

Interview

One of the few common traits your books share is that someone usually seems to die an untimely death.

"Yeah. I suppose death's such an easy thing to do, you know? You are God, after all. You do have complete control over all your characters, so you can do things in fiction that are never as timely in real life. Just killing somebody off is by far the easiest one to do, and it's good and dramatic. It engages the attention. "I don't think I'm particularly obsessed with death or anything, I think it's more of a stylistic device. I'm lazy, and I'll happily go for a cheap effect if it gets the job done."

You mentioned in another interview that you wrote >Espedair Street ... did you release that one before The Bridge?

"No. It was **Wasp Factory**, **Walking On Glass**, **The Bridge**, and then came **Consider Phlebas**, which was the first of the SF ones. And **Espedair Street** was the same year. I think 'Phlebas' came out in the spring, of '87, I think it was, and **Espedair Street** in the autumn. "But in a way, **Espedair Street** was a reaction to **The Bridge**, because **The Bridge** is incredibly complicated - partly just out of a need for some sort of relief from all that complexity. If I'd continued on the same some sort of curve, if you plotted the complexity of **The Wasp Factory** to **Walking On Glass** to **The Bridge**, if I'd carried on along that line, I'd either have disappeared up my own asshole or lapsed into self-parody. I thought for the next non-SF book after **The Bridge**, I wanted to go back to something a bit more linear, but certainly a lot more simple. "Also, like using the fantastic, fantasy-type settings or whatever, but I can't take Fantasy seriously. I can't take the supernatural seriously either. So I have a lot of self-imposed problems in that regard, and I've got to work around it. In **The Bridge** it's done by having the guy in the coma, just imagining everything, but in **Espedair Street** it's imagining a way in which working-class kids can get to have VAST amounts of money at a disgustingly early age, and far too much sex and drugs as well... obviously, they become rock stars. You actually get to live out your fantasies, so that gives you a lot of leeway there as well. It was a fun book to write, I enjoyed it."

Does Wykes' Folly exist?

"No, no. It's kind of an amalgam of various things, slightly weird properties on that side of Glasgow. In that west end part of Glasgow, there's a lot of strange-looking temples and churches and things of a religious nature. A lot of them have become restaurants, and even nightclubs... they aren't used for their original purpose now, so there's that sort of feel about them. The exact place is fairly well-defined, because it's on a corner between three different streets. I think when I wrote it, it was an old tenement, a block of flats, and I think they'd already boarded it up because it was about to be knocked down. I think it's now an office building or something, in the exact position. But it's kind of like the things around there."

Which of the novels would you say was the most difficult pregnancy?

"Oh God..."

I mean, do you find writing easy?

"Oh yeah. **The Bridge** is the most complicated, but it wasn't the most difficult. It was actually quite easy, just sheer luck that it all fell into place. I think in terms of actual writing, it's probably **Canal Dreams**, it's the one I'm least happy with. I don't think it works as well as it should, I don't think I did right by it. I did my best, but I think it was being a bit ambitious taking on so many degrees of difficulty, as it were. At the time I wasn't middle-aged, and I certainly wasn't a middle-aged Japanese lady cello player. I think it was the one that was the hardest to write."

What tended to happen with that one was, I living not far from here in a wee flat just out of Edinburgh. In the morning I'd switch the computer on, and I'd sit there, and suddenly decide that the floor needed Hoovering again, or that I needed to do the washing up from last week or something. The flat was incredibly clean! After this burst of activity I'd go for a walk to have some ideas, but not think of anything. I'd be just looking at women or window-shopping or whatever, you know?

So that would go on all day, and I'd watch all the news programs as well, because news" - he adopts a mock-serious voice - "is not like a soap opera or something. It's RESPECTABLE watching the news. "I'd watch all the news programs, and by that time it'd be getting late at night, and I realised I wasn't going to write anything, so I'd have a whisky. After a couple of whiskies I'd think, 'Well, I'll just look back at what I did yesterday, or what I did three weeks ago' - and I'd look back and start writing. So the next thing, it's eight o'clock in the morning.

So it went on like that - not necessarily eight in the morning every time, but quite often into the small hours - writing while I was basically drunk. It's the only book I've ever successfully written under the influence of any drug or whatever. I've tried writing smashed, stoned, whatever; it tends not to work. You think you're producing a work of utter genius, guaranteed to win the Nobel Prize for literature - and probably chemistry as well - the following year.

And this weird thing happens: you go to bed, and you wake up the next day - or afternoon - and discover that somebody has broken in during the night, and without leaving any signs has managed to get into your computer, started up the program and subtly but horribly altered this work of genius that you wrote the previous night. It still vaguely sounds or reads like you remember it reading before, but it's total crap. I worked out that there was no way around this; these strange people were always going to break into the flat if I'd been smoking or ingesting anything. So I gave that up.

"But yeah, **Canal Dreams** was written under the influence of whisky. The other one that was a bit difficult for a different reason was **The Crow Road**, in fact. I was trying to get the book finished by Christmas or New Year, and this time I didn't, because it turned out to be a bit longer. I didn't mean it to be quite as long as it is, so I had my usual week off around Christmas/New Year, and as usual wound up with serious brain damage - I went up the Highlands and had far too good a time, drank far too much. I came back with an eye infection, which kept me off - I couldn't really focus on anything closer than ten feet away - and then the Gulf War started, and I was glued to the wrong screen..."

Which of your characters do you most closely resemble - or would you admit to most closely resembling?

"Um... I don't know. Not really any of them, and all of them. I guess it's true that there's a bit of the writer in every character and particularly the central characters. The guy in **The Bridge** is meant to be like a sort of alternate world version of me, but he's one that's five or six years older - at a time when that matters quite a lot, having been born in 1949 rather than 1954. You know, going to university when the hippie stuff was actually really happening, rather than when it was already old.

Even he, he takes the opposite course to what I took, he gets a proper job, he gets a career, and only writes in his spare time. "Even then, there's always a fair bit of wish fulfillment there. They're always smarter and wittier than you. You know, someone makes some scolding remark, and you only think of the witty reply ten minutes later as you're going down the staircase. So you get to actually do all that, you know, your character comes out with all this stuff there and then. "I suppose that he's probably the closest, but I suppose in some ways Weird, a bit, but it's grossly exaggerated - he's an exaggerated character, in height and his clumsiness and his talent, compared to me! So divided by that quotient, there's something of myself in there, but even then, it's almost a hopeless comparison, really, to how I imagine I'd be if I was that tall and that ugly and that talented, and suddenly that rich - oh yeah, and having been brought up a Catholic with a serious guilt complex. I'm halfway between an atheist and a Protestant, and that makes a difference."

Were you always intending to write SF as well?

"Yeah. The very first book I wrote, I was sixteen, and it was an Alastair McLean-type spy story. The second book was a kind of near-future satire, incredibly long... but it was very much influenced by both **Catch 22** and also a science-fiction novel called **Stand on Zanzibar**, by John Brunner. Great novel - well, both of them. So that was in there, but the next three books were all science fiction - and they've now been completely re-done and all published. But that took me through the seventies and into the eighties. I don't know what I'd read, but I was nearly 30 and hadn't had a book published, so I thought I'd write something that wasn't science-fiction. I had to go through a big internal battle with myself, because the hard-line part of me didn't want to give up science-fiction, sort of selling out if I wrote something that wasn't SF - because I did think of myself very much as an SF writer by then. Whereas the pragmatist part of me was saying, 'Oh no, write something that's got a better chance of being published', because there are just more publishers you can send mainstream stuff to. The mainstream book that resulted was **The Wasp Factory**. It wasn't quite as mainstream as I meant it to be, but that's alright. "But yeah, to some extent I still feel like an SF writer who happens to write mainstream, rather than the other way around. It's still my first love. You know, if there were a gun to my head it's the one I'd choose over mainstream.

The Culture is obviously highly advanced and evolved - do you actually hold that much hope for humanity?

"On my good days I do, yes. Basically, the people in The Culture are very much like us, except NICER. They're not as genocidal and murderous, and selfish and stupid. They're just not as idiotic. I think if we don't destroy ourselves, The Culture's where we're headed, inevitably, anyway. Whether we like it or not - we probably won't, we'll probably be that stupid that we'll try and avoid it. But I think that's what you end up with eventually, just through technology and progress. I think the extent to which as many people as possible are happy with it, in The Culture it's kind of maximised. There are very, very few people in The Culture - at least imagined in the books - who decide they don't want anything to do with it. Historically, it's been the case all the way through. There's a consensus that The Culture is good. "I think with us, we probably have to rely more on the machines to do that, I think, rely on them constructing something that's actually better than we are before we're going to get anything remotely utopian. "In a sense, the potential for utopia is there in every epoch, every point in society and the development of civilisation. You can always maximise the good and minimise the bad. But our track record in this regard is not too encouraging. We tend to put one of our gods in front of us, whether it's a natural god or whether it's Mammon, money, profit, the bottom line - or whether it's hate, hating somebody else because they're Jewish or Palestinian or Communist or whatever. So I'm not too optimistic from that point of view, but at the same time, I think you at least owe it to the next generation to try and behave as though you are optimistic."

I don't believe I'll ever go through with it, but I've often considered cryogenics...

"Oh right...." [sounding slightly dubious]

Does that not appeal to you?

"Not really, actually, no. I find it hard to take seriously at this point, just on technological terms. I don't know, I suppose if it was a more practical possibility then I'd be interested. But I'm not particularly bothered about dying, really. I don't want to die in pain, obviously - and soon, neither, it must be said - but I think it's a normal enough part of life that you eventually die. Certainly in The Culture you don't have to if you don't want to, people do have some freedom of choice in that regard. You can live forever if you want, in your own body or be resurrected again and again, or as a group mind inside a machine, or whatever. But I see death as being accepted as part of the process."

When you were struggling to get published initially, was it frustrating to the point that you almost gave up?

"Um... Well yes, but I wasn't going to give up writing. I've always enjoyed writing. I've thought about that, and if I somehow knew I was never going to get published, would I still write novels?

Yeah, I would. I wouldn't write very often, but I think I would. I just enjoy the actual process of writing. I think my sort of natural rate of writing is probably about one book every three or four years, but given that I don't have a day job, doing one a year is easy, really. It pays the mortgage, for one thing, and it keeps the publishers happy. It keeps my hand in, as well, I don't have to wait too long to get up to speed. I think if I waited three or four years before I wrote a book, it'd take me months to remember how to do it. "It's something that I certainly enjoy. The frustration comes from the feeling that you've done something that is good - with **The Wasp Factory**, I thought I had done something good, and my friends, the people I'd relied on to comment on the books over the years, they thought it was the best one I'd done, with the best chance of getting published. And it just wasn't happening, it kept coming back, appearing in the hands of the postman. "At one point I said, 'Well, if this one doesn't work, I'm going to go back north, I'm not going to stay in London' - because I'd moved back down to London at that point. So I thought I'd be heading back to Scotland with my tale between my legs - a manuscript between my legs. I'd still be writing, but not trying that hard, I suppose. But it worked out - bizarrely, the way it worked out, the book was actually published the day of my thirtieth birthday. I'd known for almost a year that it was going to happen, but it gave it a nice, almost novelistic shape to it. You know, it was the deadline I set, right to the very day."

What are you working on at the moment - or what's next to be published?

"The next thing to be published is a book called **Whit** - its full title is 'Whit, or Isis Amongst the Unsaved'. It's a mainstream book, it's set in a small, eccentric Scottish cult..."

A nature cult?

"No, it's a religious cult. They have a thing about the number 29, because they're convinced the Messiah and all his or her Prophets are going to be born on the 29th of February, you know, in Leap Years. I think it's the least violent novel I've ever written as well, I don't think there's ANY deaths - well, a death or two is mentioned... but it's quite placid, almost. But in places there's more philosophical comedy, I suppose - philosophical sounds a bit pretentious, but there you go. "What I'm actually WORKING on at the moment - if you could dignify it with that term - is planning the next SF book, which will be another Culture novel. I'm going back to The Culture after a few years away. I was pining for The Culture, I was missing all the silly starship names - I get an inordinate amount of enjoyment from that. And there's just something about the drones, drone wit, drone bitchiness, I just really enjoy doing. I just can't get that feeling, that reward from any other part of my writing. There's just something about what I somehow think and feel about the drones that tends to come out, and I've missed it, I really have. "I'm terribly at home with The Culture, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to get away from it for a couple of books, to not get too at home in it, not get too comfortable, and try and do something slightly different. But I enjoy writing about it, and I'm going to try to do something slightly different in IT this time. But yeah, I'm really looking forward to it."

In the mainstream stuff, Scotland's obviously very important to you, and you have a great deal of affection for it.

"Yeah. I like Scotland, and that's why I always wanted to come back up here. I didn't really want to go back to London in the first place, it was just economic circumstances. I couldn't find any jobs up here, and I had friends that had moved to London, so I thought I'd do the standard Scottish thing. It's a well-worn route from Scotland - especially the west coast - down to London to find jobs. So I did that, but I always wanted to come back. "I enjoy living in Scotland. I like the idea of spending a year in Paris, you know, renting an apartment and hanging out on the boulevards and in the cafes. But apart from that, and a few long holidays, or whatever, I want to live here. I like living here, and I like the people, and I like the general feel of it. I love the scenery as well."
