

Interview

The latest high-speed, high-energy novel from Iain Banks starts with his response to 11 September and motors into a nightmare vision of the modern world.

It took Iain Banks just six weeks to write his latest, 400-plus page novel, *Dead Air*. He still looks slightly bemused by the speed, almost six months after he completed it. "It just went really, really quickly," he says, laughing. "I just kept going with the pace and finished it, embarrassingly quickly."

It's a characteristically disingenuous comment from the modest Banks, who has managed that rare feat in fiction of garnering critical acclaim while achieving sales figures to rival blockbusters. When we meet in an Edinburgh pub, just before he is due to appear at the Book Festival, I almost miss him. Looking for the wild, hairy man-of-the-hills in publicity photos, I pass over the almost professorial, bearded gentleman sitting quietly reading a newspaper and drinking iced water. What, no beer? No biker leathers? Can this be the author of violent, controversial books like *The Wasp Factory* and *Complicity*? The SF fan with a host of websites dedicated to his Utopian "Culture" novels?

Perhaps success does bring its own sheen, and Banks has been more successful than most. Not one to spend hours alone in a garret, squeezing out words in authorly anguish, Banks is refreshingly breezy about his art. "Whenever I hear other people complain about writing, I just think, 'Get another job, for God's sake!'" He laughs again. "I enjoy writing." So he should. As he admits, writers are in a highly privileged position. They can respond to whatever happens, and people pay attention. Never more so than with *Dead Air*, which opens with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre.

"Once 11 September happened, I just felt it was something I had to acknowledge," he says. "It's not something you can gloss over or just mention in passing. It did alter the balance of the book in a way." Much of *Dead Air* was already planned, and the first chapters pretty much written in his head before the attacks. "That's OK, because it altered everybody's lives in a sense. The fact is it was such a huge, symbolic thing."

It was also something that felt – to a writer famous for creating alternative worlds – like some "Orson Welles type spoof. I honestly thought that for a second I had been bounced into this weird Star Trek-style alternative reality. I'm getting goose-bumps now even thinking about it. I remember waking up the next morning with that feeling you have when something huge has happened, like someone you know has died or something, and wondering, was that real? It was almost a sci-fi moment. I wanted to say, OK, stop the simulation now."

The attacks encapsulated this collision of fantasy and reality. At one point, the group of London media friends gathered round the television to watch events unfold record their impressions in precisely that way: "Where's Superman? Where's Batman? Where's Spiderman? Where's Bruce Willis, or Tom Cruise, or Arnie or Stallone? Fuck, the bad guys are re-writing the script!" Yet surely distance of time is required to separate one from the other, if artists are to react with any kind of long-lasting response?

Banks doesn't think so. He began writing four months after the attacks, although, he says, he could have started as early as October. What has emerged feels like a sharp, speedy, but overwhelmingly angry book.

"Yes, I think it is an angry book," he agrees. "I think it was the election of George W Bush that did it. The fact that he didn't win but he got given the presidency. "Banks call the incumbent a "cretin" and says that "he lied when he implied it was going to be a kinder, gentler, less right-wing conservatism. Yeah," he laughs, "I'm angry. Does it show?"

"You just knew that whatever came after 11 September, it was only going to get worse. You weren't going to get people saying, let's be compassionate and understanding, let's see what is the real problem here. No: people in the US genuinely seem to think that the attacks happened because other people were jealous of them. Yes, there is a lot of anger there; I suppose at just how stupid people can be."

There's more than a hint of Banks himself in the central character of *Dead Air*, the left-wing shock-jock Ken Nott, who combines his rage at the world with articulacy. Nott attacks everything and everybody on his radio programme run by a commercial station, while getting involved with exotic, enigmatic Celia, the wife of a London gangster. A handsome man attractive to women, Nott is also a bit of a shit ("I tend to find the two things go together"). A "pretty reprehensible" flaw is necessary for a man who is, he insists, "spot-on about a lot of stuff". Nott's personal morality fails to match up to his public one, as loyalty is severely tested time and again before he gets his come-uppance once he falls in love with the unobtainable Celia.

Are Nott's angry tirades at the world just an indication of his essential impotence, I ask Banks? He laughs again (there's a lot of laughter, and a lot of talk, when you interview him) before beginning a tirade of his own that takes us back to 11 September. "I suppose it is how [Nott] compensates in a way," he says. "I suppose, if you're going to have a moral outrage, what is the rational response? The people who committed this are beyond rationality."

"I'm an evangelical atheist myself, not a great fan of religion in general – and this is an area where words fail. You can really only use words in a rational environment, and as soon as someone says, 'I believe in God or pixies or chocolate people orbiting Mars', that's it. You might as well talk about something else, and you'll always be confronted with that when you confront someone who has faith. Faith is belief without reason."

"I can happily co-exist with people who believe in God. I hope they can co-exist with people who don't," he continues, "but what can you say to someone prepared to commit that sort of outrage? In a way, a large part of the book is Ken trying to fill that gap with more words in the hope that to some extent he's touching a few amenable souls who might just listen and change their ideas or potential actions."

Writing *Dead Air* has been a hugely cathartic experience, he acknowledges. At one point, Nott is set to appear live on television with a Holocaust denier. "How do you combat people like that? One way is to deal with them the way that he does in the book; the other is to out-extreme the extremists. Why stop with the Holocaust? Why not say the whole Second World War didn't take place? It's completely idiotic, so there was always going to be that aspect of the book without 11 September, and that was quite cathartic – just getting all that stuff out. They're not exactly my views, there is a slight degree of caricature. But it was my way of dealing with things."

Banks may not immediately strike those around him as an angry person, and his own standing would imply he has little to feel angry about. Wealthy on the commercial success of his writing (he is fond of motorbikes and Porsches – more speed), happy with the work which only takes him a couple of months a year, one would almost expect fantasy worlds of peace and harmony to emerge from his imagination. "I do have a pretty cushy life," he acknowledges, "but I still get annoyed about things. I'm not living on the minimum wage or having to worry about keeping a roof over my head, but I can still see that the world is run not by governments but by corporations with all the morals of a leech."

Our time is up, and we have talked non-stop. *Dead Air* is just one of many immediate responses to a shocking event, the kind of exhausting, careering ride of a novel adored by speed junkies. Possibly, though, it's just what we all need.

