Use of Weapons by Iain M Banks

Iain M Banks   August 3, 2012

'I am happy to report that the book still has some structure.' Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

The original draft of *Use of Weapons* dates from 1974 and was packed with purple prose of the look-I've-got-a-thesaurus-and-I'm-going-to-use-it/never-use-one-adjective-when-six-will-do school. (Oh, I should add that, having written three unpublished novels by this time, one of them immensely long, and a 30,000-word novella, I must have decided that writing one book at a time was somehow too easy, so when I started writing *UoW* I started another novel at the same time. It was called *Ecliptic*. My notes describe it as "gloomy planetary SF". I'd write it one day, *UoW* the next, and so on. I lost interest in *Ecliptic* about 20,000 words in, and *UoW* just sort of shouldered it out of the way. It was like watching a cuckoo pushing the unhatched eggs out of the nest to fall to the forest floor.

But enough of that. Besides all the adjectives, *UoW* was also hobbled by a manically complicated structure that was really only comprehensible with a diagram. Themes like "imprisonment" and "flight as freedom" were arranged on intersecting X/Y axes, with any given chapterette therefore described by two themes, both of which had to be woven into it. Those named above were on the same axis and so never collided in this way, but if they had I'd probably have imagined a prison on an aircraft or something ...

Anyway, clusters of chapters gradually accrued an extra theme as the book ground on, until the dead centre of the thing, where the axes were reversed, after which point the themes were gradually stripped away again, chapter-cluster by chapter-cluster, until by the end you were back to the relative simplicity of a single final scene burdened with only one implicit theme. (In my defence, I was at university at the time and somebody must have mentioned the word "structuralism" – a term that galvanised me far too rapidly and profoundly to be bothered to find out what it actually meant.)

I was deeply proud of this structure, and the fact that it meant – indeed, demanded – that the book's surprise ending be located right at the centre, so that the whole, extremely long, second half was a complete anti-climax. It seemed like a small price to pay for the sheer shiningly precise perfection of the finished construction.

A little later, around the time when I started thinking about the next novel – *Against a Dark Background* – I decided that maybe this whole ending-in-the-middle thing wasn't the brave example of radical, rule-breaking experimentalism I'd imagined after all, and was basically a fundamental flaw. Fired up, as ever, with total enthusiasm for the next book, I immediately wrote *UoW* off as contemptible dross not worth bothering about.

It was my pal Ken MacLeod who asked to read it again, in the mid-80s. I told him he was mad. He took it away, read it, then said he reckoned there was a good novel in there struggling to get out. I told him he was mad again. Undaunted, he revealed a plan: use a much simpler, two-strand structure, with – and this was the clever bit – one strand going forward in time and the other going back, both leading to their own climax, at the end.

It was one of those clichéd, filmic moments when I looked at him and breathed: "You know, old buddy, that might just work …" Or so I recall. Actually, knowing me, I probably told him he was mad again.

This laying-off of any potential praise continues, I'm afraid. James Hale, my brilliant editor and good friend, the man who – along with his future wife, Hilary – had discovered *[The Wasp Factory](#)*, suggested that to keep *UoW*'s narrative honest, the authorial voice should never use the (false) name of one of the characters. I told him he was mad, too, then went off, tried it, and realised that, like Ken, he was right.

As a result, what may still be my best SF novel is largely the work of others. So, in a Vonnegutian sense, it goes. On the other hand, there are places where the writing falls beneath what I hope are my current, more sophisticated standards. On the other hand, I am happy to report that the book still has some structure, besides Ken's suggested two-stream idea. It's based around the idea of concentricity, and if you open the book right in the physical middle, you should find the section of the narrative that goes furthest back in time, and the image of somebody repetitively throwing stones into water …

Plus, *UoW* gave birth to the Culture. But that, of course, is another story.