A Cultured Man

The author's shirt says a lot. Unlike most of the chestware gracing the annual British science fiction convention, it looks quite at home in the plush surroundings of the Radisson Edwardian hotel's poshest bar - which is surprisingly posh. It is by any standards a nice shirt: rich cotton, well tailored, expensive. And it is monogrammed. The initials are not a plain "IB" for Iain Banks, the mainstream novelist whose short, sharp, shock of a debut, The Wasp Factory, has led to more than a decade of success and critical acclaim. Nor are they a more flowery "IMB" for Iain M. Banks, the name under which he publishes his opulent, galaxy-spanning science fiction.

Instead, the letters on Banks's pocket are "FTT". I ask him who he stole the shirt from, and he laughs with perhaps a touch of embarrassment. "It stands for 'Fuck the Tories'. I used to have t-shirts made that said the same thing, but now...." Now he is a big success, or perhaps two big successes, and he can indulge himself a little. He does it in his fiction (writing large chunks of a recent science-fiction novel, Feersum Endjinn, in a transliterated and eccentric Scots dialect) and he does it in his life. But while there may be indulgence, there's still a point, a message.

In conversation, Banks is a lot of fun - but it's oddly serious fun. And the same feeling carries through all the way from shirt to work. As Iain M., he's created a futuristic civilisation devoted to serious fun; it's simply called "the Culture", and is one of the few genuine utopias that modern science fiction offers. His new novel, Excession is the latest to be set in the Culture, and the most ambitious. It's an examination of what happens when the Culture faces the intrusion of an even greater power, an "outside context problem". As such it becomes a meditation on what happens when civilisations collide, on what makes communication possible across boundaries, on what, if anything, distinguishes a message from a weapon. And it has vast fleets of warring space ships, vicious bug-eyed monsters, smatterings of weird sex and rampaging sort-of-elephants as well. Not to mention a Nasty Violent Secret. All of Iain (M.) Banks is here.

Before going any further, though, the schizoid middle initial thing needs explaining. "It was a mistake," he says. "It seemed like a good idea at the time ... I put in the manuscript of The Wasp Factory as Iain M. Banks, and my publishers then, Macmillan, thought the M. was a little fussy, and would I mind losing it. It didn't bother me in the least, so I did. But then I got grief from my family - 'Are you ashamed of being a Menzies, then ?' When the first science-fiction novel was coming out I had thought of using a pseudonym and then decided against, but I had what I thought was a good idea and said, 'let's put the M. back.' There's a sort of historical precedent; Brian W. Aldiss puts in the W. when he's writing non-SF. But I regret doing it intensely now, because I'm always answering questions about it, and also because it passes on ammunition to the literary snobs who just assume that I make the distinction because I'm writing down when I'm writing science fiction."

Needless to say, he doesn't. "It's like being a carpenter. Very few carpenters will only make chairs. They'll make tables as well. To me there's not really very much difference between the genre and non-genre. The same skills, such as they are, the same craftsmanship goes into each. I'm a writer; I occasionally write about different things." And the difference is not always all that great. Walking on Glass, Iain Banks second novel to be published, has a chunk of science fiction embedded in it. "I've seen The Bridge (the third and, to many, including Banks, the best of his non-M. works) reviewed as a work of science fiction and I've no problem with that. It's a complicated novel, it's got lots of different things going on in it." What The Bridge is closest to, though, is Alisdair Grey, or Kafka - books of the fantastic that don't sit in the marketing genre called fantasy.

In that, it is typical Banks. Almost all of his 14 books, SF or not, share some degree of reliance on the fantastic. They also have undoubted similarities in their concerns - the effects of violence, for example - and in their ability to capture a dreamlike sensibility. What divides the novels into two groups (besides the obvious M.) is not much more than the author's choice of literary reference points. The Bridge recalls Lanark, while The Wasp Factory reads like a strange warping of Catcher in the Rye, with its absent elder brother, its loss and madness in a dysfunctional family - although while Holden Caulfield dreams of saving children, Frank kills them.

What singles out the science-fiction novels is the way that they refer to the consensual, commercialised dreams of science fiction. David E. Cortesi, an American critic, catches their pell-mell feeling nicely: "Banks uses the conventions of SF the way Robin Williams uses the voices and slogans of pop culture: you recognise his quotes and impressions, but they come so fast in such outrageous combinations that everything is new and fun again." An impression of Robin Williams, by the way, is a favourite Banks party piece. Banks takes ideas from all over the genre - or at least the bits of it that were to be found in Gourock's public library in the 1960s, when he was a boy.

Banks's novels inhabit much the same world that E. E. (Doc) Smith brought to life in the pulp magazines of the '30s and that George Lucas brought to the screen in the '70s. It's the world that, with his non-fictional middle initial firmly in place, Brian W. Aldiss has called "Wide-Screen Baroque - a kind of free-wheeling interplanetary adventure, full of brilliant scenery, dramatic scenes and a joyous taking for granted of the unlikely." Aldiss was writing about Alfred Bester at his prime, but the description fits bits of Banks like a force-field gel-suit. When I mentioned meeting Banks to one fan his eyes lit up: "Do you remember that chase between two spaceships - inside another really big spaceship ?"

But, as in everything Banks does, serious questions lurk beneath the fun. "I had this bizarre idea that there was an intellectual high-ground, a moral, intellectual high-ground in space opera that had to be reclaimed for the left. Consider Phlebas was the start of that. In the '40s and '50s there was a basically imperialist American view of the future that hard SF has tended to carry on with. But once you have some form of reliable space travel it becomes very difficult to imagine what we would regard as a state or an empire being able to hold together. People would just leave. If you're self-sufficient and mobile you can do what you like."

That is what the Culture is all about: the use of technology to create a social space in which exploitation and oppression can't exist. Implicit in Banks's fiction, explicit in his discussions of it, is the idea that space travel more or less requires such a society. Hegemony, whether political or commercial, becomes impossible. The state withers away, leaving a sort of high-tech anarcho-syndicalism - with some huge space battles along the way.

This point of view may explain why the Culture books seem to be so popular among those on the Net. The freedoms Banks imagines for the space between the stars are similar to the freedoms claimed for cyberspace. The widespread feeling that the technological, economic and moral arguments for freedom on the Net have some sort of unstoppable synergy is a feeling that the Culture would understand and endorse - on a much grander scale. For in the Culture it is not only information which is set free by technology, but everything. Technology, in the form of hyper-clever artificial intelligences, fulfils everybody's needs. "John Clute [Britain's best SF critic] termed it a post-scarcity society and that's a fair summary of the principle behind it. That's what differentiates it from most other civilisations in science fiction", Banks says.

I point out to Banks that free markets and new technologies are already moving today's world away from scarcity; he isn't impressed. "In the Culture it's like that everywhere, not just for the economically privileged one per cent in the richest countries. There are no poor people in the Culture at all. It's not like here with people still dying of hunger."

Given that starving is what the people of the Culture don't do, what is it that they do do ? "Ninety-nine point nine per cent of them are dull and have extremely boring lives. I mean, they have lots of fun and stuff, but it would make very boring reading, just hearing about them going to lots of parties and having affairs and children or changing sex and all the rest of it. I have actually thought of writing a mainstream novel set in the Culture in the sense that the technology wouldn't really matter particularly. In the same way that we don't explain how a car works when a character in a mainstream novel gets into a car or an aeroplane or anything, it would be about people and love affairs and petty jealousies and ambitions: a sort of Hampstead novel. It's not that happiness is compulsory in the Culture, it's just that it's difficult to avoid. You can still have ambitions in the Culture, and they can still be frustrated. And you can certainly have unrequited love. It would be perfectly possible to write such a novel but, well, what's the point ? In fact, I'd only be doing it to make a point."

People in the Culture are for the most part just having fun; this is central to Banks's philosophy. He sees fun as a high goal, material and physical. And he sees Good Works as part of fun. So he has the Culture spend some of its resources on Good Works by way of its Contact teams - spaceships devoted to helping civilisations that they judge less well attuned to the universe than is the Culture. These ships - boasting names such as A Series of Unlikely Explanations, Size Isn't Everything and Stranger Here Myself - make up the Culture's "interesting one per cent". Their helping is a hard business; it can end up as war if the other civilisation does not cooperate and remains bent on hegemony. These anti-imperialistic imperialistic wars, up to and including the vast conflict in which is set the first Culture novel, Consider Phlebas, are run by Contact's euphemistically-titled "Special Circumstances" section, employing Psychopath-class ships like the Frank Exchange of Views.

"I like writing action scenes. I enjoy the 'wide-screen baroque' approach and lots of explosions and stuff like that." Phlebas is to some extent a compendium of action sequences that needed a home, some of which had been waiting a long time. "Ever since I first saw a giant hovercraft on the television news, when they first started going from Dover to Calais, I thought 'Wow, skirts twelve foot high. You could get, like, things underneath there; people could have a fight underneath there.' And I thought 'Yeah! That'd be good in a James Bond movie.' And this was like way way way back when I was about twelve or something and I'd always been looking for a place to set that and several other action set pieces, like the train wreck at the end in the command system tunnels and the megaship crashing into the iceberg and the wreckage front taking a long, long time to travel down it, like a dream. These were ideas that were waiting for a home for years, a decade or more in some cases. I wanted a vehicle of such a scale that these things could grace it convincingly or they'd be in my notebooks when I died. My design brief was 'out-Star-Wars Star Wars'. That's why I'd really like to see Phlebas filmed. I'd like that so much that I wouldn't mind if they changed the ending."

It will come as little surprise to anyone with a passing knowledge of Banks's work that Phlebas's ending is not a happy one. In his SF and his other fiction Banks shows a willingness to submit his characters to appalling violence, and often to kill off likeable protagonists. His approach to violence is sometimes but not always embellished with a surreal, disturbing wit (the burning sheep in Wasp Factory, the drowning in shit or the obese finger-gnawing cannibal in Consider Phlebas).

So does Banks like doing nasty things to his characters? "Yes, I confess I do, actually. But I think that I've just got an overactive imagination. It doesn't shrink from doing unpleasant things to people - almost always to men, it has to be said. There's so much violence against women in fiction, in real life, that if the plot demands it I try to be nasty to men as a rule. I think it's a sort of defence mechanism. I'm quite a gentle soul, actually. I've had one fight in my life. That was after school; it was very brief." "You lost ?" "I did, and shook hands with my opponent. I'm not a violent person. I probably drive too fast, but that's about it." With a Porsche 911 that's not much of a surprise. Serious fun, once again.

Yet, for all his protestations of mild manners, Banks's view of humanity is often dark and violent. When pushed about how this squares with the unfeasible niceness of the Culture, he points out that human nature's not really the point. "The Culture's run by the machines anyway. That's why it's rational and, well, humane. If there's one thing humanity isn't, it's humane. We do horrible, inhuman things to each other. The machines can't get much worse. Well, I suppose they can. There's loads of dystopias in science fiction where the assumption is that the machines will stamp us out, we'll make one that's smarter than us and it'll just waste us. And for all I know, that might be true."

But Banks's machines save us from ourselves. They remake society in their own perfectible image. It's an engineering approach - and Banks, having spent his childhood in the shadow of the Forth rail bridge, loves ambitious engineering works, whether they're Frank's little torture chambers in The Wasp Factory, or the Culture's great orbital habitats, or the complex intertwined architectures of some of his own novels. Humanity's endurance in the context of such reality-transforming structures - for the most part, pre-existing, unalterable structures - is one of his great themes. I put it to Banks that while superior artificial intelligences aren't just around the corner, they are a lot closer than starships. He might like to write an extrapolative novel set in the Earth's near future, examining the relationship between humanity and its admirable Crichtons, servants-turned-generous-masters. But that, too, is a "research area" he's willing to cede to others. He might look at the early days of the Culture sometime, but even about that he's not sure.

Which is fair enough. The Culture books are not technological just-so stories. They're not really about technology. They're about faith in the future, about the belief that societies can make sense of themselves, can have fun doing so, can live by Good Works, and can do so in circumstances far removed from our own little circle of western civilisation. They use science fiction, the mythology of the 20th century, to portray a set of values and beliefs that Iain M. Banks holds dear, a belief that one core of civilisation is hedonism between consenting adults. To those who think that sounds trivial, Banks's would simply say, what is more worthwhile working towards ? That is, he would claim, a serious, hard question.

And he has such fun with the answers.

Oliver Morton (oem@wired.co.uk) is editor of Wired, as is Oliver E. Morton.