

Interview

Banks has become a fairly proficient writer, having one book a year published alternately by Abacus and Orbit. Orbit is a subsidiary of Little Brown that caters for Science Fiction. For this Banks adds the initial 'M' to his name.

Freebase recently spoke to Iain about books, music and political utopias...

Have any of the sci-fi novels you've written begun life as fiction books or vice versa?

No, that's never really happened. I've always started with the idea that they're going to be a science fiction novels or a mainstream novel first and then you cast around for ideas that seem relevant so it's always perfectly clear right from the start which is going to be which.

Has doing one book each year alternating between sci-fi and mainstream ever been a problem?

It's just a case of identifying which ideas go in which direction. Some would certainly work as both science fiction or mainstream but you use them accordingly to what sort of book you're writing that particular year. Certainly if in the course of thinking about the next mainstream book I came up with a really good science fiction idea I just write it down and save it for next year.

I've read that Complicity is to be made into a film...Would there be any involvement or control from your side?

You don't get too much control. I think I've actually got more control than I want in a way. I've got a ferociously wonderful agent, she's just amazing. A very nice person but not if you're negotiating against her. She's got me all these approvals that I never really asked for but she does it anyway because she's so good and she can so I end up with approval of the script or approval of the director or the cast or the catering budget for all I know. It's useful to say "well, that sounds like a good director or a good adapter or scriptwriter or whatever", but you have to just let them get on with it really. But in the case of Complicity it doesn't really come into it because the team who've been doing the writing and directing are the same people who did Crow Road for television and made such a great job of it. Brian Elsley did the adapting of the book. I've read three drafts so far and they're all very good and getting better and I think he's working on yet another one - probably finished it by now in fact - and Gavin Miller who directed Crow Road for tv and he did such a great job that we'll have no problem there whatsoever.

I know The Wasp Factory was made into a play but was there ever any suggestion of making that into a film?

Oh yeah, right from the start, right from '84 onwards. There have been options since '85 but at the moment it's subject to a legal dispute, it's going through the Irish courts so even if that was suddenly resolved in the next month or two - which I doubt - it probably won't get made until the next millenium.

It seemed such an obvious plot for a good film...

It still does. Every now and again I get someone writing to me saying "I'd like to make this into a film" and I just say, "well, you're about 15 years too late, I'm afraid".

I loved the bit in The Wasp Factory where he went to see a punk band at the local pub then had to rush back for the John Peel show. I think it appealed because it was the first book I'd read in which there was something I could identify, something I'd actually done myself. Is there much of you in the books you write, like references to things you've done?

There's usually a bit. Certainly listening to Peel's shows, I've been a John Peel fan for longer than I care to remember, and going to concerts. I've never been a great one for live music really, I like my home comforts too much. They never get it quite perfect at a concert! In the case of Frank it was things that I'd done on a small scale that I exaggerated for the book like dam building and building kites and bombs and so on that I dabbled in as a teenager but not with the same obsessive way that Frank does.

I understand that there's an EMI songbook coming out in November with Radiohead and The Sex Pistols. Have you grown up with a strong interest in music or have you lost interest in new bands as you've got older?

Oh God no. I was as interested in Britpop as everybody else. Favourite CDs of mine recently have been The Verve and Radiohead. Like everybody else I think Oasis have gone off the boil but they would do, wouldn't they, because they became too famous... I've never been a great fan of dance music per se and I can't be bothered with drum 'n' bass and so on. I'm quite happy to listen to it but I wouldn't actually bother to go out and buy it. I'm one of these weird people who doesn't actually get very much out of dancing. I always think people look slightly daft on the dancefloor, that's my problem. I still listen to a lot of contemporary music, I guess, and I listen to the old stuff too. Most of the stuff on that album will be pretty old stuff. I wanted to use a John Lennon track but Yoko wouldn't let me apparently and The Stones were asking an exorbitant amount of money for the inclusion of one of their tracks. However I did manage to sneak the Devo version of Satisfaction on. It was always on there but it was even more important it was still on there after The Stones refused permission for theirs.

You've obviously got a strong interest in music. Is there a musician struggling to get out somewhere there?

Oh definitely. And probably a very bad one but definitely yeah. I dabbled in this very briefly about a year ago when I had some influence over some of the songs on the radio adaptation of Espedair Street but they weren't really mine. I had to write the next book. It all happened at least a month later than it was supposed to and I just didn't have the time to devote to it. When Espedair Street gets made into a film - a pal of mine is working on the script at the moment - then I'm supposed to be getting first shot at providing the music for it. It'll probably all end in tears but I'm determined to have a shot at it.

As well as the John Peel thing in The Wasp Factory, in Espedair Street there's the connection with Rochester in Kent, which is where we're based. Didn't you live in Kent for a while?

Yeah, I lived in Faversham for four years - 117 St. John's Road. My wife's family settled in Canterbury and her dad ran a delicatessen in Whitstable. When we met in London and wanted to move out and commute for a while, Faversham seemed an obvious place.

Did you write any of your books in Kent?

Now, which ones were...The Bridge was and I think...quite a few were.

Did living in different places put a different perspective on your writing?

I don't really know. I think it's one of those things you're always too close to the wood to see the trees really. Not consciously, but who knows. I think it's generally good for a writer to have as many different experiences and live in as many different places as possible, so I'm sure it's all for the good in the end but it's very hard to pin down what differences it really makes to you.

I wanted to ask about the culture...a couple of years ago I was in contact with a friend of yours Ken MacLeod through a group called the Libertarian Alliance and we discussed libertarian socialism and anarchism. I picked up on that libertarian socialism in your work and I wondered how strong they were your political views...

Well, I've always been a sort-of Leftie fellow traveller and I always tracked Ken so I'm slightly to the right of Ken, but that was still pretty far Left. I always had an interest in Libertarianism and I just got fed up with the far Left so Libertarianism seemed the way to go and I find myself somewhere to the left of Ken in some ways. I used to try to annoy American science fiction writers by calling the culture a Communist utopia. But I think its just as much a Libertarian utopia in a way, a kind-of idealised Communism, certainly in terms of the way its set up in terms of personal freedom it's profoundly Libertarian. It's completely different from what I'd regard as mainstream Libertarianism as it regards property, the idea of personal and private property, as just an incumbence on one's personal liberty. The more things you own, the more responsibilities you have and the ideal is to have no responsibilities by owning nothing so the only value anything has is sentimental value. So that obviously is profoundly different to the idea of "let's privatisise everything" that thing about a bunch of academics sitting around working out how to charge for walking on the pavement. So its lots of different things and one of the ideas is that the culture's like a climax forest, it's what you end up with no matter where you start from. It doesn't matter if you head out to the stars with Stalinism or Fascism or rampant Capitalism, whether you like it or not you're dragged screaming towards the culture and that's basically it. Tough luck, it's just what you get. You evolve into it no matter how you try to wriggle out of it. It's probably complete nonsense of course but this is my theory.

Regardless of your political views, is it what you believe would happen?

It's also to me deep rooted in desire as well, it's my secular heaven, it is my utopia and I spend a lot of time in the books bending over backwards trying to investigate seamier sides, darker aspects whatever and that gives a lop-sided view of it but basically it's just total fun, just the ideal place to be born into and live in and if you don't like it you can go, there's nobody stopping you...

Do you think it's true that science fiction that is political tends to be Right Wing?

All too often, yes. Or they just spend their time setting up some hopelessly degenerate workers republic soviet state-type thing where everybody dresses in grey and calls each other comrade and it's totally horrible and it's basically 1984 all over again. Yeah, it does seem to certainly. There's no reason why that should be, there's nothing intrinsic in science fiction, it's intrinsic in the sort of people who've been writing it, it's because of that and I think if different people start to write science fiction then you get a different result and certainly I was trying to reclaim the moral high ground of space opera for the Left, that was my burning mission. It's perfectly possible to write Left Wing space opera or socialist science fiction, whatever. Why not. Let a thousand flowers bloom.
