

# Scrawl: Culture and Cruelty - an interview with Iain (M) Banks from The Scrawl archive

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## Culture and Cruelty - an interview with Iain (M) Banks from The Scrawl archive

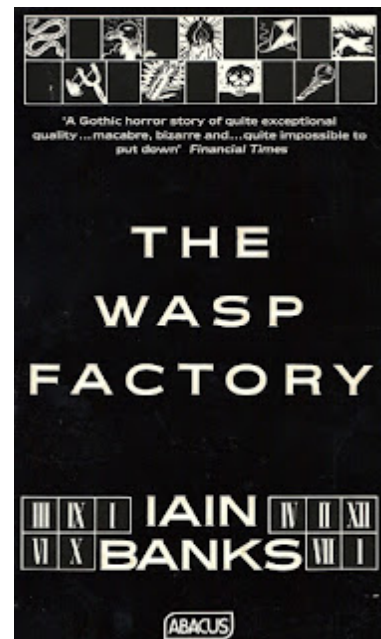
*It is 30 years since the groundbreaking epic science fiction saga of The Culture began with Consider Phlebas and went on to span ten volumes. Three years prior to that, Iain Banks' debut novel, The Wasp Factory, had shaken up the literary scene and left an indelible mark on a generation of readers (and writers). The time seems right to delve into The Scrawl archives and share our interview with the late, great Iain (M) Banks, conducted during 1998 (between Excession and Inversions)...*



Iain Banks in a publicity photo for [The Bridge](#)

*One of the UK's most wildly imaginative authors talks to Scrawl about sex, space and smugness...* Iain Menzies Banks is Scottish. He was born and raised in and around Dunfermline, Fife, educated at Sterling University. Along with fellow Scot, Irvin Welsh, Banks has become known as one of the most startling of modern British writers. Scotland seems to be producing more than its fair share of literary talent and recently that talent has begun to make a notable impact on British SF, with Iain M Banks and Ken MacLeod pushing the vanguard. Is there something north of the border responsible for this top-heavy distribution of word-wielding talents? 'I think it's mainly just coincidence,' Iain conceded, 'But it is true that a good proportion of good British writers are Scottish... A cultural divide does exist and most English people don't understand the breadth of it. Writers in that situation develop a different voice and are more determined to express it. 'I think Alasdair Gray's [Lanark](#) is a landmark - the best Scottish novel this century! Scotland has been producing more than its fair share, in terms of literature, ever since - we're just ten per cent of the UK, but we've got more than ten per cent of the best writers...' His first novel, [The Wasp Factory](#), after causing a furore in the literary world on its publication in 1984, is now held as an iconic modern novel. In much the same way as

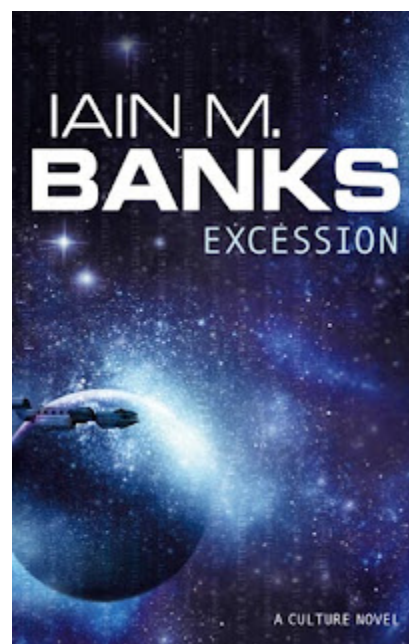
Irvin Welsh's *Trainspotting*, *The Wasp Factory* is held up as a 'yardstick' - new books are often promoted as 'the best since,' or heralded as 'a *Wasp Factory* for the nineties,' and so on... It was a provocative and stunning debut and certainly made the name of Iain Banks instantly famous and infamous, was it a battle to bring it to print? 'It was rejected by six of the big publishers...' Although it was the first Iain Banks novel to see publication, it was not the first he had completed... 'I'd written about five novels before *The Wasp Factory* was published, but I'd written three or four before that one, mainly science fiction. Two of those novels were eventually published as part of the Culture series, one of them being [The Use Of Weapons](#), partly due to some intervention from Ken MacLeod.' The Culture is a broad concept that links the bulk of Banks' widely read and acclaimed SF output. It is a vast intelligent culture of sentient machines, including giant living space vessels, which have become so advanced that they have exceeded the full understanding of humans and now look after the human population in a cosmos-spanning, multi-cultural future society... Is this a future that Iain thinks we may be heading towards, and would that be a good thing? 'Is the Culture a possible future...' Iain mused, 'Probably, eventually, but not for us. It will be the future for another species perhaps, different from us as we are today. We're too tied up in bigotry, hatred, war, economics, oppression, competition... The Culture would only work with people who are nicer than us - less prone to violence and genocide. Perhaps aggression is necessary to achieve sentience, consciousness, space travel, and we don't know if we're a particularly violent species or a relatively mild one compared to others out there...' Iain had stated that he would want to be in the Contact division, which is the section of the Culture that would deal with First Contact scenarios... 'Contact is the most interesting bit - the Culture's saving grace - and joining it is about the only ambition available within the Culture. Because not everyone qualifies for Contact - whereas the Culture goes out of its way to accommodate nearly everybody, even those who don't like it...' 'The Culture is my vision of exactly the place I would like to live. I can't imagine a better place - it's a utopian society.' Some readers have criticised the Culture for being 'too smug'... 'It knows it's smug. The price of perfection, I'm afraid. It's smugness is one of its best points!' It has been suggested that the Culture should be destroyed, because it is too perfect. 'I can understand that urge. As a boy, I used to enjoy building dams in the sand on the beach, irrigation channels and little castles, and of course the real fun was knocking them down or watching them fall as the tide came in...' Would he ever take notice of such reader feedback and compromise in any way? 'No - I write what I enjoy and even I don't know what's gonna happen next. I let it flow and the plot takes control... I started out writing [Excession](#) with the idea of destroying the Culture and it could have gone that way. There is an element in the story which could have initiated its downfall and if the plot had



*The Wasp Factory* - a stunning debut!

wrestled the book from me and it had gone that way, I would have let it - I would have destroyed the Culture... It happened to turn the other way.' So are there any more Culture novels in the pipeline? 'Out of my current four book deal, at least one of them will be a Culture novel...' Does Banks have a writing ritual or regimen? 'Oh, I'm very strict with myself... During the summer months I have fun and think about books and I find myself looking forward to the time of year when nights draw in and the weather turns bad... I write nine to five, every day during the darker winter months, and often into the night also. I write directly into an AppleMac. Listening to Radio 1, usually, though I always have a CD cued up and ready to go also. I enjoy music very much.' Does the genre-hopping, from SF to 'mainstream' and back, cause any problems from publishers or marketing departments? 'Not at all. I think, perhaps, I don't get nominated for science fiction awards because they think I'll get them for my other books and the people giving out the mainstream awards think I'm a science fiction writer, so I'll get awards in that category. But no pressure at all to write one kind of book over another.'

Are Iain's novels primarily driven by their themes, or their narrative? 'I don't really think about it. I would never try to work out how I write, I write because I enjoy it. I just let it come to me and go with the flow. Sometimes I don't know if a book is going to be science fiction or not, I just start out with a bunch of ideas and run with them...' One theme that seems prominent throughout Iain's mainstream and SF novels is that of gender identity. Of course, this is a central motif in *The Wasp Factory*, then in *Excession* we have the concept of both sexes being able to become pregnant, Whit is told from the first person point of view of a female and *Song Of Stone* is told in the male first person. There is a strong element of sexual discovery and the formation of gender identity running through the flashbacks in *Complicity*... Is this a personal fascination that asserts itself or is it an intentional exploration of these ideas? 'I can recall when "Women's Lib" was in the news - before it became "Feminism"... It made a big impact at the time I was being brought up. Then, the media portrayal of women was very clear cut and gender roles were set out for you. 'When I was a child, I remember noticing that women in films couldn't run unless the male hero placed his hand in the small of their backs and kinda pushed them along, as if this was what made them go. And if the plot demanded that the villains caught them, then it was the woman who fell over or sprained an ankle and the man had to stay in order to protect her. So you thought you had it all worked out and the difference between men and women was very clear cut... Then you realised that perhaps it wasn't true - in fact it was all nonsense. 'So it is something that fascinates me, to this day, and I am aware of it. It is a theme that runs through my writing, intentionally, but it's not the major theme and I wouldn't like to think that readers see that as one of the most important themes. I think the more important element is humanism and the definition of the individual.' The treatment of male pregnancy in *Excession*




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The Culture continues...

implies that personality defines gender more than physical attributes... 'I think there are definite male and female aspects to personality that define gender more than the outward appearance - though I wouldn't like to say what they are...' Another recurring trait is the often extreme cruelty in his novels... Is that due to some dark subconscious tendencies or is it a reaction against the happy ending cliché? 'Well I certainly wouldn't want to be a character in one of my own novels! But is it due to something in the murky depths of my subconscious? God, I hope not! I think it's more to do with avoiding the cliché and making things a bit more unpredictable. 'Many people seemed to think that *The Wasp Factory* was horrendous and pretty bleak, but I actually thought it had a happy ending and was an upbeat sort of book.' In *Complicity*, after you get to know the central character and quite like the guy... Banks gives him cancer when it has nothing directly to do with the plot... 'Well, he's not dead, he has cancer. It up to the reader to be pessimistic or optimistic about the outcome of that. Otherwise I think that's also an upbeat book.' [Song Of Stone](#), seemed to be a bit of a departure, quite a gentle read, all very lyrical except for the regular interruption of the short sharp set-pieces of blunt brutality and violence... 'Gentle!? It's horribly violent! The whole book is about the lead character's inability to affect his own destiny - he has no outward control and cannot seem to change anything. He's just swept along by events. And all he can do is think. His mind is his only freedom, and the language he uses tends to be overly flowery in parts, because all he can do is try to prettify the horrible things that are happening around him - try to make something beautiful out of them in his own mind. He does this by retreating into his thoughts and seeing things in this rather flowery fashion... 'If you're writing from the point of view of someone who doesn't share your own beliefs it makes you think, you start to question your own beliefs and that's always a progressive and good thing to do.' The science in the Culture novels seems convincing and the whole vision of the future is well filled-out and holistic, are you aware of the science facts behind the fiction? 'I read *New Scientist* and that's about it. As little research as possible! A lot of my research is just reading other people's SF and nicking their good ideas! I never let it get in the way of a good story. 'I'm not really introducing any new absurdities, just taking up old ones. But you read *New Scientist*, and you see stuff which may imply that hyperspace and faster-than-light travel aren't as absurd as all that. They're not possible right now, but for scientists to say that we'll never travel faster than light is just as daft as saying we'll never get into space - which people were saying only a few decades ago...' ...The Wright Brothers stated that flight was possible, but not in their life time. Then, the very next year, they achieved the first flight in the Kittyhawk ...Does banks really think we'll find life out there? 'There is life out there. If there isn't, I'd find that thought incredibly worrying... But we wouldn't know about it, unless they wanted




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*Complicity* was adapted for the screen



us to.' So cruelty and existential angst aside, would Iain Banks describe his own overall outlook as optimistic or pessimistic? 'Optimistic. I'm a long-term optimist.'



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Here's to you Iain Banks - fondly remembered by legions of fans,  
he lives on in his many words... and in many worlds.

Filming for the cinema adaptation of [Complicity](#) was completed during 1999. The novel has been adapted for the screen by Bryan Elsley and directed by Gavin Millar, the team also responsible for the screen adaptation of [The Crow Road](#), which, in the opinion of Iain Banks, was 'Excellent'. Gavin Millar has a long and distinguished directorial career, which includes the, also excellent, adaptation of Dennis Potter's *Dreamchild*. *Complicity* was filmed on location in and around Edinburgh and stars Jonny Lee Miller, who played 'Sick Boy' in *Trainspotting* and 'Crash Override' in *Hackers* - Jason Hetherington, who among other roles, appeared with the late Jeremy Brett in *Sherlock Holmes: The Last Vampyre* - and Rachael Stirling, who can be seen in the movie, *Still Crazy*.

**Iain Banks** was talking with [Remy Dean](#)