

Interview

- "Oh my God! A REAL author-type? No, he'll be far too busy and self-important to take an interest in The Quatermass Experiment."

- "No he WON'T, Neale," replied the Professor, with more than a hint of forcefulness. "Now we mustn't miss this chance, so get up there and speak to him."

Thus ran the conversation between us after the "Science in Science Fiction" seminar at the Edinburgh Science Festival earlier this year (1993), chaired by Ben Bova with support from the panel of a scientist/science fiction author called John whose surname temporarily eludes me [John Gribbin, I now recall], a research physicist whose name I paid no attention to whatsoever, and... Iain Banks. Hurrah!

Being a reasonably well-known (he's on the Granta list of the best young British authors) and also local (Look, I refuse to pay the postage to America for a correspondence with Ben Bova) author he seemed the ideal person to approach. Well we did talk to him and we managed to get this interview out of it, so if you, the reader, want to find out what life is like from the creative side of the fence, read on....

TQE - What prompted you to start writing?

IB - I recently discovered an old drawing book containing documentary evidence I wanted to be a novelist back in Primary 7, whatever age I was then, so it must be something that goes back a bit. I suppose I just enjoy it; I get a buzz telling stories and showing off in print; Hey, look at these ideas! Infantile but true.

TQE - Was it difficult to get published at first?

IB - Yes; it took me fourteen years, six novels and a million words before I got *The Wasp Factory* published. Mind you, being totally crap and only getting good very, very slowly, and not doing a second draft until *Wasp Factory*, might have had something to do with this unpublishableness. [Oh dear, and there I was thinking this writing-for-money lark was easy and I could just hop into it before I ever had to get a proper job. The Sits Vac column awaits.]

TQE - You seem to get some very good reviews for your books. When you read such a review, do you feel euphoric, relieved or vindicated, or something else we haven't thought of?

IB - I've had a lot of bad ones too (come on; you've seen the front of *Wasp Factory*). I suppose the complimentary ones give me a good feeling, though it's as short-sighted and dangerous to revel in good reviews as it is to despair at bad ones.

TQE - As a writer of both science fiction and "literature", do you find SF more liberating or limiting than mainstream writing?

IB - Liberating.

TQE - Do you suffer from writer's block and, if you do, what do you do about it?

IB - Only once, in the middle of *Crow Road*; it went way over the usual end-of-year unofficial deadline, I came back from a Highland Hogmanay with an eye infection that stopped me from working for an extra week, then the Gulf War started (or looked like it might), I spent too much time glued to the wrong screen, then I spent another week paralysed by the fact that I hadn't worked on the book in so long. Took that week to get up to speed. But that's about it.

TQE - How much of yourself do you put into your characters?

IB - As little as possible, though I guess every central character has a bit of me. Weird [the rock star in Espedair Street] is closer than most, and the guy in The Bridge is like an alternate-world version of me; how I might have been if I'd been a bit older and got a proper job instead of lots of wee silly ones while I practised writing.

TQE - What, in your opinion, is the worst thing about SF?

IB - Its critical reception by the Literary Snobocracy. (Ooo, don't get me started.)

TQE - What book would you most like to write, or have written?

IB - I think the last time I felt that way (and the first time for a long time) was reading Dan Simmons' Hyperion. Then I read the end of The Fall of Hyperion and didn't feel so bad. Before that, Lanark by Alastair Gray.

TQE - Did you do well at school?

IB - Okay, I suppose. I got 9 or 10 'O' levels, three Highers and I got into Uni (Stirling, '72 - '75, doing Eng.Lit.). I was usually top in English at school, for whatever that's worth. ["That's a relief," we chorus, since we had a suspicion that "real" writing and school English success were mutually exclusive.]

TQE - Which, if any, line of current scientific research would you most like to see discontinued?

IB - Military research.

TQE - Do you feel a smug satisfaction at being more famous than the people you pass in the street?

IB - No. I'm glad to say I only feel anything remotely like that very rarely, if I'm in the company of people who've written bad reviews of my books and/or won lots of prizes but who don't sell as well as I do; I get to think along the lines of, "You have the prizes, I'll take the Porsche, asshole...." This is a mean and shaming feeling and to punish myself I'm appearing on a double bill with Terry Pratchett at the Embra Festival this year; he sells much, much better than I do and that'll teach me a little humility.

TQE - Do you enjoy being interviewed?

IB - I don't mind it and I more or less never refuse, but I prefer doing my stand-up question-and-answer routine. It tends to degenerate into my impersonation of Robin Williams and it isn't very good but hey if you're going to ape somebody, ape the best, I say.

TQE - With whom would you least like to be stuck in a broken-down lift?

IB - Any Tory. [I suppose I should have guessed...]

TQE - Which is your favourite Monty Python sketch?

IB - Tricky one. Let's say the musical mice (programme two, first series).

TQE - What one word would you use to sum yourself up?

IB - How about "Banksie"?

TQE - Which fictional place, out of all the settings in all the stories (or films, or whatever) you've ever read, would you most like to live in, given the chance?

IB - The Culture. Nothing else comes close (but then it is my attempt at a Utopia so it should be the place I want to live). I suppose, after that, any space-based far-future would do.

And there you have it. The questions ranged from normal (and clichéd) to silly and irrelevant, but we've left it up to you to decide where the one category ends and the other begins. Circumstances dictated that the interview had to be conducted via the Royal Mail, so it isn't as flexible as talking face to face [and any comments from us had to be added later, in square brackets like these], but there are some interesting nuggets of information in there all the same. If nothing else, it shows that at least one author is human.
