

Interview

Iain Banks enjoys glen-walking, is a fan of James Bond and professes a deep admiration for Jane Austen - definitely not what you'd expect from the author of gripping, macabre novels like The Wasp Factory.

Up until 1984 Banks was completely unknown - he'd spent a number of years languishing away in an assortment of odd jobs which had included working as roadworker, dustman and gardener, acting as an extra in the final battle scene of Monty Python and the Holy Grail and playing the front half of the Loch Ness Monster! He moved to London, got a job as a costings clerk and tried his hand at writing in his spare time. It took four attempts before he managed to come up with The Wasp Factory which was published in 1984 provoking a mixed response of muted applause and complete outrage.

It was not long before The Wasp Factory attained cult status - not just amongst the anorak brigade but also across a far wider mainstream audience. Banks was established as a writer of note and was able to quit his boring day job. These days he spends most of his time in his native Fife drinking, eating out, reading, shopping, listening to music, playing computer games and driving fast cars and motorbikes. But for two months of each year he sits down and dashes off a novel, alternating between mainstream and sci-fi which he writes under the name Iain M Banks. He is the author of a total of 17 novels including Complicity, A Song of Stone, Whit and The Crow Road which was made into a four-part BBC 2 serial. His latest novel, Inversions , focuses on the characteristic Banks preoccupations of secrets and identity. It hit the shop shelves last week and looks set to become a classic.

How does he do it? What is it that drives this man to write such utterly grotesque yet thoroughly compelling novels? He looks like a harmless university professor, claims to have had a happy childhood, so what is it that inspires him? You can take a bash at cracking this enigma by reading a full transcript of his live chat on Oi!...

"Are you fed up with people measuring your success by The Wasp Factory?"

"Oh no... I think that's a reasonable thing to do. It's still a book that I'm proud of, it made a huge difference to my life. I'm sure if I wrote it now I'd do things differently. But I think it's good to have something to measure yourself against, rather than other people, other authors. No, I definitely still think very warmly of it."

"Did you attend any of the stage productions of your novels? What did you think of them?"

"Yes, I did. I've seen adaptations of The Bridge and The Wasp Factory has been adapted several times. I saw the original production of The Wasp Factory in Glasgow, I haven't seen subsequent renditions. I thought The Bridge was a brave attempt but I got lost in it and I wrote the damn thing!"

"Do you have difficulty when writing as Iain or Iain M. in separating sci-fi and "mainstream" fiction ?"

"No, I'm always constantly surprised that people ask me that. I alternate - one year I write sci-fi and the next it's mainstream. It's a bit like being a carpenter, you use the same skills whether you're making a chair or a table."

"What research do you carry out, especially in preparation for sci-fi ?"

"As little as possible, none, I hate research."

"Are you selling or supporting screenplays of your sci-fi work?"

"One of the sci-fi pieces, The Player of Games has been optioned. We'll be meeting soon to discuss it, but I won't be writing the script, it's a different skill entirely."

"Do you have a partner, and if so how does she cope with your vivid imagination?"

"Yes, I'm married to a long-suffering lady. She doesn't have a problem with what I do. She copes with it."

"Do you have web access yourself? I've heard you thought it would take up too much time, is this true?"

"I've managed to avoid becoming netted up, mainly because of fear - I'm worried that I'd get too hooked, spend too much time on it. I spend so much time already in front of a screen writing letters and novels and playing games and I'm afraid that if I start surfing the net I'd develop square eyes."

"Your drug scenes are very vivid. Did you have to do much research into drugs in order to get them so realistic?"

"A huge amount! I'm not sure that my readers realise the huge sacrifices I've had to make to achieve a sense of realism in my novels. It's part of the price you have to pay as a writer!"

"Is it true that you love reading Jane Austen?"

"Yes. She's one of my favourite authors. Definitely within the top five."

"I've heard you are a big music fan? Do you listen to anything while you are writing? What?"

"Well I usually listen to Radio 1 when I'm writing, but if there's too much talk I haul out a CD, some rock or pop. Lately I've been listening to Bach, but I can't follow the tune because it's too bloody complicated."

"Does the dark side of your imagination ever worry you?"

"Not in the least, no, no, it only gets used to write books, a very productive use to put it to - it's the way I earn my living, far better than acting it out. And anyway I think I'm too much of a coward to put my thoughts into action."

"How and where do you work? Do you have the same routines for both sci-fi and fiction?"

"Well I work at home in my study. Usually I write over November and Christmas, but all the most important work has already started in summer, the mental work, coming up with the plot and reaching dead ends etc., I make no distinction between sci-fi and mainstream novels."

"Which other authors do you enjoy reading?"

"Loads... The usual suspects... There's a long, long list, my bookshelves are full."

"What was your inspiration for The Wasp Factory?"

"I wanted to write a story. There was no central source of inspiration, I just had loads of ideas lying around and managed to put them together to form a story."

"Who do you think will win today - Scotland or Brazil?"

"Brazil. I've been learning how to shout: "We are the people!" in Portuguese."

"Have you had much criticism about the cruelty to animals portrayed in The Wasp Factory?"

"Disappointingly little. I didn't receive a single letter"

"Would you ever think of writing children's books?"

"No, I find it quite disturbing that people think I should. I've been approached by publishers, but I don't think I'd be able to impose the necessary amount of self-censorship."

"Have you read any Irvine Welsh novels and if so what's your favourite?"

"Um, yeah. I thought Trainspotting was superb. I read The Acid House and I also started to read The Maribou Stork but couldn't get into it."

"Do you always have a book burning away inside of you?"

"No. Round about this time of year I start to get twitchy. I've got loads of ideas but it's just a case of getting them out, starting the writing process."

"How do you think YOUR understanding of The Culture has changed throughout the course of all your books? Do you see them in a different way to your first 'encounters' with them?"

"No, I don't think it has really. I'd been thinking about The Culture for a long time before Consider Phlebas was published, about 10 or 12 years before."

"As your readers wait for your next book(s), which authors would you recommend for similar style (such as Neal Stephenson with Snow Crash) ?"

"Oh yes I enjoyed Snow Crash a great deal. It's all a matter of personal taste. It's worth trying Ken McCloud's The Star Fraction, The Stone Canal, The Cassini Division. Ken is a great friend of mine, we're both on tour at the moment promoting our books."

"Why are all the covers of your books in black and white, wouldn't you like to inject a little bit of colour into them?"

"Because The Wasp Factory established the mould... I think that was the best bit of luck that a writer has ever had, it's so distinctive. I think it would be madness to inject colour into them."

"At what age did you start writing seriously?"

"Well I started writing at 14 but only managed to finish my first novel at 16. I didn't get published until I was 30 - even though I'd written five novels."

"Many of your characters are quite quirky and some of their actions are pretty sinister. As a writer, would you say these ideas come mainly from deep within or from the world you see around you?"

"A combination of both... The real world provides the inspiration, the idea, and then you develop that yourself according to your experience."

"You portray a lot of games in your books. Do you enjoy computer games? Any favourites?"

"Almost exclusively Civilisation Two."

"Any news on further media adaptations - specifically the SF? - I enjoyed the television adaptation of The Crow Road but would love to see Use of Weapons made into a film."

"Well so would I. I would like to see Consider Phlebas even more. But the only one that is optioned is The Player of Games."

"Will you ever do a book signing in Ireland?"

"I have done - in Belfast and Dublin. I've been to both cities two or three times each."

"What does the 'M' stand for and why do you use it for your Sci-Fi books?"

"Menzies. It's just to make the distinction between the genres and to keep my family happy - they were disappointed when I dropped it earlier on, so I introduced it to brand my sci-fi stuff."

"Do you identify with any of your characters?"

"Um...a bit. I guess I relate to all my central characters."

"What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?"

"Getting published!"

"A notable feature of your writing seems to be that you never write sequels... will you ever write a sequel to any of your books?"

"I think it's fairly unlikely, I don't like doing sequels I'd rather go on to something new. But I'm not going to issue a blanket denial."

"What do you say to the accusation that sci-fi fans are geeks/anoraks?"

"I think it's a load of nonsense quite frankly. I'm a sf fan and I don't possess an anorak!"

"Will you ever shave your beard off?"

"I threatened to when I turned 40 but my wife threatened to leave me if I did!"

"Are you bringing out any new books? If so when?"

"Well Inversions was published in hardback in Britain last week. The next paperback will be released in September, A Song of Stone, which is mainstream."

"Does A Song Of Stone reflect any genuine concerns you have over the collapse of society or was that simply a frame on which to develop characters?"

"Yes, it was a frame... it's purely a conceit."

"Will you ever be coming to Australia?"

"Well I have been to Australia, I went to the Adelaide Festival in 1992. I love Australia and would like to go back but there are no plans at the moment."

"Some of your books like The Bridge seem to be subtly set in the Culture universe, is this intentional?"

"No. There's one in-joke in The Bridge about a knife missile, but no, no."

"How happy were you with the TV version of The Crow Road and its response?"

"Very happy. I thought it was an excellent adaptation and it generated a good response. I was very happy with it."

"Have you ever considered writing non-fiction? If so, what??"

"Well I had a facetious idea of writing a book called The Joy of Dam Building but apart from that, no."

"You mentioned that Jane Austen is one of your five best authors. Who are the other four?"

"Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Graham Greene and Saul Bellow."

"How's the court case regarding the rights to The Wasp Factory going?"

"It's going very slowly. I haven't heard anything for a while. I'd better not say any more."

"What do you think of Geri leaving the Spice Girls?"

"Oh, I don't care!"

"Where do you go to relax?"

"Actually relaxed is my normal state. I don't have to go anywhere to achieve that."

"Did you consciously create The Culture to be a socialist utopia? Do you think it lives up to that end?"

"Well yes I did. But it's not up to me to say whether it works... because I'm biased. I think it does."

"Are you a Doctor Who fan?"

"Well a bit. I tend to watch most of the sci-fi that's shown on TV. I haven't seen any Doctor Who for a while though."

"Love or money, which do you prefer?"

"Love."

"Someone somewhere said that the printed book was about to die, but people seem to be reading more than ever - what do you think?"

"I think people come up with ridiculous ideas every now and then. The printed book may no longer be on the cutting edge but it's certainly not going to die."

"You have many sites on the Internet, have you seen 'Culture Shock', the unofficial Iain Banks site? It's very good!"

"No, I haven't."

"Which of your own books is your all time fav?"

"The Bridge."

"In my opinion Excession is your strongest culture novel to date. Are you planning further additions to the sequence and if so what do you see as possible avenues for further development in the culture? "

"Possibly... There will probably be at least one more culture novel. But I've no idea what avenue it's going to follow next."

"If you were a packet of crisps what flavour would you be?"

"Haggis!"

"That's it we're afraid. Here's Iain Banks with a final word..."

"Well this has been a fascinating experience but unfortunately I've got to go now... I'm going to have to get hooked up the Internet! Goodbye. Thank you for all your questions."
