

Iain Banks email Q&A October 2008

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Welcome to the latest Q&A session with Iain Banks. The first two sessions can be found here: [Q&A session I](#) and [Q&A session II](#).

Read on for the latest Q's from Iain's readers and fans, with A's from the man himself...

From Ashley Franks:

Q: Having now read a number of your books, I realize that it's not always a good idea to get attached to any particular character (the typical "happy ending" is not typical of your work, as far as I can tell). Everything is messy and true to life in that sense. But do you ever have trouble killing off some of your characters? And if you do, I'm curious as to who and why? And also, how do you feel about "Happy Endings", generally?

Yes; Yalson in *Consider Phlebas*. I felt a distinct twinge when I had to kill her off. I just liked her, I suppose. Which is an oddly narcissistic thing to say, given she wasn't based on anybody and I basically made her up, but there you are; a writer's characters are part of him- or her-self and so we shouldn't be too surprised when we fall slightly in love with our own creations.

I think we're generally too attached to happy endings, but I guess that's only natural. I don't hate happy endings as such, I just think they're somewhat over-represented in our general fictive media (though, you could argue that they're under-represented in respectable / quality / Booker-type novels).

From : Anthony

Q: I wondered if you could elucidate a little on the inspiration and influences behind *Walking On Glass*? I would like to know what you were aiming to demonstrate and achieve? For me it is one of your most puzzling novels and I've not come across a decent deconstruction yet of it.

Well, I wanted to do something different, and I had a bunch of three ideas that were effectively competing to be the one to form the framework of the next novel. Unusually, none of them broke away from the pack, as it were, and all three just kept on developing pretty much equally, and even in sync, with other ideas coming along - generated by this first batch - that seemed to fit equally well with any and all of them, so it seemed obvious, eventually, to develop the similarities between them and write them all together in a sort of braided structure.

In retrospect the book may have been partly a reaction to the relatively linear and conventional structure of *The Wasp Factory* (though not to its reception - *Walking on Glass* was all but completed by the time *The Wasp Factory* was published).

Beyond that, I was just trying to tell a story (well, three) and show what I could do.

From Manuel Fernandes:

Q: The Culture is a society almost perfect from the point of view of a less evolved society. A less evolved society can look at the Culture and think they are gods. My actual question is: Have you thought about writing about the Culture finding actual evidence of a god? - not another extremely evolved culture or artefact but an actual *god* who knows everything, is everywhere and can do everything?

No, is the short answer. As a fully paid-up evangelical atheist I don't believe such a being exists, for one thing. To take this remotely seriously you'd have to specify more fully what sort of God you're talking about; is the Christian God, for example, usually regarded as something / someone it's even possible to track down to a particular place? ...Heaven? Where would that be then? How do you get there from here? Apart from by dying, obviously. Isn't God meant to be everywhere and every-when or something? And if the blighter's supposed to be omnipotent and omniscient, wouldn't that mean that it would have to be complicit in its own discovery anyway? I think the basic daftness of the idea is starting to come out here. (I mean the basic daftness inherent in the idea of God, obviously; the question's relatively reasonable.)

From Alex Brady:

Q: Can you see a technological singularity happening this century? What might it be like?

No. Frankly I'm sceptical about the whole idea; sounds too much like an excuse to stop thinking. I could be wrong, of course, in which case feel free to sue me from somewhere beyond the Singularity using a time machine.

From Janet Williamson:

Q: As we've just had the annual Banned Book Week, I thought I'd ask - has *The Wasp Factory* (probably still your most contentious book?) ever been banned? And what do you think makes it so challenging and challenged over the years?

Apparently it was banned from the Harrods department store book department in London for a while shortly after it was first published. Or maybe it was just sold under the counter; accounts differ. I like to think some purple-faced retired major stormed back there insisting it was withdrawn from sale after buying it earlier and reading the first few chapters. I don't recall hearing of any other bannings.

I'm not entirely sure why it's still regarded as so challenging; maybe it's the conflict between the often grisly subject matter and Frank's breezy narration.

From Stuart Cragg:

Q: How often do you wake up and find yourself disappointed that you are in Britain, and not in the age of the Culture after all?

Never. I think I have a fairly firm grip on reality and I know the Culture doesn't actually exist, though I would like to think that, in however small a way, the fact that I've presented it as an idea might help to bring something like it into existence sometime in our future. One can but hope.

I guess the real trouble is that we - us humans - are just not nice enough to support something as benign as the Culture. The point is that as a species, as a civilisation, you can choose to behave with consistent decency at any stage in your technological development, not just in a post-scarcity environment, and any species which could instigate or become a founding part of the Culture would, I'm afraid, almost certainly have been behaving a lot better in the lead up to that event and throughout their history than we have throughout ours. I would like to be wrong, but I suspect we are too selfish, stupid, xenophobic and cruel to be Culture-compatible.

So, genetic modification ahoy for us then, matey!

Once again, a very big thank you to everyone who sent in questions for Iain and to Iain himself for taking time out of his schedule to provide another great set of answers.