

## Books

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# Iain M Banks

The author of *Look to Windward*, *Excession*, and *Inversions* discusses the state of SF writing, the Culture, and the joy of ship-naming.

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## IainMBanks

Right; I'm here. Ask away...

[Iain Banks](#) (and Iain M Banks)

## blackbird21

Which science fiction writers do you admire?

## IainMBanks

Um, lots. (There's a list, but it's a bit long...)

## desaic

Would you ever consider publishing an e-book? (I'm sure you're popular enough for it to be worthwhile financially.)

## IainMBanks

I don't know yet. I tend to leave all the hard stuff to my publishers. So if it was easy... maybe.

## prakp

The Culture tries to assimilate new peoples gradually. It uses persuasion, reason, direction and the odd dirty trick rather than overt conquest - despite (or perhaps because of) any invasions or wars it may have started in the past. (I haven't read *Windward* yet!)

Is this policy a deliberate echo of the way the West no longer colonises by force but instead achieves similar ends through cultural and economic imperialism and the aggressive promotion of democracy?

## IainMBanks

Sort of, yes. Except the Culture doesn't have its own economic self-interest at heart, so it's nicer.

## adaldan

Well, I tried to sort of ration LTW, but past page 100 there's no stopping, is there. I liked it a lot, it was funny, grandiose, sad and sulking in more or less equal parts, though I felt you cheated a little bit. ;-)

But I was a little puzzled by something towards the end. I will try to not spoil things for anybody but I have to ask: that is not how the Culture is supposed to act, is it?

**IainMBanks**

Not exactly. But behaving wildly (and viciously) out of character means that the bad-guys can't ever exactly predict they can get away with before the Culture steps in, or how bad the retribution will be. And of course, there's lots of different tendencies within SC... Maybe it was just a nasty Mind on the duty roster that day.

**jrkenedy**

Are you fed up with writing Culture novels or do you think they will run and run?

**IainMBanks**

Not fed up. I've no definite plans for the next one and it's probably a long way down the line if/when it does happen, but I find it hard to imagine I won't write about the Culture again.

**smainprize**

Your last couple of "M-less" books have in one way or another been set in a world that isn't \*quite\* the real one... are you planning to write any more novels set in real-world situations? I'm thinking of Complicity and The Crow Road, which are my favourites of all your books.

**IainMBanks**

Again, no set plans, but I imagine there'll be a real-world mainstream book before too long.

**etolstoy**

Enjoy your books. Where do you get the motivation from for each story? People you know? Or random paths you would like to follow and see where they lead?

**IainMBanks**

Never people I know (too dangerous - I need all the friends I can get and have no desire to get biffed on the nose because someone thought their portrait was unflattering). As an example of where the ideas originate, the genesis of Look To Windward came from thinking about the pattern of the earlier books, where somebody from the Culture goes to another civilisation (and has lots of exciting adventures, and... reversing the polarity!)

**iang8**

How's the VFR800 running? Cracked a ton fifty yet? Or have you already traded up to something faster?

SF or fiction, if you could write only one?

**IainMBanks**

Actually it's a 750 (it's three years old now). Cracked the ton while running-in (look, the instructions were don't take it above 8000 in any gear, so I was heading down the M90 one day and thought I'd see what that equated to in top gear, head tucked in. Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be 120! I sat up very rapidly, braked gently and too a sweaty look round for officers of the law).

SF. Prob'ly.

**kudra**

So much of what would once have been considered sci-fi has come to pass (genetic modification, cyberspace...) - where does that leave sci-fi writing? What do you think about the sci-fi writing that's around at the moment - is it currently in a fertile or fallow state?

**IainMBanks**

SF will be fine as long as there's S, basically. I think the genre's pretty healthy right now.

**drella23**

Not being an SF fan, I've read most of your non-M books, but none of your M ones. Don't you feel that your choice of bylines will prejudice potential readers (either positively or negatively) and ghettoise your genre fiction? Or is it just my fault for not being prepared to look beyond the convention-attending dweebs and discover a whole new avenue of literary wonder?

**IainMBanks**

Could do, but it prevents ambiguity. And it's always worth trying new things...

**oharar**

It's sometimes said that a writer's first novel is autobiographical. How true was this for you? Did it cause any of your relatives to sit up and say "So, it wasn't an accident!"?

**IainMBanks**

Totally un-. And No.

**BCOS6**

I love your M-less books, however I have not gone down the SF road yet. Why do you separate the two genres with your two names? It's almost as if you don't want people to accidentally buy the wrong one...

**IainMBanks**

Correct! Also my family gave me some grief for leaving the M out of the mainstream ones...

**Maynard78**

Do you think imagination is a gift or can it be taught and nurtured?

**IainMBanks**

I strongly suspect it's a gift, and if it can be taught or nurtured it's only for a fairly brief period in childhood. But, hey; I'm no expert.

**tanyaj**

How does one write a novel?

**IainMBanks**

To the best of one's abilities.

## **Domo2000**

With a bit of luck our material abundance will let us live something like the Culture, one day. But after all the material and political crap is sorted out, the only remaining Utopian bit left to consider is love, sex and relationships. At first, your Culture writings on this solely portrayed rampant promiscuity. I don't have your books to hand, but the self-imposed exile of the pregnant lady (Excession) who'd been cheated on, after firm commitments of love and faithfulness, is obviously different. So too with the star of The Business, infatuated with a man despite (or because) of his total commitment to his wife. (Sorry, I'm no good with names).

Would you agree that there's a balance between the pre-60's miserable marriage lock-in on the one hand, and shallow bed hopping on the other? Not that sexual pleasure cannot be enjoyed without marriage. Nor that anyone should ever be constrained from ending an unhappy relationship by society. But, that experimentation should not eclipse the fact that committed love is usually/often the ideal state for human happiness?

PS Any tips for not getting shafted by publishers when trying to get a book published?

## **IainMBanks**

Tricky; I always have the get-out that the Culture isn't us; not exactly the same species at all, and therefore their nature isn't ours (and has anyway been heavily interfered with through genetic manipulation). But generally I'd agree with the sort of balanced approach you're talking about.

Publishers: get a good agent.

## **rossmi2**

Are you planning a sequel to Use of Weapons? At the end of the book, there was what appeared to be the opening chapter of a sequel. Also, have you been approached or have plans to turn any culture books into films, and if so, which one would you prefer was filmed.

## **IainMBanks**

No; I don't tend to do sequels. The last bit of UoW is there to imply that another story, similar to Zakalwe's (even down to Sma's involvement and some history to do with a [wheel] chair) is about to begin, and has been at least partially instigated by Z's own actions. And of course Z is back to his old tricks too, because both the prologue and the epilogue take place after the main action of the book. So it all continues...

Yup; Pathe have optioned Player of Games, though the one I'd really like to see is Phlebas...

## **Keith68**

Thanks for all the words you've written.

Is the separation of your writings, using a middle initial for your science fiction works, a method to combat schizophrenia? Perhaps that is too strong a word (I apologise), but there seems to be an amount of writing without constraint, or flexing

of imagination in your science fiction. Do both styles go hand in hand or is there an amount of cause and effect. That is, is the SF a result of frustration at the constraints of realism in your novels set in the present day?

PS Do you enjoy SF films, and which ones in particular?

**IainMBanks**

Not schizophrenia. There is more unconstrained fun to be had writing the SF, but it's not any sort of therapy.

Yes. Dark Star is still probably my fave.

**wheeler66**

Does political passion drive your desire to write, or is it merely a theme you enjoy?

Who intends to retire first: Iain Banks or Iain M. Banks? Or will they both live forever?

**IainMBanks**

No. Wish it did.

Neither would give the other satisfaction, though both are taking a year off from the start of September.

**jcmullen99**

Thanks again for Look to Windward!

If rumours of your taking a year or so 'out' from writing are to be believed, can we look forward to your arrival on the virtual scene soon?

A IB/IMB website would be very popular! Or would that cut across what you are doing? Or is that rumour just a rumour?!

**IainMBanks**

Yes. My Install CD from madasafish is lying at home even as I write to you from here, the throbbing heart of the Guardian/Observer empire (at 15.43 on 23.8.00 according to my watch).

Website designing might be a laugh. I'll see how easy it is...

**leperman**

I have read and tremendously enjoyed all your work, both the sci-fi and contemporary novels. But one thing has been bothering me for years - what was the very end of 'Use of Weapons' all about? I read and re-read it several times, but am still at a loss. Please help a confused soul.

**IainMBanks**

I refer my honourable friend to the answer given above (to rossmi2). The clue that the prologue/epilogue bits both happen not long after the main story is Zakalwe pushing his hand through long hair that isn't there any more (after he cuts it all off just before the enemy storm the citadel once the dirty deal has been done on... umm... I've forgotten the name of the planet). Make sense?

**craigmcgill1**

Two words: Greenock Morton. What can you say to that?

**IainMBanks**

You mean The Mighty 'Ton? I'd say, "Will you please stop calling them Mortonnull?" to my wife. She seems to think it's funny...

**davegolder**

What is it with The Wasteland?

**IainMBanks**

It's just a jolly fine poem, is all. I don't know; it's always seemed to resonate with me, despite the fact I disagree with almost everything TSE stood for.

**aclandi**

Thanks for the books. I'm interested to know about the significance of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" part IV as title references for the first and latest Culture novels. Is the drowned Phoenician symbolic of the hubris of first the Idirans and then the Culture itself? More worryingly, does this indicate a full circle and that there will be no more Culture novels? Or are you just a fan of Eliot?

**IainMBanks**

Fan of Eliot. As for the Culture, like I said earlier - if I can borrow one of Arnie's lines - I'll be back (well, probably). The drowned mariner seemed like a good image to evoke for what is arguably just a tale of a shipwrecked sailor who falls in with a gang of pirates and goes in search of buried treasure on an enchanted isle guarded by a sleeping dragon... Plus there is a sea-change, right on the surface of the sea, when Horza Changes to resemble Kraiklyn...

**JakeHulme**

I'm a big fan of both your mainstream and SF books - I don't see a conflict between the two. However, do you have any intentions towards, or thoughts on, a novel that bridges the gap between the two? I ask because I feel that Consider Phlebas (along with Neuromancer) rejuvenated SF literature just when it needed it, but the two have very different themes - Phlebas (and a lot of your other SF books) have been of the 'space opera' style, whereas Gibson is more near-future. Recent writers (I'm thinking of Jeff Noon and Michael Marshall Smith in particular) seem to have followed Gibson's path, but with elements of the fantastical that echo yours. It seems to me that there could be a place where your mainstream and SF themes intersect.

**IainMBanks**

Hmm... doubt it. In a sense this conjunction has already occurred (twice, arguably). It's there in The State of the Art, and - so people keep telling me - in The Business, which some people have seen as the possible starting point for something like the Culture on Earth (I'm more sceptical). Still, I know what you mean, but... probably not.

**adaldan**

Mmhh. You see, I have been arguing about the death penalty with a lot of people

lately, mainly from the USA. And I have always thought that the claim that the Culture was really a thinly-disguised USA was risible... but now you go and have a Culture entity acting on revenge and retaliation, even resorting to torture. Means to an end, eh? Not a Culture agent like Zakalwe, but a Culture entity... and not in self-defence either. This margin is too small to say exhaustively why, but it troubled me. It echoed some of the arguments of the pro-death people. I'd hate to think that you didn't share my opinions! ;-)

But LTW is such a gentle, almost tender book. Did I miss something? Perhaps I have idealised the Culture too much, much more than you yourself did?

Or perhaps you owe us another book about this. :-)

### **IainMBanks**

I am absolutely against the death penalty. I think if Scotland brought it back and England didn't, I'd go and live... well, in Berwick probably...

Also, the Culture doesn't just not have a death penalty, it doesn't even have an imprisoning penalty.

All I can say is that at this sort of level - the realpolitik level of attempting to prevent the sort of attack that might kill billions of civilians - even the Culture throws away its usual moral rule-book. This is what SC is for, in a sense. That doesn't make such actions right, just less wrong, and arguably less wrong than not acting at all or, as I said earlier, acting in too predictably.

Besides; I've always said the Culture is as close as something remotely like us could ever get to a genuine Utopian state; I never said it was perfect

### **craigmcgill1**

You once mentioned a possibility of a sequel to Wasp Factory - I take it that's a dead duck now? Would you do it for a daft amount of money or would you always knock it back if you didn't think there was a top tale in it?

Also, who's on your reading list these days? Do you like stuff by folk like Chris Brookmyre?

### **IainMBanks**

Not much deader than it ever was. I'd do it if I thought of a total cracker of an idea that would carry the book beyond the initial idea (though I think this is unlikely to happen). I don't think I would if it was just for money. But then ask me when/if I'm poor and maybe I'd change my mind.

### **lovefunk**

You write such rich books which get to the crux of human imagination and experience. I've always wanted to be a writer, but work for an internet start-up company instead. This choice of a career has taught me a lot about myself.

Generally, the industry's culture gives you a lot of reward for your toils, and if you are unlucky or not cut out for the job, a lot of cable to hang yourself with.

Anyway, my question to you is about your career and the sort of person you are.

Please could you tell me what writing has made you into in your eyes? What have you learnt about yourself as you have gone along the way? This is a bit personal, but

I do see my own strengths and weaknesses quite clearly. I can hold a convincing argument, and am genuinely interested in everyone I meet, and every experience I have. On the down side, there is something that I am fighting to keep alive in me as I get older (a grand 27 has been clocked so far), and more in touch with my innards. A real battle that creates energy and fear. If I don't fight, I believe that old age will be hard and full of bitterness and regrets.

In sum, the question was, what has writing made you into? And, what have you learnt about yourself as you have gone along the way?

**IainMBanks**

I have to say I don't know. It's made me a writer, I guess, but then that seems a trivial answer. The problem is that I've wanted to be a writer since I was in primary school, and I've either been trying hard to make it happen - or actually been a writer - ever since. There's not much of a base-line to compare my current self too, in other words. Difficult to perform a control experiment on that one... Sorry.

**zackhunter**

Are you au fait with the fictions of J G Ballard, and if so, has his writing had any influence on your own? And what did you think - again, if you've read it - of Michel Faber's Under The Skin?

**IainMBanks**

Yes, and I'm a fan. I think Ballard is beyond influence, if you know what I mean; his style is so intrinsically his I find it hard to imagine anyone aping it without making themselves look just plain silly.

Haven't read Under The Skin.

**janetrs**

I have enjoyed the TV and radio adaptations of your other novels -anything else in the pipeline?

**IainMBanks**

Film options of Espedair Street, The Bridge and The Player of Games. Wasp Factory still in litigation. In all cases, don't hold your breath.

**MACGreen**

Have you ever considered writing for videogames?

Can we expect to see an Iain M Banks Space Opera for PlayStation 2 anytime soon?

**IainMBanks**

Briefly. But I am not a team player, so it won't happen. So, not by my hand.

**Domo2000**

Is there a chance that you'll feature more on the sublimed entities, from the Culture Mythos? Or do you think it's best to maintain the mystery of something that is altogether beyond our comprehension? Haven't read Windward yet though, only saw it for the first time yesterday.



**IainMBanks**

Doubtful. Maintain the mystery, and don't try to think unthinkabilities...

**woody01**

Thank you for all those great books, I especially enjoyed The Bridge, Walking on Glass, State of the Art, Feersum Endjinn and Inversions.

Are your novels influenced by paintings and music? I'm thinking of the reference to Magritte's paintings in Walking on Glass, and of a composer as the main character in your new Look to Windward.

And another question: What do you think of the Episode 1 of Star Wars and the Star Wars prequels in general?

**IainMBanks**

Not consciously, as a rule (though the first bit of the first chapter of Look To Windward was inspired by a painting hanging in a hotel in Oxford - snowy barges on a canal... it was the Old Parsonage hotel, I think. Anyway). I suspect there was some sort of general feel in old Stones and Led Zep songs that affected me in some hazy way, a long, long time ago, but I wouldn't like to try and be more specific.

I'm a bit of sucker for the first three Star Wars films. Episode One looked stunning, but the plot was lame.

**BillyBollocks**

What age did you start writing? Was it a precocious talent or did it require some dedication?

One more: any particular incidents along the way that inspired you to continue trying to be a writer?

**IainMBanks**

I tried writing my first novel when I was fourteen (thought I had, too, till I did a word-count) and wrote something resembling one when I was sixteen (the snappily titled The Hungarian Lift-Jet).

It was precocious something, that's for sure, and it needed a lot of dedication. Luckily I dedicate fast, as it were.

Not really, though the long-term encouragement of friends helped.

**MattB242**

Somebody once told me that the ships 'Very Little Gravitas Indeed' and 'Zero Gravitas' were a response to a scathing review. Is this true?

**IainMBanks**

Yes. But it was a scathing review of Culture ship-naming policy delivered by another Involved civilisation. They suggested that such enormously powerful and intellectually refined entities ought to have names with a little more gravitas, to reflect their near-god-like status; the immediate and sustained reaction of one of the Culture's ship manufacturies was to name all its subsequent vessels things like: Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out; Gravitas, What Gravitas?; Gravitas... Gravitas... No, Don't Help Me, I'll Get It In A Moment; Gravitas Free Zone;

Low Gravitas Warning Signal, etc etc (including the Zen-like Absolutely No You-No-What). I am so sad I have a separate list of the Gravitas ships at home. It currently runs to about 20, I think.

### **Strid**

A couple of questions that have already been raised in one form or other, but who would you say are your favourite writers and what sort of music do you like ? You always make reference to a lot of contemporary music in your non-SF books and I wondered what sort of things you listened to?

### **IainMBanks**

I also have a list of favourite authors. The SF one starts with the name Aldiss and ends with Zelazny and there are a lot in between, let me tell you. Maybe soon I'll have my own website, and I'll post the list to that.

Oh, most of the stuff that's mentioned in the books, and certainly Family, Led Zep, The Pogues, The Pixies, Nusrat... actually that's another long, long list. Best recent single for me was Aisha by Death In Vegas. On the other hand, Look To Windward was written mostly to Glenn Gould playing Bach, with a bit of Radio One thrown in.

### **SpenceDavies**

Re: your non sci-fi stuff. Do you set out to write a 'page-turner' or a work of literature? Do you feel stylistically constrained in any way? Do you think your readership, in general, also enjoy Pynchon, or whatever?

### **IainMBanks**

Both, if possible. No constraints apart from logic. It's plausible that some readers might treat me as a Pynchon-lite (but then, who is not, in comparison).

Well, I must be going now (16.45); sorry I couldn't answer all the questions. Some other time, I hope.

Thanks for all your interest. Pip pip!

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