

Interview

Iain Banks is undoubtedly one of the most exciting and original authors on the current literary and science fantasy scene. His first published work, **The Wasp Factory** has become a piece of cult fiction. All his books are exciting and different. On top of all that he's a genuinely nice guy. Makes you sick doesn't it? GM's Tim Metcalfe caught up with Iain during one of his flying visits to London. And yes they ended up in a local hostelry...

Yes, folks, Utopia can be fun! Mr Banks says so. A culture - or should that be The Culture - where living is easy, all the boring stuff is done by super-intelligent drones and nothing really nasty ever happens sounds mighty boring. Maybe that's why many science-fantasy writers generally pick post-holocaust or hero-fighting-a-dark-dictatorship scenarios for their novels.

But, true to form, Mr Banks has a different view, expressed in his two SF novels **Consider Phlebas** and **The Player of Games** - just out in paperback by the way folks.

"SF is full of distopias, there are no utopias - you might think they are, but they generally turn out really nasty in the end. I wanted to explore the possibilities and make a convincing case for this sort of utopian society or future," he said, taking a swig of ale.

"To say, 'Look there is a possibility of something really good in the future. This is something you might aim for. The possibility might exist. Here's a genuine, humanist, non-stuperstitious, non-religious, functioning utopia where absolutely no-one is exploited; where they don't have money, where they don't have laws to speak of.'"

"The Culture is my idea of a perfect society - and it's obviously not capitalist - but it's so communist it's beyond anything in a way. Something like the Culture could just about evolve from capitalism."

But, wait a minute, says the quilldriver from GM, things in the Culture as outlined in **Consider Phlebas** and the more recent **The Player of Games** aren't all rosy. In **Phlebas** much death and destruction is caused in the name of the Culture, and in **Player**, parts of society are seen to be devious and scheming.

"Ah," says our victim, "It depends how you define utopia. Is it absolutely the perfect society? In which case it's not compatible with humanity anyway."

"But if you define it as the closest to absolute perfection as one can achieve with our flawed internal databases, our genetic circuitry or whatever, then I would argue that it's the closest thing to utopia you're going to get. Well, it's worth a try anyway! Everybody else seems to be moving in the opposite direction.

"The Culture does indulge in a few dirty tricks, but not very many, and it doesn't indulge in mass murder or anything like that and no-one is actually exploited, neither is any machine. The idea is fairly ecologically sound as well, the Culture doesn't believe in terraforming or anything like that."

"The Culture can appear quite bland. The whole problem with the Culture is trying to find the answer to the question 'How do you write a story about utopia' because stories are generally about conflict, about things going wrong and in utopia it's difficult to find things going wrong.

"I'm convinced that it would be possible to write a story set entirely in the Culture. You've still obviously got things like unrequited love and unrealised ambitions and all the rest of it, so the possibilities for stories of conflict is actually there.

"But certainly, if you want action and adventure type stories, and I'm a sucker for them - a few good explosions and gunfire - for those kind of stories you really do have to go to the fringes of the Culture, it's interface if you like, to be posey about it, where it interacts with other civilisations, and that's where you get interesting things happening - and that's the way I think I want to play it for now."

"There's still a lot more to say about the Culture. It's grown up over a long, long time. I think it started in about 1974. By complete happenstance I wanted to write about this mercenary character - a fairly complicated and tortured soul - but I didn't want him to be employed by just dickheads - he had to be employed by good guys. I had to work out why good guys would want to employ a total bastard!"

"So, I came up with this idea where you had this utopia where, despite the fact that they could genetically engineer somebody to be a mercenary they wouldn't do it for purely moral reasons.

"So, because they wouldn't genetically produce someone like that - and because no-one of that nature arises in their society because it had got rid of all the nasty things that could happen to somebody that would turn them into that sort of monster - they have to go out and recruit them elsewhere.

"They find some character who is about to die and zap them, beam them up just as they're tied to the post and smoking their last cigarette, with a blindfold around their eyes, and say 'Right, would you like to come and work for us? We'll give you good money'.

"But, being the Culture, and being very humane about it, they won't put you back down where you were if you say no. They will let you go."

"That's where it started, and I tried to work out how you could have a functioning utopian society like that. Gradually ideas built up. It's been on a continuous back-burner ever since, occasionally it comes to the front burner, and the microwave now and again when it needs to be heated-up!"

The Culture came onto the front burner when Iain last boldly went where no other author has been before and came back with **The Player of Games**, the riveting story of ace games player Gurgeh, and his personal clash with another civilisation on the fringe of the Culture's influence.

By foul means our hero finds himself reluctantly representing the Culture as he plays the ultimate game on a world where the outcome could alter the balance of power between the well ordered world he knows - and the brutish society which created this awesome challenge - the Empire.

The game is **the** thing in the Empire. It's a game of life - and death - win it and honours and riches could be yours. Lose and you'll be condemned to a life of insignificance in a society where ranks and titles are all. Maybe even worse things could happen...

When Gurgeh plays it means the values of the Culture are tested against those of the Empire - which will win? A fine scenario for a more cerebral roleplaying campaign. I think you'll agree. And a fine read too - like all of Iain's books to date.

Meanwhile, back in the pub, your interviewer asks Iain what inspired him to write **The Player of Games**, how did the 'Cool Hand Luke' character of Gurgeh emerge?

"Well, in the first draft he was more boring! He didn't actually instigate much. He was basically a boring games player who just played games, that's all he did. In the second draft he's much more dynamic and forceful, became much more of a bastard in his relationships with women, and so on.

"He's got this competitive edge to him all the time, which in the Culture is very unusual. It makes him more accessible to people in our society because he's more like the average tennis player or chess player; you've got to have tremendous drive and ambition, you've got to not mind sacrificing

friendships and loved ones for the excellence you're trying to achieve, and in the Culture that's just weird! That's like going around collecting clothes pegs or something, it's just as bizarre.

"Here, it's admired, people would say 'Wow, he's got great ambition'. In the Culture they'd say 'Hmmm, bit funny'.

"It did two things. It made Gurgeh a bit more of an interesting character, and it also makes him more accessible, more like the sort of person you'd expect to see in our society".

"I like obsessive characters, I find them good fun to write, because they make sense to people, because people are more weird than they let on a lot of the time. We put on all these veneers. You can't show the raw edges, you have to have veneers on, these are the ways we try to make ourselves more presentable to other people. Deep down we're all slightly crazy!"

What about the idea for the novel itself? Where did that come from?

"To be honest with you, I can't actually remember where the original idea for the book came from. It might have been an idea for a game so complicated that it did actually mirror life, and the logical conclusion of that is that the winner becomes emperor, you have absolute power because you're absolutely the best game player."

"Working through that idea I came to the conclusion that it couldn't be that simple. It just wouldn't work like that."

"It's like democracy seems like a great idea. In America you have democracy. In practice you can't become president unless you've got vast amounts of money and belong to one of two parties - but let's not talk politics!"

"These are great ideas in theory, it's like some day on a planet that never had democracy they think 'Democracy! There's a good idea. One person one vote - one organism one vote!' In practice, the thing works out to be much more complicated."

"You can't be a great player unless you've had great coaching and teaching, and that means you come from a certain school or university and therefore you think in certain ways. And, as it says in the book, the game becomes an examination for the judiciary, army, civil service, navy and so on."

"So, that's the working out. Taking the initial, unsullied, wonderful science fiction idea and dragging it through the dirt of reality until it looks convincing!"

So far Iain has 'finished off' his main characters at the end of each SF novels. Why?

"I wanted to 'trilogy proof' the damn things. I think it must be possible to do good trilogies - but there have been so many bad ones," he explains.

The Player of Games actually saw the light of day long before Iain had his first novel, **The Wasp Factory** published. "I'd written about five books before **The Wasp Factory**," he says.

"**The Player of Games** was written way before **The Wasp Factory**. **The Wasp Factory** was written in 1980. **The Player of Games** in 1979. Well, the original draft was. The finished book is about ten times better, but the story is roughly the same - it's expanded and drastically rewritten."

"It's the first book I've actually gone back to, pre-**Wasp Factory**. There's another two that I think are saveable, they're good stories, just very badly written - loads of purple prose."

Iain isn't a great player of games himself, although he's designed a game or two.

"I was actually asked to make up a game once, a video game, and I thought it was fabulous - but they never made it. They thought it was too complicated. They made some feeble excuse about it

being too crazed or something.

He says he did try playing the computer adventure based on Douglas Adams' **Hitchiker's Guide**, but was afraid he would get addicted to playing and not get on with writing. But he does admit to one game addiction - to that ancient arcade game, *Asteroids*.

"I've just moved into a bigger flat in Edinburgh, the aircraft hanger size, so I've now got room - if I can find one that hasn't got terminal button decay - for one of those old stand-up *Asteroids* machines. This is MY game!"

"Keep your interactive video computer disc, give me *Asteroids* in black and white! I never got gigantic scores, I used to love massacring rocks - the more rocks you had on the screen at any one time the better!"

"I've never in my life actually played a roleplaying game, I must admit, I've got a feeling they might be rather addictive. I go to a lot of SF conventions these days and I've always thought about going along to play some games there."

"As a rule, the thing that clobbers that on the head is what happens to everything else I always intend to do at SF conventions - I stay in the bar. I don't go along to any of the panels or listen to the guest speakers, I usually just about make it along to mine, let alone to anybody else's."

At these conventions he usually gets asked the inevitable questions, "How did you get started in writing?" and "Where do you get your ideas from?". Here at GM we get asked for similar advice and so we asked them too.

Iain started writing at an early age - from primary school onwards in fact - and, when he decided that he didn't want to be a scientist, looked to writing as a career, doing jobs just to pay the rent and devoting his spare time to writing.

"I toyed with the idea of journalism, but thought it wouldn't be a good idea to sit at a typewriter all day and then come home and sit at a typewriter in the evening as well. So I ended up going to university."

"Four out of the previous five books I tried got rejections, quite rightly so looking back. **The Wasp Factory** went to six publishers before MacMillan accepted it, so it did take quite a while."

"I was talking to Malcolm Edwards, an editor at Gollancz - who were the second or third publishers I sent **Wasp Factory** to - who is a mate of mine through the SF convention scene, and he said 'By the way, Banksy, I found the reader's report on **Wasp Factory** the other day'.

"I said 'Oh yeah, what did it say?' hiding my surprise that they kept these things that long for books they'd rejected. He said 'Quite well written - but far too weird ever to get published'!"

"It was **The Wasp Factory** that did it, it was the one that made the difference. It was pure luck really, it was the right book at the right time. I was just amazed."

"When I heard that I was going to get a book published I thought, right, and started to think that if the thing went OK and I wrote a book a year I might be able to give up work in four or five years time and then MacMillan started saying 'We've got you on television' and the long distance reviews started to come in, there was a cracking one in *Cosmopolitan* in the actual month of publication."

"Then Futura came through with what seemed to me at the time like a hell of a lot of money for the paperback advance, and I thought yeah, you beauty!, I'm going to give up work NOW!"

"I was surprised at the success of the book - obviously I thought it was a good book, but then I know my tastes are a bit weird - I didn't think it would cause the stir that it did. I was surprised at

some of the really good reviews, how good they were. I'm not very good at coping with praise, I find it slightly embarrassing, I try to change the subject.

"If someone really blasts me I can handle that, no problem, I just argue back. But the severe, apoplectic almost, reviews that it (**The Wasp Factory**) got, to this day still surprise me.

"It's such a cliche that the English especially - we're talking London reviewers here, so I say English, although Irish as well because of an absolutely appalling review in the *Irish Times* which Futura used at the front of the paperback version - that the British like animals better than people and because nasty things were happening to nice furry animals in **The Wasp Factory** this is why they started foaming at the mouth. It must be a true cliche, I guess.

"I think also the book was taken as a horror story and yet it was reviewed by people who would never go near a horror story, and so they were using language that was utterly inappropriate, calling it the literary equivalent of a video nasty.

"I'm glad to say that horror - being taken as a sub-set of SF in that a lot of horror fans go to SF conventions, I guess that I've had about half a dozen committed horror fans come up to me at conventions and saying: 'I quite liked **The Wasp Factory**, but I read it all the way through and kept waiting for the really nasty bits!'

"I'm just writing to please me, we're talking total narcissism here, I'm writing the sort of books that I'd like to read, because I like writing and I like reading back once I've written them and forgotten them a bit.

"Maybe I'm constructing my own cliche here, but there are certain writers that will tell you, 'Oh, it's a terrible hard lonely job, never put your son on the word-processor Mrs. Robinson', to me that's crap, I really enjoy writing. I also do it fast. It is a solitary profession - but only for a short time. Even when I'm writing full time I still go out and enjoy myself. Sometimes you do have to do a 16 hour day, but that's very unusual.

"Preferably you're doing that because you don't want to stop, you don't want to eat or sleep, you want to keep on writing it. Sometime it's because you want to know what's going to happen next - sometimes it's because you *know* what's going to happen next and you want to get there!

"Getting started is a problem. I found it hard to start my new book, **Canal Dreams**, and I've a feeling it might get harder! When you're just writing and hoping that someone might publish it that's one thing, when you know that your career and mortgage depend on it, that's another! You've got to come up with something.

"The SF novel that will come out, not next year, but 1992 - yes this man thinks in five year plans, its Iain 'Breshnev' Banks actually! - has got a female main character. It was written in 1975 and is one of the last of the ones I'm going to go back to. One of my pals whose read it thinks it's the best of the stories - the actual writing is crap, but the story is a cracker!

"I like science fiction. most of the lessons I learned about writing were learned writing science fiction, and I can't see myself not reading or writing it. So the plan, for the next few years anyway, is to write an SF one year and on the even years write a non-SF book."

That's good news for SF fans - especially those like me that like to pick out the fabulously funny names he gives to his spaceships.

"I've got a list of about 2000 names of ships on the computer. I have brainstorm sessions with myself to make up ship names. There are some cracking names - I go through them and try to use as many as possible."

Humour is important to Iain, especially when writing about the Culture, which at first could seem bland and colourless.

"The idea was that machines should have a sense of humour - all the Contact ships have got to like travelling abroad and meeting people! Also they are all eccentric, doing silly pranks and all that sort of stuff. And they all have silly names!"

The warships in the Empire are called things like *Invincible* and so on, warships in the Culture are called things like *Murderer, Genocidal Maniac the Second!* They are individuals and not just computers - they are much more than that.

"I like to make them eccentric by using humour in that way - especially the drones, giving them characters as well, making them tetchy or amusing or whatever. It's another way of saying utopia can be fun kids, sign up here!"

What does he do when he's not writing? "I piss about! It's pathetic, I'd like to say I go to shows and visit art galleries - but I just go and annoy my friends. I do a lot of walking - I enjoy walking around cities and hill walking. Hey, I just hang out...!"

"I still like making dams, very good therapy. I tried to interest MacMillan in a book called *The Joy of Dam Building* - we're talking coffee table here - but they didn't want to do it. I couldn't understand it.

Who influenced Iain most? "I think in the end every single book you read influences you. The bad ones you try to avoid their mistakes, the good ones you try to learn from.

"In science fiction? Not really the greats in the conventional sense, but people I like, I'd single out Mike Harrison, who's partly science fiction partly sometimes a very hard, sometimes bleak fantasy, better than your average *sword and sorcery* fantasy; John Sladek, the funniest science fiction writer ever, and Barry Bailey, who's vastly underrated.

"Moorcock as well, the modern day Dickens, he'll probably only be acknowledged properly when he's dead, unfortunately.

"As far as people who have influenced me, the two books I always mention are *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson. *Fear and Loathing* I still think is one - perhaps the - funniest books ever written. It's stunningly good. It breaks me up every time.

"It's like watching an old episode of *Python* or something. You know all the lines, you know what's coming - you know the bit when the attorney is in the bath with the green jelly and the sharp knife and the melon and *White Rabbit* is playing on the ghetto blaster - I'm on the floor by this time!

"The writers I respect most are the ones I'm least influenced by. I've got very boring tastes. The people I regard as the best dead writers are Jane Austen and Tolstoy, the best living ones Graham Greene and Saul Bellow.

Would he be persuaded to write a *sword and sorcery* novel? "I've thought about writing some fantasy. My editor was trying to convince me that I should write a series of short stories with the Scottish barbarian (found in **The Bridge**) as the central character, to eventually make a continuous narrative and make the whole thing into a novel.

"At least one of the ideas would've been great, putting the barbarian in various mythological situations, but Terry Pratchett got there first!

"Terry had this great idea, I don't know if he's used it yet, about the fifth horseman of the Apocalypse, the one who left before the other four got famous! Pratchett is a real danger because he's got such great ideas. Also he makes me feel slow - you think I'm prolific!

"That's the sort of thing that would be nice to do, with the barbarian, but I've just never got around to it, maybe one day, maybe not, I don't know. I did have an idea for a very long fantasy - no, it

wasn't really a fantasy, a weird society where they haven't got much technology, but they do have gigantic castles, but no guns, and a very weird landscape.

"There would be princes, kings, princesses and all that sort of thing - but no magic. I don't like magic - I don't do magic. Just say no! Say no to magic, say no to superstition!

"Yes, I started out just crossing myself when I scored a goal, I thought I can control it, the next thing I knew I was hardlining on immaculate conception and the Holy Trinity...

So far each of Iain's novels have been very different - with maybe, the exception of the SF books. Is this deliberate?

"Yes. For one thing I didn't want to get typecast as a writer of upmarket horro stories. Another thing it does is stop me getting bored. I've got a very low boredom threshold. I don't want people to be able to predict what I'm doing next. Although now it is possible, because every other year there will be a science fiction novel."

Ambitions for the future? "In writing? Well I'd really just like to keep enjoying what I'm doing and getting paid for it.

"In life, I think there's two left really. So far, in two generations of the Banks family one of us has swum the Forth, it's only about a mile, but it's cold and there are bad currents so you've got to judge it right - no one in our generation has done it yet so I want to do that.

His other ambition involves the prime minister and is unprintable in a family magazine.

His new novel, just published in hardback by MacMillan is **Canal Dreams**, the story of a Japanese cellist who finds herself in the middle of a South American revolution.

"The last third is very, very violent indeed. I think it would make a fabulous film, but I don't think Hollywood would actually finance it because it doesn't have the right bad guys!"
