Sci-Fi Writer Iain Banks Talks Surface Detail's Hell, Creationist Heresy

By Wired Staff

Iain Banks speaks at the Edinburgh Central Library in Scotland in 2009.
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By Michael Parsons, Wired UK

Iain M. Banks' latest novel, *Surface Detail*, is a grand addition to his long-running science fiction series known as the *Culture* novels, named after the sprawling civilization which dominates his space opera's universes.

Banks has used the *Culture* novels to make space opera his own, and the results are a delight — intelligent, cleverly structured novels bursting with a Dickensian excess of detail, characters and ideas, all held together with extremely tight plotting.

In *Surface Detail*, thousands of races throughout the universe are consigning the souls of their people to eternity within digital hells. These virtual hells have become connected and are now host to a virtual war between supporters and opponents of the hells, including the Culture, who understandably regard torturing the damned as a rather uncivilized practice.

The latest novel weaves together the stories of a persecuted slave girl, Lededjem, fighting back against her evil master, Veppers; a pair of twin-trunked, elephant-like aliens trying to expose the horrors of the virtual hells; and a warrior within one of those hells fighting an endless series of virtual battles. Banks doesn't pull any punches in his descriptions of the virtual hells, which are as gruesome and disturbing as a Heironymous Bosch painting.

Wired.co.uk sat down with Banks to talk about the book in a predictably wide-ranging talk that touched on science fiction, religion, politics and the current financial crisis.

Wired.co.uk: When does this story happen in relation to the chronology of the previous *Culture* novels?

Iain M. Banks: This one takes place about 800 years later on in the chronology of the Culture, that's why you've now got the whole potential of the turf wars, because Contact has hived off itself into different bits and there are various bureaucratic evolutions going on within the Contact section itself.

Wired.co.uk: One thing newcomers to the *Culture* novels will have to grapple with is the incredibly elaborate names of the characters.

Banks: A lot of what the *Culture* is about is a reaction to all the science fiction I was reading in my very early teens. There seemed to be all this convention that in the future everyone would have numbers for names. We'd live in a giant hive, and dress identically in dungarees. I thought: no. It also struck me that in the Culture, citizens have the lifestyle and access to luxury that in our history only aristocrats have had access to. I thought in a sense they are all aristocrats, with the very long names, often with the place where you're born.

Wired.co.uk: They're a bit like Hobbits — proud of their heritage.

Banks: Yes. Except taller and more elegant somehow…. It's the same with the names of the ships: These are conscious entities, and they treat their ships as their bodies, they're not that important, it's the Minds inside the ships. I couldn't imagine they'd be called things like *Intrepid* or *Victorious* or even *Enterprise*. They'd be called things like *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints* or *I Thought He Was With You.*

Wired.co.uk: What gave you the impulse to write about the war of the hells?

Banks: The idea of the hells came from thinking over the approach from one of the other novels, *Look to Windward*, in which there's a mention of a civilization that has a kind of Valhalla-ish virtual world for their fallen dead. At the time, that was treated as something very special. Then I began to think, if that was possible then it's the kind of thing that civilizations would do as a matter of course, and be an actual part of your civilization's development.

Wired.co.uk: The device becomes a great way to talk about religion — and in particular the Catholic religion's vision of hell. You're explicating the theology, and saying this is what it would really be like, these are the hells you're wishing upon your sinners. And you explore it in excruciating detail.

'I think hell is a sick idea!'
Banks: Absolutely, I think hell is a sick idea! You have to make sense of it, though, as with everything else. It starts off as a neat idea, but then even hell would be bureaucratized. You have to think it through in detail, as part of your responsibility as a writer. If it's a short story you can get away with just touching the idea, but you have to go into it in great depth in a novel of this scale, particularly when these hells are supposed to be an ongoing thing. It's certainly not just aimed at the Catholic Church, of course — but at superstition in general.

Wired.co.uk: I know you've spoken before about the idea of colonizing the galaxy for the left. So much of the architecture of the space opera is very right-wing. Is part of the project to have this lovely, *Guardian*-reading hedonistic diaspora?

Banks: Well frankly yes! I suppose that's me at my most didactic worst. I'm trying to be subtle about it as best I can. The good guys by my standards are winning, liberals with small L, of the left. Money is not the be all and end all — but it's a post-scarcity society, so in a sense it can afford its good works and its charity.

Wired.co.uk: There's a sense in which in this book you're pitting the Culture against religious fundamentalism, which is of course the drama we're all living through right now.

Banks: There are a lot of caveats there, but yes, I wanted to put across my sense of what a fully developed society would actually be like, and I'm trying to make the argument that we are still behaving in a relatively barbaric way at the moment.

Wired.co.uk: There's a nice turn in the story when our heroine discovers an unexpected ally. Was that something that came out in the telling of the story, or was it part of the narrative from the get-go?

Banks: It was there before I started typing the book out, but it was fairly late on in the development of the whole thing when I was thinking about it and planning it, quite a late twist — very similar to what happened with *The Wasp Factory*, where the final twist was there in the first draft, but it was fairly late on in the planning. The whole book was kind of ready to go, so I had time to put in some clues and cluettes as I went along. With this one I had to throttle back the number of clues, simple because it would have been so lethal for both of them that they had to keep it almost secret from themselves — there's a couple of moments when Ledejde almost starts to think about it. You are there in her own head with her thoughts, but she's censoring herself, and therefore the reader as well.

Wired.co.uk: There are three strands to the narrative: Lededje's revenge, the war of the hells and Yime's story. I struggled a bit with the Yime subplot. It seemed like she's making an attempt to get into the story to make contact with Lededje, but her mission was slightly

echoed in the narrative structure in that she doesn't quite make it. Would you cop to that?

Banks: I would, I think she ends up working almost as a Greek chorus, commenting upon the action rather than taking part in it. At various stages in the book there was the idea that she would take more part in the action and there were various ways that could have been done, but they didn't really work out. I think that point is brought into the book at the end in that she's kind of been had, almost fooled. Her story helps to explain just how devious Special Circumstances has become, and it also continues this idea that the Culture has reached a stage where Special Circumstances has its own turf wars going on, another development of the culture.

Wired.co.uk: The Hells plot means you have some characters living out multiple lives in virtual spaces, which means you can really play around with timelines — you have one who ends up living out a life in a virtual monastery.

Banks: Yes. Virtual spaces mean you can have these little vignettes. I got much more into writing about that part of that character's life than I had expected. Quite often you get to little things like that, which you think are going to be details, and they end up being quite important to the overall feel of the book. You always kind of know — you get to it and realize that you need to go a bit longer, get into a bit more detail.

Wired.co.uk: The novel's villain, Veppers, is a great character, yet there's so much baggage attached to the idea of the evil supervillain, how do you avoid cliché when you do a nice big baddie?

Banks: I think sometimes you just have to accept that you are going to stray into cliché territory! With Veppers, all I was trying to do was try to make it clear that in his own way he can be charming, and that he has a very sure touch with his people, and so on. He's a horrible sort of person but he still has to have some sort of inner life, some sort of rationale, and for him it's about, "This is what you do, this is how you prove yourself."

No matter what sort of society you're in, no matter how privileged you are, you have to prove how aggressive you are, regardless of the fact that you are well beyond the stage of economic need or desire. I wrote quite a few soliloquies that I had prepared for Veppers, which were really in the end about justifying himself, and they ended up feeling wrong because someone like him doesn't question himself, he doesn't need to, he's so self-confident it felt wrong to include them. He talks about other people beneath him not being able to recognize the need to fight — he talks about hating it when losers win. He regards the culture as an entire civilization of losers who somehow annoyingly have come to a position of enormous power!

Wired.co.uk: One thing that's sinister about Veppers is that he's a media mogul. We now live in a world of extraordinary media concentration, do you find that scary?

Banks: Oh God yes! Even in my side of the world, I've been in publishing for what 25 or 26 years and it's gone from being a gentlemen's club to being a few big players, and it's very corporatized. I feel sorry for people trying to break in. I don't know how successful I

would have been trying to break in now. Now days you almost have to have an agent — it's almost unheard of for people to send in a manuscript to a publisher. It's not great for agents; they're almost having to become editors and mentors at the same time.

Wired.co.uk: Do you think your books are as carefully edited as they used to be?

Banks: In a sense no. I think a lot of editors now are more like executive editors who buy in completed properties. My books are very carefully edited at the copy-editing point, but that's because I've established a track record. I'm not as edited as I used to be, but that's really down to one guy, the very late and very great James Hale, with the help of the lady who became his wife, Hilary, who plucked *The Wasp Factory* and therefore me out of obscurity. James was a real old-fashioned, proper editor, we'd have arguments over commas.

Wired.co.uk: William Gibson describes how he thinks of his books as being surrounded by hyperlinks. How plugged in are you when you're working?

Banks: I have the writing computer in front of me, and I have one to the left connected to the internet, so I can check e-mails and Google. To be perfectly honest, for stuff like this I'm trying really hard to make all of it up myself.

Wired.co.uk: Trying to give the internet a run for its money?

Banks: Trying to, and the words "Hiding to nothing" come to mind…. Having said that, when I was writing *Matter*, I was looking up stuff about very large waterfalls and I'd have the Wikipedia entry open, but I do have this insistence on having the writing computer not connected. I am not conscientiously or religiously connected.

Because the Culture is my world, I created it, it's my train set — so I make the rules! I'm trying to recreate everything around the various civilizations of the Culture with imagination rather than research — and that's a lot easier for me, as I hate doing research.

Wired.co.uk: I've heard you talk in the past about how odd it is that science fiction is simply not as well-respected as a literary genre as, say, detective fiction. Do you think that may have something to do with the genre conventions of science fiction being a bit tougher for outsiders to engage with?

Banks: I don't know if it's tougher, it's just less respectable. I suppose it's easier to grasp what's going on in detective stories; they can be extremely well-written and really tricky to negotiate. I think a lot of people are frightened of technology and frightened of change, and the way to deal with something you're frightened of is to make fun of it. That's why science fiction fans are dismissed as geeks and nerds. In some ways, science fiction doesn't do itself any favors in the way we portray ourselves.

I think it's more to do with being threatened. I've argued for years that in a sense it's the most important literary genre. It's the only one that deals directly with the effects of change, and specifically technological change, on people and society. And that has been one of the most important aspects of our lives since the industrial revolution. There simply isn't another genre that deals with that, and mainstream writing touches on it but doesn't concentrate on it.

Wired.co.uk: Gibson talks about using the tools of science fiction to attack contemporary life — what, for you, is central to that tool kit?

Banks: Well, I think you have to try and strip away some of the assumptions that we automatically make by simply having grown up in this society. You have to look on our civilization in a slightly childlike way so that a lot of the assumptions we have you have to try and forget about. Why do we do things this way? You have to try and represent a way of looking again at the facts of our existence.

Science fiction is trying to find alternative ways of looking at realities. It's quite a hard thing to do! Bill is better at it than most of us — one of the best — but it's not an easy furrow to plough. It's very hard to stop being yourself. We're very social creatures and our souls are so imprinted by our parents, schools, the media, soaking in all this information we need to function with as adults. It's very hard to filter out all that stuff and pare away the stuff that is simply what we've been told but that is actually less then 100 percent verified.

Wired.co.uk: The process you're describing is inherently political — you're talking about making the ideas we live manifest, about ideology …

Banks: Absolutely. In terms of religion, I'm quite convinced that the main reason that so many people are self-reportedly religious is because that's just the way they've been brought up. You don't want to dismiss or disrespect your parents, who brought you up to be a good whatever, or your teachers, or your holy men. But you might very well get to the stage when you're too embarrassed to admit that you don't believe that load of rubbish, but you don't want to upset your friends and your family and your loved ones and every figure of authority in your entire life by going, "Yeah, that's bollocks, I've been lied to." That's the kind of stripping away of assumptions you have to try and get to in terms of looking at our own society.

Wired.co.uk: There's a new belligerence on the side of scientists and writers and thinkers in response perhaps to the Islamic fundamentalists and the American right. You sense a kind of militant atheism, are you broadly sympathetic?

Banks: I've described myself as a militant atheist for the last 20 years! I think it's a reaction. I think a lot of us were naïve and thought that religion would quietly slip away, embarrassed and mumbling, saying, "Sorry I got it so wrong guys." Instead it's come back and said, "We were right all along." Well no you bloody weren't! The world works in a certain way, and the way you find out about it is you do science, you do experiments, and you use reason, that is how you find out how the world and the universe works.

Religion just doesn't do that; it's a set of hypotheses arrived at by very primitive people 2,000 years ago, and it's not fit for purpose, it doesn't describe reality, it's that simple. You can believe whatever you want to believe, but when you start basically saying that reality isn't reality, when you start saying this nonsense about the world is only 6,000 years old, when you have this absolute refusal to meet with reality, we can't just say, "You're entitled to your view."

No you're not! You're not entitled to put that view across as being just as good as science, because we can prove that science works. In a sense the results of science are embodied in technology — it's only because of science and reason that this technology works. There's an entire web, a system, which fits together and which tells us through tree-ring dates that there are tree dates that go back way beyond 6,000 years.

'I've recently come up with a spiffing new idea about creationists. They are all guilty of heresy.'
I've recently come up with a spiffing new idea about creationists. They are all guilty of heresy. You have a contradiction between the word of God as revealed in the Bible, and the word of God as revealed in the universe. We have reason, we have our brains, and we were supposedly created in God's image. If we assume that God isn't deliberately lying to us, there was no human hand in God's creation of the universe, it was God and God alone — but the Bible was written by human beings. It was demonstrably written by separate hands. And the briefest textual analysis will show you that there was not one set of hands behind this. And of course the book says it's the whole truth, but it would, wouldn't it?

Hersesy is denying the word of God, and the word of God is much more reliably expressed in the natural world as it's revealed through reason and science than in what I have heard described wonderfully as "the giant book of Jewish fairy stories" — which is basically what it is.

Wired.co.uk: And as a writer you know what fairy stories are all about.

Banks: Damn right! Dawkins and people like myself are reacting to this escalation of preposterousness. Religion should have sloped off embarrassed by now.

Wired.co.uk: You talk about the Culture as a culture of abundance and the big debate now is of course that we find ourselves in a culture of scarcity. Do you have an economic view?

Banks: Yes, lots! One of the things that you can look at with a science fiction take on things — what Bill Gibson was talking about — is our own economic system. While I'm deeply dubious about capitalism almost from first principles, in a lot of ways it does at least deliver the goods. We are very blinded to the exact form of capitalism we've got.

Banks: It's perfectly possible to imagine a world without publicly limited companies. This fabulous idea that you can have a company that has its own independent existence — and it owns the debts but none of the people who put their money in do. You can imagine

a form of capitalism which only ever had partnerships, in a Lloyds of London kind of way, and there was infinite liability. People would be much more careful if it was their own money. Of course, you talk to city whiz kids who are always yabbering on about thinking outside the box, and you put an idea like that before them and they have an attack of the vapors.

Wired.co.uk: It's as though there's only a very narrow form of casino capitalism we're allowed to discuss.

Banks: I think we're paying the price for it now. Years ago I wrote to the *Guardian* and said, "Well, what do you expect, we put the fat boys in charge of the tuck shop, and you shouldn't be surprised that the shelves are bare." Of course they're going to protect their position, of course they are going to pay themselves vast amounts of money, and of course if you allow banks to become too big to fail, that allows them to take the most ridiculous risks. If the risks come off, they get to make gigantic amounts of money and if they don't, the government comes in and rescues them with taxpayers' money. It's lunacy.

Wired.co.uk: Are you optimistic that there will be some sort of market reform here or in the United States?

Banks: There's going to have to be something. There might be a revolution, but they tend to be bloody, who knows. There are times when you think we can't be so stupid to let this kind of thing go on — but then you think our track record isn't that great in this regard — we're belligerently stupid!

Wired.co.uk: You've written a lot of science fiction. Are there any pinch-points in the genre that become slightly wearying — introducing another race, describing a new planet, getting the hero out of captivity?

Banks: Not yet, but I am going to be looking out for them now! I guess the trick is to always have stuff that makes you as a writer personally excited. I was really pleased when I came up with the idea of a giant wheel-like vehicle, like the London Eye taking off across the landscape. Although come to think of it, there was an American comedian on *QI*, I think Richard Hall, he said something about the first Ferris wheel was meant to be a form of transport, and I thought, "Ah!" — I should have put in an acknowledgement. Ideas like that, little images that catch people's imagination, can build up people's idea of a civilization or a planet.

It doesn't feel like back to the boring routine. You do have the whole galaxy to play with, and you have the full panoply of types of planets to play with, not just rocky, watery planets. You've got no excuse for getting bored with it!

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