

# Interview with Iain M. Banks



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**Iain.M.Banks' latest novel SF novel, *Excession*, was published in paperback in May. His new non-SF novel, *A Song of Stone*, was published in hardback in August. In between publicity tours, he took time out to give us a unique insight into one man and his "M"...**

**Your first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, was described by critics as both "the literary debut of the year" and "a work of unparalleled depravity". How did you feel about those reviews?**

At the time I was just delighted to have any reviews at all, so the fact that some of them slammed the book didn't matter. The very range of the reactions also kind of inoculated me against the effects reviews might have; as there was no consensus, and people disagreed so utterly whether the book deserved to win heaps of glittering prizes or be burned in bulk at a high temperature, it was hard to take the whole thing seriously. I suppose in the end it's best not to let either kind affect you; believe the glowing reviews and you might get big-headed and self-indulgent and think your work doesn't need editing; believe the bad ones and you might stop writing altogether.

**What is your ideal evening out with your closest friends?**

Easy; drink and curry! And then more drink.

**Your science fiction novels are widely reviewed by the non-genre press but, in general, do you think that science fiction is unfairly ignored?**

Yes. As the one literature primarily concerned with change and its effects on people and society, SF is – at least potentially – the most important literary form in the world.

**What's the best place in the world?**

Hey, like wherever you are when, gee, when you're feeling really, like mellow and cool, you know? Personally, the middle of Loch Shiel on a sunny day...laughing with pals round a pub table..sitting in a fast car or on a motorbike with a deserted Highland road stretching in front of me..or a bed of course.

**What's the worst place in the world?**

Trapped in a lift with the recent contenders for the Tory party leadership.

**Do you see any trends in science fiction, and how do you see the genre developing over the next 10 years?**

I'm sorry, but as an SF author I obviously have no insight into the future whatsoever. However I'm sure that whatever happens in the field, it'll be terribly exciting.

### **Are you an animal lover?**

I'm an animal-*liker*, I suppose, and I have been known to go a bit gooey over puppies and kittens and so on. I get on pretty well with cats and dogs – I think they appreciate meeting someone from our own species on their own intellectual level – but we don't have any pets because we're away so much. Instead we have a bird table outside the kitchen window which we keep well stocked during the winter, plus there are various grey squirrels which visit our window ledge and look almost unfeasibly cute.

### **Did you enjoy watching *The Crow Road* on television?**

Yep; thought it was very well done indeed; great script, cast and direction. A fine production altogether. It took me a while to get used to Ashley having short dark hair, and I didn't understand why Darren Watt killed himself rather than die in a motorbike accident, but these are about my only quibbles, and there are bits where the TV version is better than the book; the scene where Prentice at his lowest, squats down in the street to pet a dog and somebody puts some change into his hand thinking he must be begging, was just succinctly brilliant; the book took a whole chapter to say the same thing.

### **Have you thought about writing your own screenplay for your novels?**

Tried it with the first draft of *The Wasp Factory*; hated it. Never again.

### **Do you think that mankind is becoming more civilised?**

Well I should hope so, otherwise there's not much point, is there? Actually, I suppose it's our civilisation that's developing and maturing; we, of course, still carry the barbarian within us.

### **Do you own an anorak?**

No, but I have a fine selection of jackets, thank you.

### **How would you like to see your science fiction books filmed, if at all?**

With a very, very, very big budget indeed. The one I'd most like to see done is *Consider Phlebas*; if they kept in the sequence where the megaship hits the giant tabular iceberg, the fist-fight under the giant hovercraft, the bit where the *Clear Air Turbulence* escapes from the GSV, and the final train wreck, I wouldn't even mind if they changed it to a happy ending!

### **Are there any movies in the pipeline?**

Yes, but they're a long way up the pipeline and there's lots of places where they could leak out before they reach the end. *Complicity* has been optioned, so has *The Player of Games*, *The Wasp Factory* is still legally entangled, people have expressed interest in

making a film of *Espedair Street* and *Against A Dark Background* and *The Bridge* and *Whit* may become TV series. But don't hold your breath on any of those.

### **How do you think the 90's will be remembered?**

I have no idea; I get the answers to this sort of question from Sunday supplements like everybody else, so we'll all probably have to wait until December 1999 to find out.

### **How do you describe the new novel, *A Song of Stone*?**

Well, see, there's the Nice hopper and the Nasty hopper. In the Nice hopper recline books such as *Espedair Street*, *The Crow Road* and *Whit*. In the Nasty hopper are unpleasant pieces of work like *The Wasp Factory* and *Complicity*, lying festering in their own depravity. It is my sad duty to record that *A Song of Stone* has fallen – with a resounding thud which entirely and ominously belies its relative lack of bulk – into the Nasty hopper. Aside from that, it's got a lot of elemental symbolism in it, it's a bit flowery about the linguistics (guv), it has a vaguely North European setting with the implication that the story is taking place during the second half of the Twentieth Century, it out-bleaks *Complicity*, and that's about all I'm going to tell you.

### **What does the famous "M" stand for-literally and metaphorically?**

It stands for Menzies (the family's real name, as it turns out...but it's a long story). Metaphorically? No; it's definitely Menzies. Metaphorically would just be silly, now wouldn't it?

### **What do you think is the most useful definition of science fiction?**

I don't know, but I bet John Clute does.

### **If you have to live for one month as a character in a novel, which novel and which character would you choose?**

Hmm. Probably one of the minor Culture characters in a Culture book; being a utopia, it's hard to have a bad time in the Culture. Of course, this reflects a purely sociological interest on my part and has nothing to do with the drug glands and minutes-long orgasm. Would I lie to you?

### **Do you see a big theme covering all your novels-science fiction and mainstream?**

There's obviously something to do with identity going on in there-people who have secret identities, unknown names, and so on-but I don't think I want to know what it all means.

### **Did you have a nickname when you were younger?**

Yes. I was Carrot-top and Ginger-nut, from when I had garishly orange hair (it went ginger, then auburn, then brown, and now it's got grey bits); later I became Beaver (not a sexual reference; something to do with my predilection of dam-building), El Bonko (again,

nothing to do with bonking, sadly; it comes from bonkers, though I can't imagine why) and- the one that's lasted most strongly into the present day-Banksie (imaginative or what?).

**In *Excession*, the Culture faces what is described as an Outside Context Problem- something beyond its current level of understanding. Where do you think mankind's next Outside Context Problem is going to come from?**

Well, it could just be a comet-strike, or the Internet becomes sentient or something, or it could be an alien contact or more civilisationally-bruising nature than the Culture would contrive for us (if not actually something like *Mars Attacks*) but if an OCP does turn up it's almost certain to be none of the above and a complete surprise.

**What do you think of the new government and the end of 18 years of Tory rule?**

Let's just say I've done a lot of grinning since the early morning of May 2nd. Or you could just say HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!

**Do you have a daily routine when you're writing a novel?**

In theory I work an eight hour day for five days a week to complete fifteen thousand words. Then I can meet with my pals-who mostly have normal jobs-and have fun. In practice I often wake up at 4 am thinking about the book and-knowing from long experience there's no hope of getting back to sleep – I get up and write until about eight, then I go back to bed (with what my wife assures me are very cold feet indeed) sleep for a bit then get up and write some more. Sometimes, I work in the evening, too. And – while I work during October – December to minimise this sort of thing – if it's a nice day I'm very good at giving myself the day off and going for a drive. So, a bit chaotic, really. Still, I usually do manage the fifteen thousand words and – somehow – each year there's always a completed first draft winging its way to my editor with the post-Christmas mail while I collapse in the corner with a stiff drink and get ready for some furious Hogmany fun.

**What are your favourite albums/books?**

They're great, that's what they are. But here's a list of literary (or literary-ish) favourites and influences in alphabetical order: Brian Aldiss, Jane Austen, Samuel Beckett, Saul Bellow, Alfred Bester, Jorge Luis Borges, John Brunner, Noam Chomsky, Arthur C. Clarke, Leonard Cohen, Ivor Cutler, Samuel Delaney, T.S. Eliot, Gunter Grass, Robert Graves, Alisdair Gray, Graham Greene, Ursula LeGuin, M. John Harrison, Joseph Heller, Frank Herbert, Michael Herr, Aldous Huxley, Clive James, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Lucretius, Alistair Maclean, Ken MacLeod, Candida McWilliam, The Marx Brothers, Herman Melville, Sid Meier, Spike Milligan, Alan Moore, New Worlds magazine between 1971 and 1975, its quarterly paperback incarnation, Jeff Noon, Mervyn Peake, various Plays for Today on BBC TV during the sixties (the only one I can remember was called The Last Train Through The Harecastle Tunnel), Marcel Proust, the Monty Python team, Kim Stanley Robinson, William Shakespeare, Dan Simmons, John Sladek, Vivian Stanshall,

Magda Sweetland, Hunter.S.Thompson, Leo Tolstoy, Vernor Vinge, Kurt Vonnegut, Alan Warner, Ian Watson, Bill Waterson, Evelyn Waugh, Irvine Welsh and Gene Wolfe to name but rather a lot (some of the individuals named for single works).

Films:Apocalypse Now, L'Atalante, Barbarian Queen (much funnier than Plan 9 From Outer Space), The Blues Brothers, Le Boucher, Casablanca (surprise), Catch-22, Citizen Kane (another surprise!), The Conformist, Dark Star, Delicatessen, Die Hard, Doctor Strangelove, Duck Soup, Les Enfants du Paradis, The General, The Performance, Pulp Fiction, Queen Christina, Raising Arizona, The Searchers, Star Wars, The Untouchables, The Wages of Fear...and,umm...lots of others I can't think of right now but any one of which, if mentioned at this point, would cause me to strike my forehead and go Doh! in a distinctly Homerish sort of way.

As for my musical tastes, they can be easily gleaned from a close reading of my non-SF books.

### **Have you read the *Lord of the Rings*?**

Yes, a long time ago: so long ago that I read it because I liked the look of the weird red-on-grey (if I recall correctly) covers the three big hardbacks had when I spotted them in the library, not because I'd actually heard about the work before.

### **Is your next science-fiction novel going to be set in the universe of the Culture?**

Ah.Probably not. But then I haven't decided what the next book's going to be about yet, so I wouldn't take my word for it.

### **Who is your hero?**

I don't think I have a genuine hero, but I think if I had to choose somebody it would Noam Chomsky for his intellectual clarity and fearlessness.

### **Are you happy?**

Yup.According to my mum I always was a happy wee boy, and frankly nothing much has changed. (Least of all my level of maturity, but that's my problem.)