An Interview With Iain M. Banks on the 25th Anniversary of the Culture

About the Author

Iain Banks came to controversial public notice with the publication of his first novel, The Wasp Factory, in 1984. Consider Phlebas, his first science fiction novel, was published under the name Iain M. Banks in 1987. He is now widely acclaimed as one of the most powerful, innovative and exciting writers of his generation. Iain M. Banks lives in Edinburgh, Scotland.

In *The Hydrogen Sonata* you explore the concept of 'subliming', whereby advanced civilisations achieve a higher level of existence. You've touched on this theme in previous Culture novels, as well as exploring the idea of digital hells in *Surface Detail*. What is it about these alternative states of being that entices you to write about them?

I guess it's all part of the process of exploring the possibilities the future might offer. The history of technology is largely about wish-fulfilment, even dream-fulfilment: as a species we dreamed of being able to fly, of holding conversations with people on the other side of the world, of exploring and travelling to other worlds… well, our technology has achieved these things. Historically one of the areas we've been busiest in, coming up with usually comforting but frankly unlikely dreams, is that of existence after death, or just avoiding death in the first place; the kind of stuff, in other words, that religions tend to deal with. Now, while religions tell us next to nothing useful or true about the universe, they do tell us an enormous amount – perhaps an embarrassing amount – about ourselves, about what we value, fear and lust after. It is now those dreams that we might realistically think about fulfilling. And that's fertile territory for a skiffy writer, and relevant, because we stand on the brink of creating things like gods – AIs – , we continue to significantly extend our life spans and we seem on the way to blurring the boundary between the real and the virtual to the point of irrelevance. On matters where only religious writing and faith previously seemed qualified to comment, SF is now able to speak with some degree of authority, or – at the very least – propose alternative angles for looking at the same dreams. Though of course there will always be those who choose to disagree, unable to accept that religions are simply part of our wacky narrative history rather than direct, if laughably contradictory, conduits to absolute truth.

The rise and fall of civilisations and empires is another recurring theme in your Culture novels, and *The Hydrogen Sonata* is concerned with the tumultuous last days of a race known as the Gzilt. What is it that fascinates you about the ends of civilisations? In addition, how far is the endless cycle of civilisations in your Culture universe symptomatic of your belief that existence is just – to use your own term – 'outrageous chaos'?

I think you'd have to have the heart of a cabbage not to be interested in empires falling and civilisations meeting their ends. We love tragedy as much as comedy, and while we might

appreciate, admire and even vicariously glory in the rise to power of somebody or something great, we are certainly capable of appreciating their fall with at least equal relish. Again, SF gives you the opportunity to talk about this kind of stuff, and to custom-build the setting it all happens within to let you better make your point (history has the unfortunate quality of being, generally, pretty much fixed. Even the most zealous revisionism can only take you so far).

I suspect the endless-cycling thing going on in the Culture novels is largely about me trying to reconcile the age and scale of the universe – actually, just this galaxy – with the plausible life spans of both creatures even vaguely like ourselves and the likely duration of their institutions, empires and civilisations. Throughout the Culture sequence especially I've tried to give an impression of the scale of the context beyond the immediate focus of the narrative, both physically and chronologically, and to emphasise that there are lots of different ways for civilisations to interact and develop; with the last three Culture books in particular I've been trying to make it clear that there is a lot more to the galactic meta-civilisation than just the Culture – it's actually a fairly small fraction of the whole.

Beyond that, I might query the "just" in that sentence, "existence is just … 'outrageous chaos'": a place within that chaos, that vast unfolding of randomness and pursuance, might be what we're ascending – hopefully and erratically – towards, and what we'll be lucky ever to achieve. I'd argue that you don't even start to become a part of it until you get all your eggs out of the one home-planet basket.

Music is a prominent feature of The Hydrogen Sonata and seems to play a significant role in your own life – you've previously reviewed music for a radio show and have admitted that you're "a sucker for a good tune", although an interviewer noted in 2009 that your piano rendition of Chopsticks was 'faltering'. How polished are your musical skills these days, and do you listen to music while you write?

I refute that entirely unwarranted assertion robustly! I've never been able to play "Chopsticks" and I still can't. I can play the first four bars of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. So well, indeed, that it remains a constant source of surprise to me that the rest of the piece continues to repel my assaults upon it. My conventional musical skills, then, remain quite entirely miserable. However, my skills at putting together pieces of – for want of a better term – music using a terribly clever bit of software called Logic Pro 9 running on a 27" iMac – along with an interface, a few outboard sound modules, a mixer desk and some frighteningly unforgiving speakers – have become sufficient that at least one person is genuinely impressed with the results (though that person would, admittedly, be me).

I listen to music whenever I write. The radio, as a rule: Radios One and Six for pop-rock-hip-hop-neo-folk-whatever usually, though, these days, Radio Three with lots of classical music, too, and occasional dips into Two (can't be doing with talk radio, or radio with adverts). I have multiple playlists ready to go, if there's too much talk on the radio, and Glenn Gould playing Bach as a sort of ultimate resort, for when I really need to concentrate on the words being rattled off the qwerty keyboard and even people singing seems somehow overly intrusive and distracting (distant humming along with the tune is just about acceptable).

With the 25th anniversary of the Culture series now upon us (*Consider Phlebas* was published in 1987), have you come to regard the series as your life's work? Do you think you'll ever 'complete' the series, or do you still have a long list of ideas that you want to explore?

I suppose the Culture series will form the largest part of my life's work; it's unlikely I'll come up with another over-arching structure on the same scale now. I'm perfectly happy with that. I'll keep writing about the Culture for as long as I still feel there are new things to say, new avenues to explore. It's important that I feel able to write SF outside the Culture, but even within it the restrictions are minimal; most of the action in most of the Culture books takes place well outside the Culture itself, and it's been that way since the beginning, with *Phlebas*.

I don't intend ever to complete it; I decided right from the start to resist the temptation to tear it all down at any point, and this has become sort of indicative and symbolic of the nature and demeanour of the Culture itself, now: it means to resist completion and put off Subliming, so that it can keep on going, sticking around in the Real and trying to do good (as it sees it), for as long as it can, and it's already envisaging that when it does finally fade away, it'll be when its going will hardly be noticed, because being something like the Culture – behaving like it – will be pretty much the default state for all galactic civilisations. (Though, in this, it could, of course, be completely wrong.)

I've more than enough material and ideas for another full-on Culture novel, and that has been the case for at least the last decade or so, no matter where I've been in the Culture-novel-writing cycle, as new ideas keep on coming along at a slow but steady rate. At the moment I'm tempted to try something a bit more oblique next time, though I'm also tempted to go with something tighter and more wildly kinetic, too… Who can say? We'll see.

You've been writing in the Culture universe for nearly three decades – how do you keep things fresh, and do you still approach new novels with the same sense of excitement? Do you feel you still have anything to prove?

I keep things as fresh as they are – however fresh that may be – by still finding new things to write about. Sometimes these come from brand new ideas – like the Shellworlds in Matter – and sometimes they come from throw-away ideas – sometimes just single words – in earlier novels (like the airspheres first mentioned in Phlebas turning up again in Look To Windward). The whole Subliming thing in Hydrogen Sonata is another example; Subliming had been mentioned in various culture novels and I'd never really thought much about it – it just gave me an out for civilisations without them having to collapse in the classical, Ozymandian sense. Then people at signings and in interviews began to ask about it, so I started to think about it properly and decided/realised that it was an important part of the whole context of the Culture and the rest of the civilised galactic scene, and could provide an interesting setting in which to tell a story. (This is as close as I ever get, or want to get, to audience participation.) I still needed an idea for a plot, and so the initial idea might have sat on the shelves for years waiting for one, but then, fortuitously, a plot suggested itself and the book was ready to go almost immediately. I can remember where and when the idea came to me: I was lying on a sort of bubble-bed wotsit at the side of a large swimming pool, in the sunlight at a spa complex called Archena, in southern Spain, in October 2011, thinking about an edition of QI I'd seen a week or two earlier, in which Stephen Fry had mentioned something called The Great Disappointment. Bang; the plot of The Hydrogen Sonata just unfolded in my head.

I guess a little of the excitement I used to feel starting a novel has ebbed away over the years; it's my life, my career, my living, and I've got used to writing a novel more or less every year, so to some degree it's part of a routine, not the dazzling new adventure it used to be. But that's okay, because there are compensations, and the fact that I oscillate between mainstream and SF means that I'm always writing something different from the last book. Plus there is, anyway, invariably a point where the book I'm writing, regardless of genre, sort of takes over and energises the whole process; I get all wrapped up in it and come close to forgetting that I've ever written anything else.

Also, if you have any sort of ambition, pride in your work or even self-respect, in a sense you always have something to prove. I'm getting to the sort of age now when I need to prove there's life in the old dog yet, and fully intend to keep on attempting to do so until it becomes positively embarrassing for all concerned. (In this scenario, the lunch where your publisher takes you somewhere nice but then asks pointedly what your plans are for your retirement represents the equivalent of the smelly mutt's last trip to the vet.)

The Culture is the ultimate utopia: an egalitarian, post-scarcity society, whose citizens want for nothing and do not fear illness or disease, instead being free to live lives of apparent luxury. Yet what power exists in the Culture is firmly in the hands of the Minds, which are artificial intelligences. To what extent are you suggesting that humankind could not achieve a utopia like that of the Culture without ceding control to machines? Is human nature too destructive and corruptible to ever achieve such a utopia otherwise?

In a sense I'm trying to pre-empt objections to the very idea of the Culture. Suggesting that beings much like us can achieve a functioning utopia as though it's part of our plausible, easily-envisaged future, our expected and plausible destiny, always seemed a bit wishy-washy to me; too much like just wish-fulfilment. Arguably we express as too inherently nasty, too prone to become violent, too prone to xenophobia and too easily en-mired in our noxious mythologies of false comfort and dubious exceptionalism for this to make sense (narrative, psychological or philosophical). Taking away the excuse that we need to be mean and selfish to others because, heck, there just ain't enough of everything to go around… well, that's one step, but I suspect that while it might be necessary to achieve a hi-tech utopia, it's not sufficient. The Minds – the Culture's high-level AIs – are the other part of the equation. The humans create them and enough of these god-like entities stick around to save us from ourselves. The children create the adults, and behave better as a result. I submit this is no more likely to be wrong than the idea that as soon as we create an AI it'll try to exterminate us is right – that's the us in it talking, if I can put it that way; that's our guilty conscience articulating. The final get-out is that in the end the mongrel Culture, though suspiciously human-like in so many ways, isn't us, so they might just be naturally nicer than we'd ever be in the same situation. Cos that's evolution, that is.

Anyway, one of the side-tracks of the Culture I'm thinking about exploring at some point is one of the parts of it where Minds don't get involved, and people run everything themselves; they'd have computers, I guess, but no Minds. Smart help without any of that concomitant but deeply annoying wisdom. I am not yet sure how this will go.

The tricky thing about claiming we'll ever create a utopian society is that our record up to this point is so lamentable: you can create something as close to utopia as technologically possible at any point in your development once you have a reliable surplus of food and goods; it's not about having rocket-belts, floating cities or even smart-alec drones, it's about having the shared urge, resolve and will to behave decently, altruistically and non-xenophobically towards your fellow human beings, whether your latest invention was the wheel, moveable type or an FTL drive. And in that respect – I humbly submit – we've been heading backwards quite rapidly over the last thirty years or so. It would be pleasant to believe that we're starting to pull up and out of our nose-dive into the morass of Greedism and Marketolatry that has characterised our civilisation for the last three decades, but frankly it's still too early to tell yet.

You've mentioned before that you created the Culture as a deliberate response to the science fiction of the time, which was largely concerned with dystopias. To what extent was your earlier science fiction deliberately aimed at challenging genre conventions, or was your subverting of certain tropes merely a by-product of your desire to tell a ripping story? And is it important for SF writers to strike out into uncharted territory, or is the story all that really matters?

I don't think I saw it as challenging genre conventions as such; I just did what any fan of a genre (who has ambitions to create within that genre) does: look at what's on offer, think "I can do that," and then "But I want to do it differently, I want to do it this way." Especially in SF, it seems right to try to improve on what's already been produced, to take matters forward, to climb onto the shoulders of the giants who have gone before. What I wanted to read – and so to write – was SF with the energy, vitality and can-do attitude of so much great American SF, but which was as well written as so much of the usually more reflective, nuanced and less gung-ho British stuff. What I wanted to avoid was what I saw as the economic – and to some degree political – naivety of the US writers and the sheer god-awful sub-Orwellian miserablism of the Brits. Whether I've succeeded or not isn't for me to say, but either way I'm sure I've managed to introduce my own intrinsic, embedded annoyances that other writers have been, are and will be reacting against for some time. This is entirely right and proper, by the way, and just the way the whole system works. So there.

I think with SF yes, you do, generally, need to strike out into uncharted territory, though there will always be writers for whom the story is all that really matters. Room in the field for both.

The serene image of the Culture hides a dark underbelly: the various agents and AIs that stay in the shadows, working to protect the Culture's existence and future by monitoring and

meddling in the affairs of other civilisations. To what extent is this persistent interference a reflection of real-world events? You were a vocal critic of the Iraq war, so is it fair to assume that you are influenced by international politics and that your feelings about world events work their way into your novels, perhaps in some cases even driving them?

It's not a deliberate or thought-out policy, though, as I've always said, even space opera isn't written in a vacuum (repeat until funny … thank you Mark and Lard). So events in reality will seep in, I guess. The position implied regarding the use of torture in *Transition* is entirely a reaction to then (and still) current events and effectively my contribution to the debate. Shameful though it is that we should even be having it.

Despite being a pacifistic utopia that promotes tolerance, the Culture's 'Special Circumstances' division sometimes resorts to shady practices to defend its civilisation's 'moral right to exist'. Do you regard any of these practices as ethically problematic, or is any act acceptable when it's geared towards protecting the ultimate utopia?

Very ethically problematic. The Culture itself – both en masse and in the shape of the tiny numbers of people and machines engaged in or in any relevant way connected to that sort of behaviour – is disturbed by the very idea that such actions might ever be justified. That's why they don't do it very often and they're constantly re-calibrating the moral cost-benefit balance through the use of assiduously gathered and honestly deployed statistics (said a Culture spokesperson). Of course, my need to tell a story of even the slightest degree of rip-roaringness means that the novels tend to concentrate on exactly the kind of life-threatening mayhem that the entire Culture is very carefully designed to obviate, both within it and – to the extent that it reasonably and ethically can project its values – around it. The impression the books might give is that this action-adventure stuff is happening all the time all over the place, and that's just not true. (But there we are – that's fiction.) Technically, also, any Mind would tell you that the more often you have to resort to bad behaviour to keep yourself safe, the less plausible your claim to be part of a utopia is. A true utopia implies an inclusivity, a comprehensiveness – limited only by consent – or it's not really a utopia at all. Living in a gated community and employing hired muscle to keep you comfy does not mean that you live in a little utopia. It means you live in a dystopia and happen to be one of the privileged.

A sense of humour runs through all of the Culture novels, whether it's in the form of an eccentric drone or in your famously unconventional ship names – and the humour isn't just limited to humans. If we consider humour to be something of a coping mechanism, how important is it as a pre-requisite to a civilisation's development and continued existence? And while we're on topic, where *do* you get those ship names from?

Very good question. We'll never truly know until we either meet proper space aliens or create some really high-end virtual civilisations of our own, inside a computer. I suspect – hazarding – it's all-important. Not as a deliberate ploy or strategy you can choose to pursue but as a near-infallibly significant emergent property. I think it's pretty much accepted there is a strong link between what you might call a broad, well-balanced intelligence, and wit. So I'm assuming, anyway. Sadly, being just one very limited human being, I can't make the Minds as cutting, witty and just plain smart as they really would be (did they actually exist – I have to keep reminding myself they don't. This is very annoying).

Ah, the ship names. Sometimes they're a result of me just keeping my ears open, but mostly they come from me trying to think myself into the mind-set of the Minds (or at least a reasonably clued-up human Culture citizen – let's not get too ambitious, given the above and how much I've banged on in book after book about the transcendently ineffable intellectual fabulousness of the Minds). Then I just think about how the Culture would look upon a bunch of barbarians like us, and take it from there.

I am aware this is not a furiously helpful answer. My apologies.

You've created a vast setting where theoretically almost anything is possible. While this gives you an impressively large and expansive canvas to work with, is it important to instil a sense

of realism and humanity in your characters? Or is the whole notion of realism (as we understand it) a redundant concept in a world where many people live in hedonistic bliss?

Well, you have to have the feeling that the writer can't just write him or herself into a corner and then do the with-one-mighty-leap-he-was-free! thing. There's no jeopardy, no tension and little interest if you do that. You are allowed to feel that the writer's on the side of the protagonist, but not that they're necessarily going to make sure everything's going to work out all right no matter what (actually that's not true; there are lots of series in lots of media where that's exactly what people want and what they get. Again; room in all the fields for all tastes). And there has to be realism in any depiction of utopia. There is still failure, embarrassment, thwarted ambition, unrequited love and the possibility of suffering a broken heart, even in the Culture. Not to mention existential despair at the utter incorrigibility of one's fellow, less morally developed galaxy-users, almost no matter where or when you care to look.

Ever since *Consider Phlebas*, large set-pieces (often involving big explosions, which you're a self-professed fan of) have been a regular feature of the Culture novels. Is writing these epic sequences your favourite part of penning a new story, or do you take equal satisfaction from the interactions of your characters and exploring political and social ideas through their deeds?

It is one of the most enjoyable bits, I do confess. Ultimately, the thing I enjoy most is putting together a good, well-balanced novel; the set-pieces, like any other aspect, can't be allowed to play too big a part in that or the whole thing gets out of kilter. Still, I'd love to pack another novel with as many action sequences as Phlebas, but then that was the result of sweeping up a couple of decades-worth of such ideas (most of which had been left on the shelf because they were so preposterously over-the-top … or under-the-bottom in the case of the fist-fight under the giant hovercraft) and cramming them into the one novel just for the hell of it, so I guess that isn't going to happen unless I stop writing for an unfeasibly long time – even supposing I keep on having that sort of idea in the first place. Still, keeping that kinetic quality in the Culture books is important to me. The characters just have to make their way through the stories and plots as best they can and frankly I pretty much leave them to it. The political and social ideas I touch upon are equally subject to being bundled and tumbled along by the story, rather than ever being granted central stage. Best is when it all comes together and the characters, the story and the ideas all coalesce within a given sequence, producing something – in its own modest way – transcendent. That's the gold standard, that's the longed-for ideal.

Still working on that.

Maybe one day…