

Interview Iain M Banks, Part Two

 web.archive.org/web/20101020152056/http://www.sfx.co.uk/2010/10/13/interview-ian-m-banks-part-two

13/10/2010 06:03am

Answering questions set by *SFX* readers, Iain M Banks discusses film scripts, his writing regime and why the Culture was never omnipotent...



Just a quick recap in case you weren't here yesterday (in which case [here's what you missed](#)): In issue 202, on sale 20 October, hugely popular novelist and man of Culture Iain M Banks takes time out of his writing schedule to answer your questions. He spent so much time with us going through your posers that we couldn't fit it all in the magazine, so here are the rest. His latest Culture novel, *Surface Detail* (four stars in *SFX* 201), is in the shops now, and you can [read the first chapter here](#).

So, on with the new stuff...

How long did it take you to find a writing routine that suits you? Are you self-disciplined by this stage in your career or do the publishers have to chase you to finish a book? **John Banks, email**

Banks: "I'm very self-disciplined, actually. It's easy because I've always been able to write lots and lots of words really quickly. I still seem to be able to concentrate okay so I do a lot during the working day – I can write about 3,000 words a day. Although I keep a quota on a week-by-week basis rather than day-by-day which means I can give myself days off! When I've been very good, I decide, 'I'm going out for a hill walk.' Which is why I

write in the winter (we don't get so many nice days in the winter in Scotland). If I lived in southern California I wouldn't write anything: the occasional haiku! I used to write in the last three months of the year, now I'm moving slightly to writing in the first three months of the year. I've gradually worked out that's when the worst weather is...

"I chatted with Terry Pratchett years ago and it seems he has the 'war of attrition' approach. He'd write just a few hundred words per day and keep at it, only occasionally giving himself Christmas Day off. Whereas I'd do nothing for almost eight months of the year, and then write like mad for three months when it's cold! I have the blitzkrieg approach. I tried to write slowly like Pratchett once but I very soon ramped up to 3,000 a day because I just got into it."

My question regards the Referers from your Culture novels, the extremely intuitive humans whose predictive powers sometimes can rival or even surpass those of the Minds. They figure prominently in Consider Phlebas, are alluded to in Player of Games, and seemingly go without mention in the rest of your books. What's the reason for the Referers' absence now? Anonymous, Sweden

Banks: "There's a sleight of hand here – I always thought that was one of my weaker inventions in *Phlebas*! After thousands of years of artificial intelligence, the idea that the AI couldn't do all this themselves is silly. I did make the point that they were being studied for how they could be so intuitive, but I was uncomfortable with it though so they were never going to survive long! Basically: the AI Minds have got better at doing that stuff themselves so they're no longer required."

In the epilogue of Excession the Excession refers to our universe as a micro environment: does that mean it's from a much larger, older universe or from somewhere else entirely? Nuttyprofessor, SFX.co.uk

Banks: "Have I not told you my plan for the Culture universe?! [You've got it all figured out? – SFX] Oh yeah, the whole idea behind the universe in the Culture books has been hinted at since *The Player Of Games* onwards, but I have worked it out. Have you got any crayons? [Laughs] Right, the universe expands from the Big Bang – but it's not an expanding beach ball, it's an expanding onion. There's a Big Bang going off all the time at the centre, and the outer universes get bigger and bigger as they go. So if you're in one layer, you could go down a layer to a smaller, younger universe and in theory keep on going down until you got to a Big Bang. There are also older universes beyond ours. You know the energy grid between the layers of the universe that the ships use for power? It's between each of the layers of the onion.

"So the Excession is a symptom of something that can travel between layers in this onion universe, and it's incredibly exciting to the Culture because they can't do this. As far as we know of all the races and species nobody can do this yet. Maybe the Sublimed people can, but they're not telling. (It gets even more complicated, in fact, with a completely

nonsensical torus-shaped representation of a multi-dimensional hypersphere that I worked out in 1980.) The more we learn about physics the less sense all this makes, but that's the answer: that's where the Excession is coming from!"



In Matter you seemed to broaden out your Culture universe with many more races and civilisations competing with each other, some on the same level as the Culture, some possibly even more powerful. Was this a conscious decision to make the Culture seem less omnipotent? **Adrian Leaf, SFX Forum**

Banks: "Yes, I wanted to put the Culture more in context. There have always been hints that it's not the only sophisticated society in the galaxy; I've made it very clear from *Consider Phlebas* onwards there are lots of other societies out there. But with *Matter* I decided to make it much more clear about all these levels of civilisation, to demonstrate the Culture has peers. Beyond that there are also the Elders, the older civilisations – I first mentioned them in *Consider Phlebas* too so it's not like I just brought them all in. 'Oh, um, yeah, I forgot to tell you, there are all these guys who were here all the time!' The indications were there all along. But with *Matter* I definitely wanted to make it much more clear about where the Culture stood, that it's not omnipotent."

Have you ever considered writing a screenplay for a movie, Culture or otherwise? Would you like to? **John Burnett, Facebook**

Banks: "I did that for *The Wasp Factory* many years ago, in the 1980s. I'm afraid I wasn't very good at it! It's the whole difference between telling and showing. As a book writer you have to be really good at telling – which means you're possibly rubbish at showing! They're surprisingly different skills. When I type THE END at the finish of the novel, that's pretty much it. Those words, nicely bound, are pretty much what you'll read."

“But typing THE END at the bottom of a film script is just the *start* of a complicated process! Other writers come in, script doctors... even the actors can tweak what you’ve written. You have to surrender your ego which is pretty hard to do, but also surrender your control. You can forget about that sense of godhood which you get as a novelist. In science fiction and fantasy, you get total control of the whole universe! To surrender that to a script editor and director is a wrench.”

[A Gift From The Culture has been optioned for a film adaptation, but we understand you're not writing that in person? – SFX] “I’m not writing it, no. For the happiness of society and all concerned, I’m keeping well away! I get to sign the contract and it about it ends there, and that’s how it should be. There are writers who can work in both media but I’m not one of them. Maybe I could do a movie if I trained really hard for a decade or something. It’s taken me long enough to get good at writing novels [laughs] I’m too old to start learning a whole new discipline. I think it can be done but I think I’d rather let people get on with it. That’s the proper attitude; these are fellow professionals who know what they’re doing so I will trust them.”

Thanks Iain!