

Interview

Cherish Iain Banks' latest novel, Look To Windward, while you can. Not just because it's one of his finest SF follies yet, but because it's the last fix of awesomely contorted Banksian plottery you'll see for a while. After 15 years of writing a book a year, Scotland's finest weaver of yarns is taking a rest. "I need some time off dammit," he says, as his eyes rise melodramatically to the ornate roof of the bar of the London Hilton. "I'm a very lenient boss," he confides. "I'm very good at giving my self time off. Also it works out nice because Look to Windward is the end of a four book deal. and I thought yeah, the Millennium and all that stuff. The year 2000..." A return to the culture, near utopian transplanetary society in which he's set many of his SF books, Look to Windward is a typically Banksian page turner, full of cool concepts, outlandish, colourful characters and those copyrighted Banks twists. However, Banks claims it was one of his most difficult books to write, and reckons that maybe that's a sign that it's time to take a rest. so before he heads off into the Highlands on a motorbike, SFX grabbed the chance to see how life has been for Iain Banks in the five years since we first interviewed him way back in issue one.

So, what have you been up to since you helped fill the pages in our first issue?

Oh blimey. Well, yeah, just writing a book every year. Although I'm taking a year off starting in October. No writing. So next year will be the first year in about 15 that there won't be a new book. It'll be the first time in one and a half decades that I won't be writing, so that should be interesting.

But we hear that you only write for two months of the year anyway...

Two to three, yeah. Well, it depends. I usually try to do about 15,000 words a week. 3,000 words a day in a five-day week. Last year I started to slow down a bit. I wrote what would have been a two-month book over three months and wrote 10,000 words a week. The trick is to know what you're going to do, to have written the book in your head already, so that when you sit down to put it on paper, you just write what's already there. You don't have to start thinking, 'Oh, what happens now?' You already know what happens now because you already have your little story in your head. And writing 3,000 words a day is not that difficult once you get going. I type really quickly but inaccurately. I've tried to teach myself touch typing, but frankly I'm still a lot faster just using two fingers.

Ray Bradbury is famous for saying "If you put off writing for a day, you can tell. If you put off writing for two days, your editor can tell. If you put off writing for three days, your public can tell." Why don't you feel the urge to write all the time?

Because I don't want to. It's down to style basically. What suits you as a writer, as a person. There are lots of writers who couldn't write the way I do to save their lives. They need to do a few hundred words a day. It just doesn't work for me. Once I've started the book I want to get on with it. I don't want to sit around and just do half an hour's work a day. I want to press on to the end. That's just the way I work. It doesn't make me a bad person.

What do you do with the rest of the year, then?

Oh, just farting about generally. I drive my motorbike quite often. I take it down the lanes of Fife. I haven't done very much this year, mind you. I do a lot of travel. Take this month - when it started off I was in Bergen, at this science fiction convention there. And then I was in Guadalupe for a week in the Caribbean. Then I came back for the weekend of my dad's birthday. Then I was in

France for a car ' magazine driving a Formula One car. Then I was in Glasgow for the Easter Con. So I keep myself busy. And I do a lot of mail. I reply to letters that I receive. And I dally in music a wee bit. I have some great music processing software and lots of hardware. I've been doing that a fair bit. And I read quite a lot... You'd be amazed actually... I suppose I might go shopping a lot more than I might do otherwise, which I like doing as well. I've definitely become a dedicated shopper over the years.

Your wife must like you.

The hard bit's trying to get my wife to spend enough money. Which is a bizarre thing to find yourself saying, but I don't feel she really holds up her end of the financial commitments. She's very reluctant to spend money. Which is a situation I suppose many men would give their right arm for.

It says on the back of *Look To Windward* that the book is your "most powerful novel to date and a masterpiece of science fiction." Is that what you set out to write?

Of course I didn't. You always try the best you can, you know. 'Just one novel at a time...' you know. I think in terms of this one, it was always going to be a fairly... I mean, there was never going to be a vast amount of action in it. Or very large thingsy things, and even larger things, you know. I wanted it to be very much a page turner, one where you don't know what's going on. It came about largely in almost a calculated way. Last summer I didn't have any ideas. 'What the hell am I going to write about?' Actually I didn't even know if it would be a Culture novel or not. I knew it would be science fiction, that's all I knew. So I thought, suppose I did do a Culture novel; where do we usually start with the Culture novels? Well, it's usually someone within the Culture goes away - they're usually a dissident, or they fall out with the Culture, or they can't stand the Culture or whatever. They go away to an alien civilisation and have adventures. Why not turn that around? Why not have someone coming into the Culture? And that was it. As soon as I thought that, I thought, 'Alright, why?' And that's when I came up with the idea of the central character literally not knowing his own mind. Things are only being revealed to him gradually. That's when I thought, Bingo! Because it gives you such a great excuse to reveal things slowly to the reader. It doesn't feel gratuitous. And I like things to be melodramatic...

This aspect of "outsider looking in" also makes it a good starting point for people who haven't read a Banks SF novel before.

You reckon? Yeah. Someone else who said they'd never read my SF said they started reading it and got on fine. I was surprised that people would say that because I've got the impression of the Culture as this gigantically complicated thing that's in my head and you get little peeks into it now and again through the novels. And it would be easier to start at the beginning with the first of the novels. So I'm always amazed when people actually think that some of the other books are better introductions.

Did you actually feel like you were creating an "SF masterpiece" while writing this one?

Yes and no. It was actually quite hard to write this one for some bizarre reason. I don't really know why. I think it was because I need that holiday. It was actually quite a struggle. I was very, very pleased with it as it went on. But it was actually quite difficult to write. Surprisingly I almost had to force myself to do it at times, which is not the way it's supposed to be. It could be age, or it could be that I've finally written myself out to some extent. That's why I really do need this year off. Once I looked back at it, I was very pleased with it. But that was very much after the fact. It was actually quite a struggle. Worrying really.

You've often said that you don't write in a different style when you're writing your SF to when you're writing your mainstream novels.

There's very little difference, no. They're just stories or plots or ideas. They're all about ideas. Science fiction or not.

But literary critics traditionally look for "themes".

Oh yeah, that's the tradition; that's what you're supposed to look for. You have a theme that's worked into the novel, disguised somehow, which is then teased out by the critic or the astute reader. I just think it's a load of nonsense frankly. I don't think it's a natural way to write books at all. I just want to tell stories and whatever might come out of that, fine.

There are, though, strong hints in your books of your politics, or world view.

But that's just the window dressing. That's not what they're about at all. In a way the Culture series is more sort of polemical, more about trying to tell you something than any of the mainstream books, because it's a very - how should I put it? - it slips it in underneath your guard as it were. So it's always a subliminal thing. Basically you're talking a fairly optimistic, liberal - even left wing - view of technology, and of social progress for that matter. I'm just trying to say the future might not be so bad after all. It might be good fun. Machines could be our friends. Yeah!

Strange you should say that considering you've been famously reluctant to get netted up.

This summer we're going to get a new computer! And the old computer, the one I write on now, will go next door to my mum and dad's house. And that's the one that we'll attach to the net, so that you have to actually physically get up and go outside, across the yard and pick up the email. I won't be tempted to look at my email when I'm writing. Frankly, getting a pool table in is more important than getting on the net.

What's happened to the Player Of Games movie?

The last we heard was not very encouraging. That was because the guy who was behind it, Alexei Lloyd, left the film company. It was his baby, so I suspect that might be the last we hear of it.

And what about Complicity?

Well, it was made. It was shown in Scotland, and it might have been shown in the north of England; they were talking about it but I don't know if it happened or not. My mate Roger who works in the film industry reckons that what happened was that the distributors didn't think that it was good enough to fill movie houses throughout the rest of Britain, so they released it in Scotland so that they could tell Sky Movies that it did have a major European release - ha ha! But they only had to print 18 copies instead of 200 or whatever, so they cut down on the amount of money they risked. I know that Jonny Lee Miller was depressed by the state of affairs. He was deeply pissed off.

Was it any good?

It was good. It was actually quite understated in a way, which takes some doing given the raw material. But yeah, it was actually worryingly good at times. I think people were expecting a cross between Trainspotting and Se7en, but it wasn't that. I think it confounded expectations.

What questions do you always seem to get asked in interviews that you do?

Oh definitely, where do you get your ideas from? What does the M stand for? Do you feel a Scottish writer?

What exactly does that mean?

I'm not sure myself! That's why I've never given a really good answer. People think that because you're not English they should ask that. 'Do you see yourself as a Scottish writer rather than a writer?' Well, I'm Scottish and I'm a writer so I suppose I'm a Scottish writer. But not, as far as I'm concerned, with a capital S and a capital W. I think I'm very lucky to have been born in Scotland. I also get asked something along the lines of 'To what extent do you write differently when you write with an M in your name?' Or an extreme variation which so many people ask so often, 'Do you ever start writing the wrong thing? Do you ever start out writing a mainstream novel and then discover you've just put in a whole paragraph where someone has come down in a space craft?' Are they mad? Of course not, you idiot. 'Suppose you're in the middle of a mainstream novel and you get a SF idea, what do you do?' There are these things called notebooks! I put the idea in there and then go back to the page I'm working on. I think what it comes down to basically is that some people are annoyed that anybody is writing in two different genres. As though you should only be writing in one. They're looking for an excuse to point out to you the futility of doing it.

But it's too simplistic to say that you write in just two different genres. The mainstream novels cover a whole range of genres.

Political thriller, comedy, rock novel... But, there is such a big difference. The SF is quite science fictional. It's not 'Ballardian'; it's not near future. It's going for the big budget, widescreen spectacular feel. Big spaceships and even bigger artifacts and all that sort of stuff. It highlights the difference. Compared to that, compared to the extremity of the SF, the mainstream novels all do look similar if you close one eye and squint from far away.

What did you make of the South Bank Show on you? Did it reveal anything to you about yourself that you hadn't realised?

Actually it did, believe it or not. I hadn't really thought about it so much, but there was a link with cold wars, wars and stuff and that definitely comes out in this novel. I come from a quite a sort of martial background. Lots of aunts and uncles were in the Navy and the Wrens. But also the village I grew up in was littered with old guns and placements. Because it was right beside the Forth Bridge that was where they put naval guns in World War I and anti-aircraft guns in World War II. And watching the interview I realised just how much the debris of old war littered my childhood. So, actually it was quite good that way. The only thing he got a bee in his bonnet about was religion. I thought he got a bit het up about that, which unbalanced things a wee bit. Other than that it was okay. I thought it was quite well put together. Nicely shot. Should have shown the cars a bit more. Shots of me driving and stuff. I've been asked on to Question Time in Scotland twice now but I've turned it down both times. I'm not really interested in appearing on TV and spouting on; it's like trying to achieve fame for fame's sake. I am a complete media whore when it comes to promoting books because that's my job. Publicising books is one thing but publicising me is something I'm not very happy with at all.

Talking of publicity, there seems to be some kind of blood brother pact between you and Ken McLeod to publicise each others' books...

Oh yes, We're just old friends. We've known each other for getting on for 30 years now. We both used to swap ideas, talk about plots of books we were developing. We've been doing that for so

long now and Ken was a big influence on the Culture. I don't think we write similarly but we both like what the other writes. So it does lead to some mutual back slapping. I try not to do it too much. I don't think I could actually write a review of one of Ken's books. You couldn't win in a way. If you hated it... I can't imagine hating one of Ken's books but, it'd be impossible to enthuse about it without sounding almost as if I were starting a localised version of the sort of thing that I hate in London when everybody reviews everyone else's books and they all go to the same parties and all that kind of nonsense. It's a bit incestuous and a bit unhealthy, frankly.

Do you think you have to put twists in your novels now because people expect them?

I don't feel that I've got to do it. I could write a book and if it didn't need a twist it wouldn't have one. And the twist would be that there is no twist - ahem. I do it because I like doing it.

The Business didn't seem to have a twist as such.

Um, in a sense there is one, but it's one that a lot of people are a bit iffy about, frankly. I was very confident it was the right thing to do. The heroine is determined to marry someone she doesn't love. Because it will benefit a lot more people if she does marry this man, it's actually a good thing to do. Literally it's not romantic, it's anti-romantic. It's quite hard-headed and a little bit sacrificial as well, That in a way is the twist. It is slightly stretching the definition of twist. I accept that.

In a strange way The Business at times does feel like one of your SF books.

Yeah, a few people have said that. It wasn't deliberate, but yeah, after it was pointed out to me, it struck me as plausible. I think that some people have been fooled by the word 'robot' in the first chapter. One of the most interesting things - again I had no idea at all - was that someone said that The Business could actually be the start of the Culture, in a way. The Culture could grow from something like the Business. It's not the way I imagined it at all but I can see what they mean. I was very happy with the book. I think I was the person most happy with it. I think everybody else was a bit disappointed.

Some authors say that their characters take on a life of their own, and force them to change their plots. Do yours?

They do as they're bloody well told! None of this character taking over nonsense. Suppose they go off in a boring direction. I've actually read novels like that.

What is your knowledge of science like?

Oh, not very good, but not as bad as you'd think reading the novels. The only book that actually obeys all the laws of science is probably Against A Dark Background. I play pretty fast and loose with the laws of science. It requires research, and I'd rather rely on my imagination.

Because you do write both SF and mainstream novels, it's easy for you to be marketed as the guy who alternates between the two. But if you only wrote SF, what would your unique selling point be?

I have no idea. The Culture I guess. The Culture guy is what people would have to say. Largely books about hippies with mega nukes.

The prehistory of Iain Banks.

In the beginning was one man and a typewriter... The Wasp Factory may have been the first book Iain Banks had published, but he had been busy at his word processor long before he thought up his gender bending black fairy tale. "Five novels and then that [The Wasp Factory] was the sixth," he reveals. "Three of those were SF. The first was a spy story full of sex and violence, which I wrote when I was 16 and had no experience of either. Then I wrote an SF book which was enormous, about 400,000 words. It was very much influenced by Catch 22 and Stand On Zanzibar by John Brunner. Both books were unsaveable. The actual job of going back and making them into something approaching literature was impossible. And the next few were all science fiction and have now been published, much altered. Use Of Weapons came first, then Against A Dark Background and then Player Of Games. And the further back you go the more that had to be changed. I didn't think Use Of Weapons could be published. There was nothing that I could do to it that could turn it into a good book until Ken McLeod told me how to do it. Originally it was vastly, ludicrously complicated. It had to have x and y axes to plan it out. And the climax of the novel - because of the structure - had to come in the middle, which is completely stupid. The entire second half of the book had to be an anticlimax, which is idiotic. It was Ken who said 'well why not tell it in two stories, one going forward in time, and one going backwards? That way you'll get to the climax of each at the same time: at the end where it should be.' Absolutely the best piece of advice I've ever had from anyone ever. I still think it's the best of my SF.

The grand opening.

Banks is the master of the grand opening. Who can forget "the day my grandmother exploded..."? but is there an opening he'd love to do but hasn't had the opportunity to put it into a book yet? "There is one. I probably won't use it so it's okay to mention it. Yet another female culture agent is on a very arid rocky terrain looking over this enormous plain with this big, long, straight road. A sort of Roman-era army is marching along; tens and tens of thousands of men marching to battle. And she just sits watching then and then says, 'Go on, do it' to her drone. And out of the top of the drone this little missile comes and zaps its way to the back of the army, slicing its way through rocks and trees as it goes. So it's behind them, and sweeps up to the army. It's zapping along at neck level until at the very last second it goes up and cuts off the tops of the officers' plumes and spears and everything. And then it goes straight back to its mistress."
