

# Interview

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Iain Banks is one of Scotland's most successful and prolific novelists, having published seven books in the last five years. **The Wasp Factory** ("Perhaps it is all a joke, meant to literary London into respect for rubbish" - The Times; "A gothic horror story of quite exceptional quality" - The Financial Times) made its controversial appearance in 1984. This summer MacMillan published his latest, **Canal Dreams**. James Robertson spoke to him about his work.

**IB :** I was born in Dunfermline and brought up until I was nine in North Queensferry. We lived at the top of the village and my bedroom looked out over the Forth Bridge. When we left they were still in the process of building the road bridge which was opened in 1964.

My father worked in the admiralty and was based in Rosyth until 1963 when he went to Greenock. We lived in Gourock. I went to Stirling University '72-'75, and spent the 4 years after that getting wee daft jobs and travelling; I then moved to London in 1979. I headed south for the usual reason - I couldn't find any work here. I got a job as a "law costs draughtsperson" - that's the grandest version of it - really a lawyers clerk drawing up and justifying the outrageous fees charged to clients - corporations and rich individuals as a rule. It was quite a good training for fiction in itself. I left in 1984 when *The Wasp factory* came out and it looked like it was economically viable to give up the day job.

**JR :** Your books, particularly **The Wasp Factory**, seem to provoke reviewers to extremes of both praise and damnation. When I read **The Wasp factory** I was amazed at the people who condemned it. They didn't seem to be able to distinguish between you as the author and the things that your characters get up to. How do you react to that kind of criticism?

**IB :** I was intensely amused. It was personal to me in that the reviewers who were negative were talking about my own personal depravity, but that's not the sort of thing you can lose any sleep over. I was disappointed that they could lose their cool like that. I thought and still think that there is a hell of a lot wrong with the English and London literary scene, but I thought that at least they could be urbane. It didn't actually hurt because it was so crazy, it was so over the top. I thought that some of the pro reviews were over the top as well!

The archetypal negative review was the one in The Times that said that it "soars to the level of mediocrity". It just seemed so crass. You can call **The Wasp Factory** lots of things, but I wouldn't say that it is mediocre by anybody's definition, but this guy said it was rubbish. When I read that review I literally cried with laughter. Later I found out - the really hilarious part - that his day job when he wasn't writing reviews for The Times was working for Conservative Party Central Office. That was just the icing on the cake - "I don't **want** a review from you bastards!"

I think that the general standard of reviewing in this country is pretty awful. It's much better in America where views are much more balanced - they're not always trying to praise the best thing since sliced bread. More measured overall, and they actually read the books properly. No, I'm not a fan of the reviewing process.

**JR :** One of the things that struck me about **The Wasp Factory** was how honest the writing was. Whatever else one thinks of the book it doesn't shirk from delving into the adolescent imagination.

**IB :** I don't think that you can avoid it - not if you're trying to write seriously about that sort of thing.

**JR :** But that point was missed by a lot of people.

**IB** : Oh sure. For a start I don't think that these people had ever read any horror novels. But neither had I. It was not the background I had come from either. I have had horror fans coming up to me at science fiction conventions saying, "I read **The Wasp Factory** and quite liked it, but I read the whole way through waiting for something really nasty to happen." But I think a lot of the reaction of the reviewers was that they had been conned into reading what they regarded as a horror novel because it came from a good and respectable publisher. If you're constantly reading stuff about divorce and adultery in Hamstead, **The Wasp Factory** really would knock you for six.

**JR** : Do you read horror writers like Stephen King and Guy Smith and so on?

**IB** : No, I don't. After the Wasp Factory somebody gave me a Stephen King book to read **Christine** which annoyed me because I cannot take the supernatural seriously and anything that involves it just leaves me cold. I really enjoyed the book for its insights into the whole rigmarole of American dating and small town life, but that was it, and it could have been done in something like a quarter of the length. That is the only Stephen king novel I have read. I understand that he is a nice guy. he writes quite well and has lots of wonderful ideas but it's not my cup of tea.

**JR** : There is a strong link between the horrific and the fantastic, and fantasy - particularly in the form of dreams - comes into your books an awful lot, especially in **Canal Dreams**. The heroine Hisako Onada, has dreams which are extremely vivid and bloody even before the real violence starts. Do you use fantasy as an allegory of reality or do you just let loose a very vivid imagination?

**IB** : Well, I suppose a bit of both. I find I have self-imposed restrictions about writing fantasy involving the supernatural magic, ghosts and ghoulies and so on. The only way around that is to use dreams, or a science fiction setting, or a coma as used in *The Bridge*. I use fantasy as the nuts and bolts of my writing to show the grotesque and fantastic aspects of the human psyche, but in the end my writing comes down to a secular. humanist framework, certainly a materialist one.

**JR** : **Espedair Street**, to go on to another novel, is almost like one long fantasy - the rise and fall of a rock band. Would it be fair to describe it as an affectionate piss-take of the rock idol mythology of the last two or three decades?

**IB** : That would be a fair description of it, but not the only one. you don't write books in a vacuum. They have to relate to what has come before and may happen in the future. I had written books that were very complex - **Walking on Glass** and **The Bridge** - and I was looking for something simpler, something completely set in the real world. *Espedair Street* came out in the same year as *Consider Phlebas* which is purely space opera, but I wanted to get some fantastic elements into *Espedair Street* and quite cold-bloodedly thought, well, where do you get people living out their fantasie? And it's working class kids getting hold of gigantic amounts of money and fame. Football has always been one of the great working class escapes, but the other one, even more so nowadays - the scale of it - is rock music, and it just struck me that it gave me carte blanche to do what I wanted. Everybody knows the stuff that has gone before - Keith Moon driving the Rolls Royce into the pool and so on. Yes, a fertile vein to mine, and one that has been fairly well ignored by most people.

**JR** : You mentioned separating out the strands of your fiction into science fiction and "mainstream" - for want of a better word. There's a big no-go area for a lot of readers between the strands. People who read science fiction very often won't read any mainstream and more so the other way. You obviously bridge that gap as a writer. Do you hope to take readers across the gap as well?

**IB** : I'll take some. If I'd had a proper campaign I would have done it differently: Having **Consider Phlebas** as the first S.F. novel, if that was a deliberate policy, was a complete mistake because it is not just science fiction, it is space opera and there are a lot of people in science fiction who as contemptuous an attitude towards space opera as people outside science fiction have for science fiction as a whole.

**JR** : You'd better explain to me what space opera is.

**IB** : There are lots of types of science fiction. They exist in coherent separate blocks in people's minds. Space opera works on a broad canvas, it gives an impression of the operatic where some science fiction might feel like a small ensemble. Space opera is going for the big effect, with lots of characters, gigantic space ships and is usually set in a context of conflict. Yet in a way I am just trying to tell a yarn. There's all this space paraphernalia but you can paraphrase the story as just being about a ship-wrecked sailor who falls in with a gang of pirates and goes off in search of buried treasure. It's a yarn set in S.F. terms.

**JR** : Robert Louis Stevenson "somewhere out there"?

**IB** : Something like that, yes.

**JR** : In the non-science fiction novels, your main characters, certainly in *Espedair street* and **The Bridge**, strike me as being local boys that made good but who still have a kind of political, social conscience in spite of the fact that they've got the fast cars, the expensive tastes and so on. They either haven't forgotten their roots or they haven't been able to escape from them. And in **The Bridge** there's a good sense of the society of '70s, 80's Edinburgh which is again reflected in the futuristic bridge society. Maybe it's not consciously a political book but I felt that you were making some quite telling points about society. How much of all this is yourself coming through and how much are you deliberately trying to make political points?

**IB** : That's me coming through. That's why I'm happier about the political aspect of **Canal Dreams** than I am with **The Bridge** even though *The Bridge* is a far better book - it's the best of the bunch in the terms of the actual craft of the novel. But **Canal Dreams** is a political novel, **The Bridge** isn't really. There's some good lines in there about Reagan and Thatcher and so on, but they're spoken more or less as me talking to the camera. The political is not embedded in the context of the book. It's just really dialogue.

**JR** : In **The Wasp Factory** Frank turns out to be a victim as well; even though he does these horrendous things to animals and so on, he is actually a victim - a pretty serious victim. But **Canal Dreams** is obviously much more political. you've got your central American liberation struggle, your CIA plot, and a heroine who seems to be haunted by the self-doubt of Japan's post-Hiroshima, market-driven culture. Certainly the second half of the book, after the lid is blown off, reads like a political thriller of the left - lots of blood and guts, but not glorifying it. A sort of Frederick Forsyth set-up but coming from a completely different angle.

**IB** : A large part of what I've tried to do is to take specific scenarios that have been abandoned by the good guys, and do them from a fresh point of view. Most space opera, for example, is American. It's usually quite sexist imperialist, and subtly racist and I just felt that the intellectual, the moral high ground of it had been abandoned by the left and that it was too good a form of writing to waste, albeit a bit gaudy. And the same with political thrillers where the baddies always seem to be in the Kremlin. Again it's too tempting a field to miss.

**JR** : A lot of women writers have turned to S.F. because they can explore feminist ideas there which they can't explore in the present world - they can set up a future world to accommodate these ideas and develop them. talking to people I know who have read your books, it seems to me that your readership is quite heavily male, youngish male. I don't know if you feel that's true or not.

**IB** : Tricky. I'd say yes, probably the majority, which is unfortunate. I'd rather it was more evenly balanced. I think the reason for this is the way the first book was perceived. The fact that **The Wasp Factory** was seen as a horror book, gory and all the rest of it, and because people have looked at the more grotesque aspects of the subsequent books, has had this effect. I don't pull punches. I think it has frightened off more women than it has men, which is a pity.

**JR** : Going back to **The Bridge**, the two worlds that you describe in it - the Edinburgh world and the futuristic society living on this great elongated bridge - reminded me a lot of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, the split narrative there. Are you influenced by any particular Scottish writers at the

moment, and what do you think of the idea of a Scottish tradition in literature, the whole idea of Scottish writing as a distinct entity?

**IB :** Certainly of all the books I've written, **The Bridge** is the one that was most influenced by any other single work, definitely *Lanark* - I don't think **The Bridge** would be the way it is at all if it wasn't for *Lanark*. I was extremely impressed by it and still think it is one of the best pieces of Scottish literature at least since the second world war and possibly this century. Apparently Gray prefers 1982 *Janine* which is slightly surprising. About the Scottish literature thing. I'm always very wary about lumping people together because it so often doesn't work. I think maybe it used to when you had a cafe society and a group of chaps that used to get together for a few bowls of tobacco in their long-stemmed pipes to discuss issues of the day and to agree to write in a particular fashion, criticise each other and so on. I just don't think it works these days. But certainly there is an increasing awareness in the last ten years of the differences between Scotland and England, which does have a blanket effect on all writers working here. I don't really know enough about Scottish literature, so I'm very dubious about saying "Yes, I'm part of this tradition". I'm certainly part of the English \_language\_ tradition. I've been a lot more influenced by *Catch 22*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Tin Drum*, and almost anything by Kafka, than by anything in Scottish literature apart from the single exception of *Lanark*. The extent to which i am different to someone born in Reading or somewhere who had the same influences would be the crucial test ....but I don't think that you can run controls on people in that way.

**JR :** I wonder if the fact of being a writer in Scotland makes it easier or more likely that you will have access to work in English from non-English writers - americans, Canadians , Australians and so on, while somebody who's working in London might be dragged into that London-oriented culture.

**IB :** I don't know. Obviously there's just as much access down there to, say, American writing. To me there's a tremendous advantage in being Scottish and that is lack of imperial guilt, which i guess applies even more to the Irish. another thing that has dogged the literature of England itself is this ghastly division between the arts and sciences, which is one reason I get such a hard time from reviewers because most of them tend to be really snotty about irrelevant useless professions like science engineering, biology, chemistry. And then there's the whole thing about class. In that sense the distinctions in English society apply to literary society and are immense. there is this ghastly snobbery of going to the right school and especially the right University. There's an attitude that if you're bright and working class and go to Oxford then you're OK.

**JR :** There's also a division between what's literary and what's popular - the same sort of idea as cutting off science fiction because it's to do with engineering or something. Even the books that get published nowadays in paperback, the crap stuff is in A format and the snooty stuff is in B format.

**IB :** **The Wasp Factory** actually went from one to the other!

**JR :** One last question. What are you doing advertising sherry on the backs of colour supplements?

**IB :** It's a drink - what's wrong with that? They rang me up and asked me if I'd like to advertise sherry so I said fair enough. I do occasionally drink a sherry as an aperitif, and I did actually buy a bottle of Croft Particular for my Mum and Dad as part of their Christmas present a few years ago. So I'm perfectly justified!

**JR :** A genuine advert for a change!

**IB :** I once modelled clothes for the Italian issue of *Vogue*. It's interesting to do these things, to see how they're done. I'll do anything once. To me it's all experience.

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