

Interview

*Twelve years and fourteen books since the publication of his debut novel *The Wasp Factory*, Iain Banks has become one of Britain's most prominent and prolific writers. Whether writing mainstream novels as plain "Iain Banks" or science fiction under his ubiquitous "Iain M. Banks" nom-de-plume, Banks has mastered the tricky art of attracting both bestseller status and critical acclaim. Now 42, Banks' most recent books, the sci-fi epic *Excession* and the religious cult thriller *Whit*, indicate that his ceaselessly inventive imagination is in no danger of slowing down. Banks is first and foremost a brilliant storyteller. He takes evident joy in being able to push his plotlines as far as they can go, sending the reader at breakneck speed through unexpected plot twists, cliffhanger endings and, in his sci-fi, mindbending technological possibilities. As he says, "You're very spoilt as a novelist. You get used to being God, basically. No-one tells you what to do."*

*Yet amongst the sex, death, drink and illegal substances that peppers Banks' writing, there lurks a distinct moral probity. *Whit* tells the story of the fictional Luddite Luskentyrian religious cult, as seen through the eyes of the cult's 18 year old "Elect Of God" Isis Whit. Sent to London in pursuit of her errant cousin Morag, Isis slowly comes to realise that all is not what it seems either within the cult's enclave or amongst the Unsaved of the outside world. Banks describes *Whit* as "a book about religion and culture written by a dedicated evangelical atheist - I thought I was very kind to them...Essentially, Isis makes the recognition that the value of the Luskentyrian cult is in their community values rather than their religious ones. She recognises that efficiency isn't everything, that people not profit are what matters."*

"So, are you on a mission?" "People usually just ask me 'What are you on?' You can't be too prescriptive about what a writer does, but it's important to me to get these ideas into the books, just for my own peace of mind, so that I feel I'm not just doing this to make money, I'm not just writing pageturners for people to skim through, put aside and forget. Like anybody else, I want to make the world a little more like the world I'd like to live in, sad though that is. So I put forward these ideas however subtly or cack-handedly to the extent that I can get away with it. The good thing about writing is that you can do this in a non-invasive, non-penetrative way, you're not telling people this is what they should do, you're just presenting ideas."

**Whit* also differs from Banks' previous novels because it's written through the eyes of its female protagonist. It's a common complaint about many male novelists (Martin Amis springs to mind) that their female characters always remain lifeless stereotypes. Banks however ignores gender preconceptions as some sort of prohibition to his imagination: "I just think of the person in that situation, I don't try and think as a female character per se...In a sense it's easy to be blind to the sexism that's still around and somehow manage to ignore the other elements of society that still are unequitable in terms of gender or whatever," Banks pauses and then laughs, "but it's only stupid or ignorant people who do that."*

*"If you're a writer you're supposed to have some ability to spot what's going on and to empathise - it should be relatively easy to write a female character because you spend your time in the same society - I think I'd find it hard to write from the point of view from someone who was particularly gay - there's a small element of it in *Complicity*, but it's very marginal, a childhood dalliance sort of thing - and I think that's because the gay community is quite separate in many ways. To the same extent writing about a black person or someone in the Indian community would be difficult - so writing about an 18 year old female virgin is quite easy!"*

**Whit* was a conscious attempt by Banks to write something quieter and more reflective after the polemical rage of his previous mainstream novel, *Complicity*. Even though Banks has had a reputation for the macabre ever since the gothic horror of *The Wasp Factory*, *Complicity*'s graphic descriptions of corrupt politicians being killed off in particularly inventive and horrible ways reached new stomach-churning extremes.*

Banks has no qualms about the violence in his writing: "In principle, anything's OK, as long as I've got an excuse to put it in - which is a more honest way of saying, "Is it artistically justified?" You shouldn't self-censor yourself just because you have a gut reaction that an idea is too horrible. If there's a reason for it, it has to be done. There's a moral point to that ghastliness, pain and anguish. Which is why I would absolutely defend Complicity's extreme violence, because it was supposed to be a metaphor for what the Tories have done to this country."

Banks rejects the idea that his science fiction writing is a way for him to cut loose in contrast to the tight stricture of his contemporary novels: "The sci-fi isn't really a way of letting off steam. In a sense, Complicity was letting off steam, a way of getting out all the anger and bitterness I felt about the 80s and the Thatcher years. It kind of varies, there's no set pattern - it's not like the sci-fi is always playful and the fiction is always disciplined - it's just that I have more fun in sci-fi more or less regardless because I enjoy playing by my own rules."

This is certainly apparent in Excession, Banks' latest Culture novel which charts the arrival of a mysterious entity from another universe into that of the Culture's. Banks revels in the possibilities of technology. "Oh yeah, I love the stuff, the more buttons it's got the better, when we get voice control it's going to be so boring because there won't be any buttons. There's another moral point here as well. You can't escape the fact that humanity is a technological species, homo technophile or whatever the Latin is. Technology is neither good or bad, it's up to the user. We can't escape what we are, which is a technological species. There's no way back."

"In your recent interview with the English edition of Wired (June 1996) you intimated that the only reason the Culture works is that machines become so intelligent they save us from ourselves...do you think that's the case?" "Not entirely, no. I think the first point to make about the Culture is," *Banks pauses again, sounding like he's about to deliver a profound insight,* "I'm just making it up as I go along. It doesn't exist and I don't delude myself that it does. It's just my take on it. I'm not convinced that humanity is capable of becoming the Culture because I think people in the Culture are just too nice - altering their genetic inheritance to make themselves relatively sane and rational and not the genocidal, murdering bastards that we seem to be half the time."

"But I don't think you have to have a society like the Culture in order for people to live. The Culture is a self-consciously stable and long-lived society that wants to go on living for thousands of years. Lots of other civilisations within the same universe hit the Culture's technological level and even the actuality of the Culture's utopia, but it doesn't last very long - that's the difference."

"The point is, humanity can find its own salvation. It doesn't necessarily have to rely on machines. It'll be a bit sad if we did, if it's our only real form of progress. Nevertheless, unless there's some form of catastrophe, we are going to use machines whether we like it or not. This sort of stuff has been going on for decades and mainstream society is beginning to catch up to the implications of artificial intelligence."

Despite Banks almost evangelical zeal concerning technology, he's avoided William Gibson and Bruce Stirling's embracing of the net. "I don't have access to the Internet or email either. I've got two answering machines which I never switch on. Communications wise, I've got a fax and a letterbox and that's about it."

Banks still considers himself primarily a science-fiction author, due to his now long gone pre-publication rites of passage: "I wrote five novels before The Wasp Factory, and the last three were science fiction, which have all now been published in a much altered form. The one just before The Wasp Factory, Walking On Glass, almost got published before The Wasp Factory in 1979. The Wasp Factory was written in 1981 and published in 1984, by which time I'd already written Consider Phlebas. So I thought of myself very much as a science fiction writer as the three books I wrote before The Wasp Factory were all sci-fi. The other two never rose to the light of day because they weren't very good, frankly."

"I go to a lot of SF conventions and the authors I spend time with regularly are SF writers. I'm Scottish and a writer so I'm a Scottish writer, but I don't mix with Scottish writers very much." So

he hasn't been keeping a fatherly eye on Irvine Welsh's meteoric success then? "I read and was incredibly impressed by Trainspotting and The Acid House. I'm as interested as anybody else in new writers but I don't keep either a jealous eye or a particularly helpful eye, for that matter, on them. I'm not sending round people to visit them in the early hours of the morning (slips into impeccable Don Corleone voice), 'Mr Banks. He don't feel you respect him. We're gonna break off your fingers this time.'"

One organisation that might be receiving a midnight visit from Mr. Banks is the film company who own the rights to The Wasp Factory, which is currently embroiled in litigation and which he's unable to discuss outside of the courtroom. More happily, the BBC have just finished shooting a television adaptation of Banks' novel The Crow Road, although quite how they intend to portray the exploding grandmother remains to be seen. "It's four one hour episodes starting in November, although BBC programming controllers being a law unto themselves will probably change that. Gavin Miller was the director, and there's quite a few recognisable Scottish actors involved in it: Bill Patterson and Joseph McFadden, who was in the film Small Faces McFadden is playing the central character Prentice McHoan. Allegedly the BBC are pretty happy with it, but that's all I know. I didn't have any involvement with it and I didn't want any involvement with it. I think it's very rare that writers can interfere in that sort of thing and not just be a pain in the arse."

Banks' diffidence concerning moving into new areas extends to the PC games industry - "Once you start co-operating with someone else you have to make compromises and take other people's ideas on board. I'm not a team player: that's one of my limitations" - and even writing in other genres: "There's been flippant remarks about doing pornography as Iain S. Banks and Westerns as Iain Z. Banks...It's not impossible that I might wake up one morning and decide to do a historical novel, but it would mean doing research - the R word - so I can't see it myself...I think it's very unlikely, I think I've found my two niches. And anyway, I've just signed another 4 book deal which specifically states two mainstream and two science fiction novels, so I don't have to think about it - it's going be 'What year is it? Oh it must be science fiction time...'"

As regards what those books will concern, Banks remains quiet. Fin-de-siecle hysteria of the close of the millenium, perhaps? "I've done it twice already - Canal Dreams is set around the turn of the century, when the canals are handed back from the US to the Panamanians by the year 2000. I tried to achieve the same sort of feel at the end of the deca-millennium in Against A Dark Background. It's science fiction so you can make it bigger and better with the year 10,000 approaching rather than the year 2000. So while everyone else's attention is diverted by the millenium, I'll do something else."

Iain (M.) Banks - he's out there - somewhere.
