

Iain Banks email Q&A July 2008

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A few weeks ago, we invited readers of this website and www.orbitbooks.net to submit questions to be put to Iain Banks by email. Once the three-week submission period was over, the selection panel sifted through the submissions and picked half a dozen; Iain mused, pondered, cogitated and then sent back the following responses:

From [Ed Ashby](#):

Q: Imagine you've agreed to write a novella; the only two provisos are that the story must be set in the Culture and it must feature a character from a previous Culture novel. It doesn't have to be a main character, and the events in the novella can take place before or after those of the original book in which they appear. Who would you pick, and why?

Iain Banks: Hmm. Good question. I think I'd go with Shohobohaum Za, from [The Player of Games](#), the man who saves Gurgeh's ludic arse when he's attacked outside the games hall, orders the preposterous cocktail from the Limiting Factor's module and who turns out to be - surprise - an SC agent. Now there's a chap who must have had an interesting past. And would doubtless go on to have a just as interesting a future (though you wouldn't necessarily bet on it being all that long).

I always felt he was a character who could carry something bigger than the cameo he has in *TPoG*, and it would be good to have an SC agent who isn't so obviously weighed down by the past, like Zakalwe from [Use of Weapons](#) or Anaplian from [Matter](#); Za has a much more blasé take on the whole being-an-SC-agent lark, and that would be refreshing. So I'd probably write about some future adventure, scrape or escapade of his. No idea what the story would actually be, but I wager it would be colourful.

From [Paul Raven](#):

Q: Which is your favourite (or most hated) literary manifesto, and why? If you could start your own right now, and gather an instant flock of rebel cohorts, what would it be called, and what would the agenda be?

Iain Banks: Cripes. We don't much hold with them there literary manifestos round here, though I'm sure if I had a concisely annotated list of them before me I could find one or two I thought were sensible or inspiring, and some I'd regard as a bit daft. Honestly, I don't really pay such things much attention. I'm always a bit sceptical about any movement or even allegedly coherent group of writers really existing for much longer than whatever lunchtime the idea of said movement was dreamt up.

That whole herding cats thing, you know? I feel writers tend to go their own way, especially these days, and any pattern or appearance of a programme only appears in retrospect, and generally only to those looking for it.

If I was going to have a manifesto - just for the sheer flipping heck of it - I'd draw up one that denigrated cliché, demanded greater realism in narrative and bound its adherents to resolutely refuse to acknowledge the existence, even as handy plot devices, of any form of supernatural or spiritual force whatsoever.

Ha! (That's a 'so-there' type of 'Ha', not a 'tee-hee' sort of 'Ha'.)

From [Dave Haddock](#):

Q: The Culture books have been chronological so far - have you thought about writing about the Culture before it was the Culture?

Iain Banks: Yup, I have, and generally jettisoned the idea pretty quickly. It's one of those ideas that is kind of waiting for the right story idea to come along; an idea that somehow implies the Culture but doesn't depend on its existence. I guess the trouble is that when I'm in what you might call a Culture state of mind then I really look forward to using the usual props; the ships, the drones, the knife missiles and so on.

(Even in *Matter*, where most of that stuff is kept fairly isolated to brief sections while the rest of the story rolls on, there's a kind of expectation, I think, that all this will come to the fore at some point, so that when the flurry of action does take place at the end, it's a kind of long-built-up release.)

And when I don't have my Culture hat on, I usually take the opportunity to get well away and do something quite different, maybe even something that is effectively incompatible with the Culture universe ([The Algebraist](#) being the best example). These are kind of the two faces of the coin being spun here, so waiting for a pre-Culture Culture story might be like waiting for the coin to land on its edge. Still, you never know.

From Gabriel Bihian:

Gabriel: Could you write a science-fiction novel without wars and violence?

Iain Banks: Good grief yes. I've toyed with the idea of writing a Shakespearean - okay, a sub-Shakespearean - comedy set in the Culture where some feckless / rather dizzy / profoundly spoilt human characters suffer a series of misunderstandings (with hilarious results), attended by jaded and long-suffering drones. It's just I'm kind of a sucker for the unlimited special effects budget written SF hands a writer - and big explosions (I blame Gerry Anderson).

Again, though, it'd be a narrow idea-window for me to hit; a story that needed to be SF, but didn't need all the pyrotechno-gizmology I've become so fond of. Any ideas I've ever had in this direction, when sternly asked the question "Couldn't you do almost exactly the same story set in our reality, present or past?" tend to look pretty shifty, break eye contact and start drawing doodles in the dust at their feet while starting to whistle.

Definitely possible though.

From Massimo Gasperini:

Q: Can you suggest any particular parts of Scotland that would be most interesting to visit and explore, from the point of view of someone who likes your books?

Iain Banks: Reading *Raw Spirit* might throw up more, but off the top of my head: The stretch of shore West of [Portmahomack](#) in Easter Ross (helped inspire [The Wasp Factory](#)), the Forth Bridge (no prizes for guessing which book), [Greenock](#), [Oban](#), the [Glenfinann House hotel](#), [Glenfinnan](#) and the area around the [Crinan Canal](#), all of which provided raw material for [The Crow Road](#). [Edinburgh](#), obviously, given that it plays a part in [Complicity](#) (and Loch Bruc in the novel is sort of based on Loch Shiel, the loch which Glenfinnan is at the head of... there's a rather poor joke in there with an utterly irrelevant Australian connection. Moving swiftly on).

The upper reaches of the Forth - the flood plain as far as [Stirling](#) - is there in [Whit](#) (and briefly Edinburgh again), and the whole area around [Stirling University](#) and the town of [Bridge of Allan](#) (plus [Stirling Castle](#) in one scene) lies behind the setting of [Song of Stone](#). That's all I can think of!

From Mark Wilson:

Q: What do you think is the one, single, most vital collective development that humanity needs to take before it has any hope whatsoever of evolving into a Culture-like society?

Iain Banks: Genetically modifying ourselves, I suspect. Finding the set of genes that code for xenophobia in general - these days usually expressed through sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, Romaphobia and so on (and on, and on) - and knocking them out. Possibly then we'll be nice enough for the Culture or something like it. Of course maybe inventing true AIs will be enough, always assuming that they're as benign - and yet sympathetically interested in us - as they are taken to be in the Culture. The one thing that won't be enough is getting to a post-scarcity society; a statistically valid number of us have lived in something very like that for the past decade and a bit and we still collectively behaved like slaving morons, so it'll take more than just having more toys than we know what to do with to make us truly civilised.

I mean, *nil desperandum* and all that, but - still - don't hold your breath.

Thank you very much indeed to everyone who sent in questions, and to Iain for taking time out to provide us with answers. We're hoping to announce further Q&A sessions in future, to watch this space, or even better, [subscribe to the site's RSS feed](#) for updates.