

Interview

THE first thing that strikes you about Iain Banks is how likeable he is. Anyone who has read his books will know the twisted, painful deaths awaiting many characters, particularly the heroes, whom you cheer on to the last page only for some twist to befall them.

It's a fact that he shrugs off with his booming infectious laugh, which peppers conversations. "HAHAHAHAHA yeah, they have a pretty tough time of it, especially in the science-fiction novels, but there's the occasional sort of happy ending," he points out, proudly.

"Normally, happy endings are really schmaltzy. Everybody else is doing that and if you watch a standard Hollywood movie you get that. There are far too many schmaltzy endings and it's been far too well covered already; I wouldn't want to do it."

*Iain Banks burst on to the literary scene in 1984 with *The Wasp Factory*. Since then, he has notched up a number of successes, including *The Crow Road*, *The Bridge* and *Complicity*, and he writes under the name Iain M. Banks for science-fiction titles, including *Consider Phlebas*, *Excession*, and *Inversions*, just out in paperback.*

At first dubbed the Scottish Bard of Depravity, a title he says he has passed on to Irvine Welsh, he now has an air of respectability about him, but still finds painful deaths for his characters. And he readily admits that he enjoys it.

"It's kind of obvious in the things that happen to unpleasant people; you can't set them up if you're not going to knock them down.

"Sometimes, someone is carrying out an-eye-for-an-eye type revenge, like when you hear of some judge blaming a woman for getting herself raped, then find him being violated in a similar manner. The moral would be tied up in the idea."

Some of the books have also carried digs at politics and more especially the morality of politics: it's not an area he shies away from.

"In the last general election, I voted SNP, not because I'm any great nationalist as such, which is something I'm kind of agnostic about, but it's because they had a more left-wing outlook with what they would do for the young, the elderly, getting rid of Trident.

"That was one of the best nights of my life -- it was great just to see them (*the Tories*) get kicked out. Unlike a lot of my friends, I managed to stay up to see Portillo get chucked out." *The laugh booms again.*

"But I'm not very impressed with things like continuation of privatisation -- that doesn't sit well with me at all -- and I really don't like student loans. One of the general obscenities of capitalism is that you can work for a company for 40 years and then you are just slung out, whereas a shareholder who just bought in yesterday or last week, their interests have to be protected; that's just wrong." *The boom which at times carries the laugh can also carry words.*

*While he disdains Hollywood, non-book mediums have been kind to him. *Espedair Street* was a success on radio, *Complicity* is currently being filmed with *Trainspotting*'s Johnny Lee Miller in the lead role and *The Wasp Factory* has been an acclaimed stage production. But it is TV production of *The Crow Road*, starring Joe McFadden, that has brought the most acclaim.*

Iain, however, takes no credit for that. "I didn't have any complaints; I thought it was excellent. I didn't have any input at all, which was the wisest thing to do. If you've no responsibility, you can't take the blame if it all goes wrong, but the thing is you can't take the praise, either, as that was all their own work.

*About his next book, *The Business*, he gives little away, saying only that it is a mainstream book, set in contemporary Britain. He started writing it in November, but it is already well into production and is expected out in August.*

After that, he says he will probably return to science fiction and his own universe, the Culture, a universe where the ships are more intelligent than the people and have names like Clear Air Turbulence, while the humans and aliens have fun most of the time, changing sex and race just as we change hair colours.

It's a place, he said, where he would dearly love to be. "It's my secular heaven, it's still where I'd like to live, I doubt I'll ever get fed up with it. I don't think I could ever write in someone else's universe like Star Wars or Star Trek, as it would be too restrictive.

"The whole thing with the ships started 20 years ago with the way artificial intelligence was going and I thought that, within 300 years, there would be ships intelligent enough to be in charge of themselves.

"I used to get annoyed at some of the names that would be given to ships, -- they always seemed a bit too gung-ho -- so I thought about ships having silly names that nonetheless fitted in with this Culture.

"The naming thing sort of took on a life of itself, to the point where there's now 50 pages with names -- about 2,500 names; it's crazy."

And if he was somehow transported to the Culture, what would Iain Banks be in a land where you can be anyone or anything?

"Yeah...I'd probably write stories." There goes that laugh again.
