatest influence on me as a writer. There's a chap called Mike Harrison, M John Harrison, I admire him, he's still around writing great stuff. But there's no great secrets, it's people you might expect. I'm really terrible at remembering people's names. Dan Simmons, I like Dan Simmons, he's very good at the moment.

CNN: One element that stands out in your books is the way that you write about technology so convincingly. Where do you get those ideas from?

Iain M. Banks: I think a lot of it's just wish fulfillment, to be honest. A great deal of science fiction, especially the sort of stuff I write, which is not near future, is not necessarily that plausible or immediate, is about thinking "Wouldn't it be great if life was like this." That's not to denigrate it: as long as you don't confuse it with reality, you're all right.

So yeah, I think it's, "Wouldn't it be cool if the moral responsibility was taken away from us by incredibly clever and cool wise machines and we were just free to get on with being human within a general benign moral framework, and wouldn't it be great if the more intelligent you were, the nicer you were?" That's my private theory, anyway.

CNN: Would you like to live in the Culture [the society he has created]?

Iain M. Banks: Good grief yes, heck, yeah, oh it's my secular heaven ... Yes, I would, absolutely. Again it comes down to wish fulfillment. I haven't done a study and taken lots of replies across a cross-section of humanity to find out what would be their personal utopia. It's mine, I thought of it, and I'm going home with it -- absolutely, it's great.

CNN: What's it like, being a humanoid as part of the Culture?

Iain M. Banks: It's pretty great being a human in the Culture, with the drug glands and enormously long orgasms. You can change sex if you want to, and you have total control over pain, and blister-free callusing. That wasn't one of mine, that was Ken MacLeod, my chum and fellow SF scribbler -- "I've just thought of a good improvement for the human body: Blister-free callusing!" -- so I made a particular point of putting that in ...

CNN: In the Culture's post-scarcity society, where no one needs for anything, you're removing a lot of the struggle around everyday life. Is that not removing the point of life itself?

Iain M. Banks: I think a lot of the struggle is kind of pointless and is in itself boring. The struggle for existence for most people most of the time, especially in a post-agricultural, industrial society, is a bit of a grind. People have to work very hard and awfully long hours for not a great deal of money: if you don't, you get virtually nothing. Life's not much fun, frankly, so I'd quite happily trade in that struggle.

CNN: What effect did the moon landings have on you when you were growing up?

Iain M. Banks: Oh, the whole thing had a big effect. I was born in '54 and so by the time it happened in '69 I was of an age to appreciate what had been done. I was just about old enough to remember when JFK first announced that we wanted to get to the moon, so the whole lead-up to it was amazing. I loved the Saturn V and all the technology.

It was sad that NASA managed to make the whole thing rather boring, and so people lost interest in it, and it took Apollo 13 and a near disaster to make it all exciting again.

There's all these caveats about how we should get things fixed down here before we send people anywhere else, but I still think it's worth doing, to put people elsewhere. Back to the moon is the first one, then on to Mars, and then we'll see after that.

CNN: Do you think humanity really has a future among the stars?

Iain M. Banks: Well, it's there or nowhere. I think it's insane to have the capacity to get off the planet and not use it. It's still the case that we've got no real defense against meteors or comets or anything else hitting the planet. You've got all your eggs in one basket, all six, seven billion of us in the one place, and all potentially vulnerable to strike by something really big that'd wipe us all out. It just seems really daft, so yeah, why not?

It might take us longer than we hope: I come from that generation that feels quite put out that we don't have square meals the size of Oxo cubes and we don't have jet packs and free electricity and all the things we were promised -- where's our hovering cities and starships and moon bases and Mars bases, and so on -- but I'm still optimistic, I still think we'll get there.

But we're making life difficult for ourselves at the moment, what with global warming and all the shenanigans associated with that. We'll see; I do think we should keep on doing it. It would be great if we could spend less money on the military and a lot more on space exploration: divert funds to something worthwhile instead of developing new ways of killing one's fellow human beings.

CNN: One of the most compelling aspects of the Culture's society is that it's post-scarcity: no one wants for anything, people aren't hungry, everyone is clothed. Do you think it's within humanity's nature to build a society like that?

Iain M. Banks: Arguably not. This is why the Culture isn't us. I thought long and hard about this long before the books were published and decided, that the Culture wasn't going to be us in the future, it would be humanoid, they could kind of pass for us, because

I'm not sure that we are.

It's a very pessimistic thing to say that we do seem to be wedded to war and destruction and torture and racism and sexism -- all the horrible things, all the xenophobic things -- we seem to have a xenophobic gene sequence. I think we should genetically modify ourselves, frankly -- if we could identify the bit that causes all the horrible things we can knock it out and become nicer people.

CNN: If there was one element of the Culture that you could give to humanity, what would it be?

Iain M. Banks: Oh crikey. You certainly wouldn't give the very slow ageing and the potential of never dying because that would be disastrous as the moment, and you can be damned sure the rich people would keep that as their own, nobody else would get it.

The drug glands maybe. Not for the trivial reason that you'd be able to get stoned without having to pay for it all the time, but if you had really good drugs that you could just manufacture inside your body just by thinking about it, it would solve all the drug problems: you'd have much better dope than cannabis, much more exciting stuff than crack cocaine, and much more pleasurable stuff than heroin. Maybe that one.

But then, being as we are, we might spend our lives subsequently stoned out of our brains, lying around and watching civilization decay about us. I wouldn't put that past us, frankly. No, actually, I'll go back to blister-free callusing.