

Interview

The novels of Iain Banks have always seemed natural fare for film makers, yet none have made it on to the screen. Ann Donald finds a BBC crew at a Dumbarton crematorium, filming **The Crow Road** and talks to the author about his hopes for a project nicknamed 'Four funerals and a wedding'.

We pull up at the crematorium just in time to see Grandma McHoan explode. The huge puff of smoke rising from the crematorium's white chimney is preceded by an electric orange flash and a bang.

Yet the clusters of muted mourners in black M&S twinsets do not look aghast. No heads swivel towards the celestial kingdom for an explanation, no eyes bulge cartoon-like in horror and there are no murmurs of consternation. On a patch of well-manicured grass, around 40 mourners have adopted the blasphemously relaxed pose of a Sunday school picnic gone awry: massaging each other's tense shoulders or slurping noisily from polystyrene cups. To complete the picture, a pair of ladies' black court shoes lie forlorn but upright on the gravel path.

A calm soul in a blue kagoul steps forward to shout: "Cut!"

On a perfect Sunday morning in late July at a crematorium near Dumbarton, BBC Scotland are in the final week of a ten-week shoot. They are filming Iain Banks's wild and exhilarating tale of love, birth, marriage, and death, **The Crow Road**; a project summarised by the producer Bradley Adams as "Four Funerals and a Wedding". The scene we have just witnessed is the opening one, where the indomitable grandmother Margot McHoan's journey to Terminus Deceased is diverted by her still-embedded pacemaker.

The four-part drama serial has been adapted by Bryan Elsley (also credited with *Hamish Macbeth*) and has *Small Faces* star Joseph McFadden in the lead role of Prentice McHoan. Bill Paterson, Peter Capaldi and Stella Gonet lend support.

As we retreat past the tangled paraphenalia of movie lights and cables and the 50ft stone slab bearing an Inerflora-wipeout of grandma McHoan's funeral bouquets, producer Adams explains in reverential whispers why he's spent three years developing **The Crow Road**, "I thought it had all the elements good drama is made up of: lovely characters, a beautiful location and a story driven on several levels." As he speaks, director Gavin Miller's voice wafts in from outside as Doctor Fyfe is filmed roaring up the gravel path in his gleaming Rover in a pointless bid to save grandma's pacemaker.

The director's voice fades and Bradley continues his resume. "Firstly, it's about a young boy's rites-of-passage, where Prentice encounters all the problems common to most young people growing up. Secondly, it's a family saga, and thirdly it has a gothic murder mystery story added for a bit of spice. What we've done is take a very complex plot and simplify it without losing the texture."

Banks's writing has always seemed a natural target for screen adaption, but **The Crow Road** will be the first of his books to make it into celluloid. Though both **The Wasp Factory** and **The Bridge** have been adapted for the stage and a production of **Complicity** is set to toll next year, an American film version of the controversial **The Wasp Factory** is still trapped in litigation in the Irish courts.

The Crow Road is, as Adams and everyone involved with the production concede, a very complex novel. It is a storming, sometimes confusing and magical tale in which acutely observed reality is mixed with flights of mad fancy, disparate narrators and deadpan humour. Though overloaded with references to the minutiae of the Fifties culture, it just manages to emerge intact and inspiring at the end of 500 amphetamine-fuelled pages.

Perched on a chair in one of the crematorium's eerie alcoves is Banks's hero and principal narrator of the television version. Formerly a *High Road* heart-throb, Joseph McFadden is a boy blessed with the eyelashes of Dusty Springfield and, at 21, is possessed of an endearing shyness and innocence. He is also a totally credible Prentice. Replete in his improvised funeral garb of faded Nirvana *In Utero* T-shirt, scuffed no-name trainers and a scabby tartan jacket, he describes his character in simple terms: "He's a really genuine, honest guy who is very confused about the world, life and death - that's his only flaw really. He's got to understand the reason behind everything and that messes his head up."

McHoan is the archetypal student, matching a neat line in self-deprecation with an obsession with life's big questions (Death, God, Curries, and *The Clangers*). He becomes intrigued by his peripatetic Uncle Rory's mysterious disappearance back in the hippie days of the Seventies.

The man responsible for translating the complexities of the book into a tailored four part tele-drama is Bryan Elsley. Though he cut his teeth on *Casualty* and *London's Burning*, the scriptwriter confesses that 1996 has turned into "a real Banks year". He had just completed the second draft of **Complicity** for Talisman films. "Like a lot of people of my generation [he is 35], I read everything Banks wrote. I loved **The Crow Road** when I first read it but I had no thoughts of a TV series until Brad suggested it."

Though there were some sceptical voices within the BBC, who voiced initial worries that the novel's complex unruly mix of soap, murder, mystery and rites-of-passage would lead to a confusing narrative, Elsley remained convinced of its worth. "I never once had a moment's doubt but many people believed it was unadaptable," he reports happily. "For me it looked like a rather easy adapting job, which it in fact turned out to be. As far as I was concerned **The Crow Road** is a great book and there was no need to worry about these genre issues because Banks obviously doesn't. That's the great thing about him., he just doesn't care.

"I think of Banks as a bravura writer. I'm not sure how much he actually thinks every time he sits down at his desk in the morning and writes. As a TV writer - someone who is constantly bound in by the demands of structure, story, planning and sticking rigidly to a plot and having to think in tele-visual terms - I totally admire Banks." Later, Banks will admit that he plans the structure of his novels carefully, but makes up the dialogue as he goes along.

One unexpected element of **The Crow Road** the novel is the disconcerting habit Banks has of switching narrators. Then there are the time-zone jumps through the decades. Elsley refers to this as Banks's "knockabout style". Consequently, he says, there were places where he had to grit his teeth and take editorial decision. In the television version, 95 per cent of the story is seen from Prentice's point of view, but the addition of a *Blythe Spirit*-style apparition (Rory, played by Peter Capaldi) allows for some exploration of Prentice's memory.

The role of adaptor was clearly relished by Elsley.

"Oh yes," he beams. "Not only is the story and the dialogue well-nigh perfect but it's got so many twists and turns. Basically Banks gives you a big dollop of material."

This is a view with which the author concurs, when I track him down at his home in Fife: "**Crow Road** is like diving into a laundry basket and some of it's not very nice smelling, and there's no order to it, and there are a lot of loose socks."

A conversation with Iain Banks is like a walking holiday among Munros; the voice rises and falls, slows down and speeds up with each peak and trough in the conversation. "I do think that **Crow Road**'s slightly ragbag shape and lack of proper structure gives a fair amount of leeway for any adaptation" he says. "Whereas my other books tend to be quite difficult to much about with structurally." (**The Bridge**, for example, has a structure which the author claims to have modelled on the Forth Bridge).

Banks has religiously adhered to a hands-off approach when his work is adapted, whether it be for stage or screen. He is financially secure enough to leave his literary offspring to fend for themselves.

"I'm lucky. I have a backlist that does fairly well already."

So hard cash is not a consideration?

"Well it's not something I say no to. I have an agent who thinks in those terms: what to sell, to whom and for how much. I'm happy to write a book a year and if there are spin-offs then that's nice."

A second reason that Banks stands back from adaptations of his works is that he believes that the novelist and the screenwriter have different skills. "Usually, the last person to adapt a novel should be the person that wrote it," he reasons. "I do believe it is foolish to think that just because you can put a book together you can also adapt it. Some people can, and good for them, but personally speaking it's taken me long enough to become a half-decent writer would probably me the same time again to become a scriptwriter - and I just don't have the lifetime."

"I take full responsibility for the book and if anyone adapts it then it's their triumph if it works and their disaster if it doesn't," Banks says with a laugh. "My creative part in all this ended God knows when. Maybe six years ago? And to be honest I've not really thought about it since then. The only way for this to work is to give it over to Bryan because I feel that part of the job of the writer is to leave well alone. I feel it would be professionally insulting if I tried to interfere."

Banks confesses that he would feel "a bit shy and spare-partish, like the Duke of Edinburgh," if he took up the crew's invitation to "come on down" in his Porsche to observe his fictional characters in action, preferring instead to wait until the final product is broadcast, "when I'll get my friends to watch it first and screen it for me". But perhaps these pre-natal fears are uncalled for. Elsley voices the mantra I hear repeatedly from everyone involved in the production. "Usually when you turn up eight weeks into a shoot everyone is really miserable but with **Crow Road** that doesn't seem to be happening. That is due to the material being so rich the cast just love sinking their teeth into it."

At the end of June the crew were stationed in Tarbert, Argyll, working on the later stages of the story. If a tourist was to look for a typically quaint Scots fishing village, Tarbert would be it, with its rolling hills and rainbow-painted houses. But on this day it was raining. Torrentially. At the once-genteel Islay Frigate Hotel (B&B £18 a night and Charity Bingo on Wednesdays, and now doubling as Prentice's Gallanach local) Elsley's optimistic outlook was being put to the test. The remnants of the Hogmanay party scene filmed at 7 am were still present in the Frigate lounge: crushed party streamers and peanuts lay trampled on the swirly, alcohol-stained carpet, intertwined with the spaghetti trail of camera flexes and wires.

The extras sat quietly downstairs supping on low-alcohol lager to the constant background noise of static from the crew's walkie-talkies. Upstairs, Bill Paterson - in sensible shoes and cords - was chatting to an unkempt hippie in a biker jacket who had just slunk by. The hippie was Peter Capaldi (as Uncle Rory) and Paterson was in his Kenneth The Dad role. This was their sixth take in a crucial scene where Rory hits at a mystery concerning their brother-in-law Fergus. Capaldi fluffed a line for the third time. Eyeballs rolled and there were nervous laughs. An extra carrying pints of lager was commanded to take off his shoes: "It sounds like wet fish," the sounds man complained.

Next, Paterson fluffed a line, provoking understanding smiles and a round of sighs from the sound man. A bin lorry went by and an angry exchange was conducted on walkie-talkies. Take number seven: a wrap. Palpable relief invaded the Frigate Lounge.

"You know" said Adams with a defiant grin sometime later, "this is the happiest cast and crew I've worked with in a long time." And with that, the clouds parted and the sun swept across the Tarbert skyline. Somewhere, Grandma McHoan was smiling.

