Interview

"Well I still feel very proud of it. It's still in print. It's been sold in seven territories, six in translation... I'd count it as a success. No awards, but then I'm not really award compatible; that isn't the kind of trajectory my writing career's taken."

This is how Iain Banks describes his first SF novel. **Consider Phlebas** (St. Martin's Press, 1988; Bantam 1991). One of a new generation of British SF authors, Iain Banks is unique in that he writes both SF and mainstream fiction. As SF author, he's been invited to conventions across three continents; as a writer of mainstream fiction, he was nominated as one of the 25 best young novelists in the United Kingdom.

So, to start at the beginning and Iain Banks' first SF novel: **Consider Phlebas**. This is the one 1980's SF novel I feel everyone should have read. For me, the book's first impact was as strong as my first reading of Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings** or first viewing of George Lucas's **Star Wars**. It was the book that convinced me that SF not only has a past; it has a future and that future was called Iain Banks. I went on to read **Consider Phlebas** 10, 15, 20 times. This bold brash space opera has it all: faster then light travel, layers and layers of plots and schemes, three-legged aliens, treachery, murder, destruction on an interstellar scale and droids. Exciting. Technicolour. Panoramic. Extremely Well-Written. So who is Phlebas?

"Phelbas is the drowned Phoenician sailor in T.S. Elliot's `The Waste Land' which is my favorite poem, if you exclude Shakespeare. Not that I like what Elliot stood for, but he was a genius and `The Waste Land' is his masterpiece. Well, his and Pound's, also of iffy political leanings. I just always like the words, `Consider Phlebas'. They looked good, they sounded good. They just looked like a title somehow. I tried all sorts of titles for the story before I settled on **Consider Phelbas**, but they all sounded too much like **Star Wars**. I knew it was a weird title but I though well, if it works it'll just **become** right for the book. I put in the bit about the sea-change - when Horza is undergoing a Calvin-like transmogrification on top of the crashed, awash shuttle - and in a sense, the whole book is just a yarn about a shipwrecked sailor who falls in with a gang of pirates and goes in search of buried treasure, so the quote-cum-title seemed to fit, and the idea was to hint at a tragic stature to Horza and at a kind of futility."

Where does Banks get the fantastic names for his SF characters? This question has been asked before, but I wanted to know whether he'd had studied languages, or whether, like Tolkien, he is fascinated by dialects. Should standard pronunciation be used?

"The SF names just come from slipping the clutch on my In-Skull Random Syllable Generator and recording the results. Isn't that how everybody does it? I suppose language fascinated me, but as I'm still so obviously struggling to master English I think it would be foolish to attempt to branch out beyond one. Standard pronunciation will do, though technically the Culture's language includes a lot more sounds and an optional subset of tones; the Culture names in the books especially have to be regarded as Anglicised versions of something much more exotic."

There's a hundred questions I could ask about **Consider Phlebas**, but it was written a while ago, so I'll ration myself to one. Why did Horza have to die? So close to salvation too...

"For the first few weeks when I was planning the book Horza **didn't** die; in fact at first he **won**; he got the Mind and maybe went off with Balveda. Then as I though through the story I decided he couldn't win; it just didn't feel right. As I though it through further, just before I actually started writing it, I though, shit, no; he's got to die; it'll feel like a children's story if he doesn't. The whole burrowing, obsessive movement of the story was pushing towards just that result. So, off he had to go. Writing Yalson out when her time came hurt more, mind you."

Consider Phelbas was followed by **The Player of Games** (St. Martins's Press, 1989, Harper 1990) and **Use of Weapons** (Bantam, 1992). All three have been written against the same backdrop of the Culture civilisation. Most SF writers have their preferred world, where they can spend decades fleshing out the details. How long was Culture in the making?

"The Culture series came about because of Zakalwe (the hero of **Use of Weapons**) bizarrely enough. I had this idea of a sort of ultimate mercenary; not a super-man, just clever and cunning and lucky, but human and flawed, and again, tragic. But I didn't want some standard power system behind him; I wanted some political-philosophical framework that somehow morally justified what he was doing. I'd read so much SF which seemed just to assume that our current political-economic systems - and especially US-model capitalism - would just continue on almost unchanged into the stars and that just seemed blind, blinkered...

"Maybe that's exactly what **will** happen but it isn't the way I imagine things going. I still don't. So, I came up with the idea of the Culture. I still call it a communist utopia if I'm talking to right-wing Americans authors, but technically it's probably anarcho-libertarian, with the emphasis on anarcho... Very well-armed anarcho-libertarians, but that's what they all, all the same. I think. I suppose it grew quickly over about, oh, five or six years and more slowly thereafter. My pal Ken MacLeod helped with the growing; we've bounced ideas of that sort off each other since school days. I'm still tinkering with the Culture.

"At the moment, I'm trying to work out why there's a Net discussion going on about whether the Culture somehow represents the USA. An idea I find utterly bizarre. (I mean, haven't these people been **reading** the books?) The Culture thinks private property is a slightly puzzling, utterly immature and old-fashioned idea; it thinks money is a joke... Oh, I suppose the Culture might appear a bit like the US likes to **pretend** it is, or its own citizens especially - intervening on the side of good and justice and so on, but...

"Look, let's cut to the chase, shall we? If somebody starts banging on about the Culture's interference policy, use the Chomsky Test (which I just made up, but it is based on what the great man has written about): ask them what about the US's invasion of Viet Nam? If they just look puzzled, uncomprehending, then they don't know what they're talking about. If they at least smile, or nod knowingly or even **get upset** knowingly then at least they know the territory. So there. Mind you, by the time this interview appears this discussion will be ancient history in Net terms, but apparently that's what's going on. (Must get my modem up and running and get connected, so I can jump in there and contradict this sort of nonsense at the start.)"

In the 1970's, there was much speculation about space platforms. Was that where Banks drew his inspiration for space orbitals?

"The Orbitals grew from smaller tube-worlds; I'd already decided most people in the Culture wouldn't live on planets and I was trying to envisage somewhere pleasant to live; orbiting tube-worlds - a few hundred klicks long, a few tens of klicks across, rotating to provide gravity, transparent sections and mirrors to provide sunlight - seemed like the way to go until I just did the usual SF extrapolation thing and thought about how big something would have to be for the one-G rotation to fit into a roughly 24 hour period. At this point I was still thinking of the Culture as a development of our own civilisation: it was early days. My calculations - probably deeply suspect - lead me to these **things**, ten million klicks in diameter and very likely forever impossible because of the stresses involved, but, oh, the elegance..."

George Lucas is famous for having undertaken a vast amount of research before making **Star Wars**, commissioning SF artists, thinkers, and scientists. Does Banks keep files on the Culture? Does he draw the droids, spaceships, and other items involved? What kind of information is there? Photos, statistics, other?

"Well, running on from the previous question: lots of casual research in that I'd read lots of SF and always taken an interest in science and read a fair bit of stuff where scientists were letting their imaginations go and looking into the far future. I don't know if I'd have though of Orbitals if I

hadn't read **Ringworld** by Larry Niven, so I have to acknowledge an influence there. Of course in turn Rings - as they're called in the Culture - are just sections of a Dyson Sphere (just Spheres in the Culture), which I'd also heard about at the time.

"I have to admit in my sadder moments I've drawn lots of Culture space ships and weaponry and drones and so on. Mostly the ships are very boring looking - a lot of GCUs look like shoe boxes with the corners cut off because they have to fit inside bigger craft, though of course they can use their external fields to look like any damn thing they want to look like - but the interesting stuff is inside; the structure.

"One of my long-term projects is to get a CAD or drawing program for my new computer, so I can design these things properly, though I suspect to do so I'll need a program so hideously expensive it'll be kind of silly and I'd be better off spending the dosh on a direct to disk music system or something. The General System Vehicle **Little Rascal** in the **The Player of Games** is kept shallow to remove the needs for pressure levels (like **The Ends of Invention** has in **Consider Phlebas**) but the thing's still four klicks high; in theory that could mean over a thousands decks... it doesn't actually because... but I think we're entering deep Nerd-space here, so I'll shut up."

Use of Weapons was very different than its two predecessors, in that the tale is not told in a linear fashion. Instead the action jumps back and forth, in time and space, between reality, memory, and what-might-have-been. How did Banks write this story, create this structure?

"The original draft of **Use of Weapons** dates from 1974 and was just absurdly complicated; if you think the finished version is confusing... well actually you don't want to read the first draft because it's packed with purple prose and it had this insane **structure** it was **impossible** to comprehend without thinking in six dimensions or whatever. I basically left the thing to rot; it was my pal Ken who asked to read it again, back in the mid-eighties. I told him he was mad. He read it and came back and told me there was a good novel in there struggling to get out. I told him he was mad again.

"So he came up with two suggestions; I mean, one of them... **both** of them could have been a suggestion that I travelled and sex with myself, but what they actually were, were putting the climax of the book at the end - it had been in the middle. Because that's where the structure said it had to be and such is my blinkeredness this seemed totally radical when he suggested it. Though, of course, also completely impossible because of the structure - but then he suggested this two-stream idea, with one strand going forward in time and the other going back, both leading to their own climax, so that you'd get the identity revelation at the end - where it always had been - and the whole thing with the besieged battleship and so on at the end as well, where it belonged.

"It was one of the cliched, filmic moments when I just sort of looked at him and then said. `By Jiminy, old buddy, that **might just work**...' Or so I recall. Actually knowing me I probably told him he was mad again and tried to argue the preposterous structure had to stay... I can't take full credit for the book's strengths because of that, and hence the acknowledgement at the start."

After the three Culture novels, Iain Banks wrote **State of the Art** (Mark Ziesing Books, 1989), a collection of short stories, and **Against a Dark Background** (Bantam ,1993). This new novel was very ambitious in that he sought to create an entirely new world, an entirely new universe, different from the Culture. How easy was that? How long did it take, how did Banks start? I was curious to know whether Banks found himself wishing he were back on home ground or delighted to explore his new world?

"**Against a Dark Background** was another pre-existing - does that sound better than `old'? - book I felt I'd overwritten and under-thought. It was written a couple of years after **Use of Weapons** but unlike it I always intended to return to it one day and do it properly, so going back was almost nostalgic; I enjoyed it."

Iain Banks is a reliable best seller in the UK. Nearly all the books have been translated and sold overseas. How well has the SF sold in America?

"The SF books have sold in the US, but not extravagantly well. They've been sold to maybe half a dozen places in translation and have done all right. I haven't heard of entire print runs being pulped, but on the other hand, I haven't been invited to do 3-month signing tours or been acclaimed as Hero of Portuguese Speculative Literature or whatever either. Modest success. Hey! That'll do."

And Iain Banks' next SF book?

"The next SF book, after **Feersum Endjinn**, which is just out in the UK and out in the States in '95, will be a Culture book. I'm telling myself this is because I miss the Culture, and especially the drones - especially the drones when they're being **sarcastic** about something - but possibly I'm kidding myself and really it's because people keep coming up at signing sessions and asking when the next Culture novel is coming. Actually some of them demanded a new Culture book, which is flattering and very slightly disturbing. Whatever; the book for '96 will be a Culture novel, though I've no idea what it'll be about beyond that. Probably I'll do a couple of Culture novels and then another non-Culture book just to prove my independence, but as I only write a book a year and an SF book every second year, this takes into the next century and I quail at thinking that far ahead."

Other than SF, Iain Banks has written a large number of mainstream novels, starting with **The Wasp Factory**, his first novel. How did he come to write **The Wasp Factory**?

"**The Wasp Factory** was published by Houghton Mifflin and Warner paperbacks in the States. When writing **The Wasp Factory**, I wanted to write a slightly off-beat, blackly humorous but basically conventional novel after years of writing SF and not getting it published. **The Wasp Factory** is what I came up with, but at the time, I recall thinking, `This is too boring, too banal' several times. That was usually the cue to throw in another of Eric's phone calls, which is what I did when I though the action was flagging."

This was followed by **Canal Dreams** (Doubleday 1991), **Walking on Glass** (Houghton Mifflin 1986), **Espedair Street**, **The Bridge** (St. Martin's Press 1989, Harper 1990) and **Complicity** (Doubleday, January 1995). Other novels, **The Crow Road** and **Espedair Street** couldn't find US publishers; apparently they're too parochial. **Complicity** is Banks' latest. It's very much in the style of **Manhunter** and **The Silence of the Lambs**. What was his initial inspiration for this tale?

"**Complicity** grew from an unpleasant idea; some geriatric scumbag of a British judge had just told a women she was asking to be raped and let her rapist off with a caution - happens every now and again in the UK though thankfully less often than it used to - and I went into High Dudgeon Mode; this happens fairly frequently, I'm afraid. On that occasion I imagined the brother of a rape victim finding a willing gay guy who was a bit violent and who'd be prepared to rape the judge once he'd been kidnapped. Well, I just filed the idea and then later I'd been thinking of writing a thriller or whodunit set in Edinburgh, and I just extended the idea of poetic justice being visited on all these right-wing bastards and put the two together and there you are. It's not so much a novel, more of a howl of rage after 13 years of cranio-penisocracy. Cathartically satisfying for me; I can't speak for my readers. I've always hated the Tories [Britain's Conservative Party]."

I particularly liked **Canal Dreams**, a terrorist thriller set on board three ships caught in the heart of the Panama Canal. What was Banks' inspiration?

"**Canal Dreams** came about from a kind of exercise I set for myself once; to find some nice enclosed setting for a thriller, or at least some tense story. I recalled the ships that were trapped at the southeast end of the Suez canal after the six-day war; I thought that would have been an interesting place for a story; limited, imprisoning, concentrating. I suppose I could have done a recent-history novel set there and then but that seemed pointless, so I thought of the world's other great canal, the Panama, and already knew that it had to be handed back at the turn of the century, and... well it all just fell into place.

"I know I wanted politics in it and then I wanted some central character who wasn't a ship's officer, who had to be outside of the ship in some way. For some bizarre reason that got entangled with an idea I'd had of somebody being killed with a cello spike. Before I knew it the obvious thing seemed

to be to make the central character a middle-aged lady Japanese cello virtuoso who was afraid of flying. It just seemed inevitable... I worry about me sometimes... Anyway the politics is only skin-deep in the book and that's why we've turned down one film enquiry already and would probably turn down any others too, unless one came from Oliver Stone, which is unlikely. But writing a political thriller just seemed like a good idea at the time. **Complicity** satisfied me more in that area though."

In **Crow Road**, Banks wrote a lot of sex, which to a large extent had been hidden behind closed doors or in darkened rooms in previous novels. Except for one scene in **Walking on Glass**. How did this change come about?

"Actually there's a fair bit of sex in **The Bridge**, though the main scene is told deliberately coldly. I think the time is long past when people write about sex just because they could - I mean to prove a point; that was in the sixties **Last Exit to Brooklyn** and so on - so it just goes in when it's necessary, when it seems required by the plot or when it seems like a more than normally important facet of a particular character."

With the total number of Iain Banks novels coming close to a dozen, some themes now appear across several novels: incestuous, adulterous double-dealing relationships of **Crow Road**, **Walking on Glass**, and **Use of Weapons**. The sex change/confusion as to sexual identity of the female characters of **Player of Games**, **State of the Art** and **The Wasp Factory**. Is Banks aware of similar themes recurring is his work?

"Identity seems to be a big thing with me. No idea why. The rest I leave to people like critics and academics to unravel; my job's writing the things in the first place, and the way I work is intuitive at the level; if something feels right, into the book it goes. I don't need some thematic or didactic reason. Although having said that, there are things in the books that **are** there for some thematic or didactic reason, but that's not the sole motivation.

Similarly, familiar motifs are Wrought Iron Bridge, McEwans Export, Casio watches, hard rock sound tracks.

"The [Firth of] Forth Bridge must have had an effect on me. I grew up with it outside my bedroom window and I moved back to the same village a couple of years ago, which means I can still see it. All mile-and-a-quarter of it is floodlit now, so it even looks impressive at night as well. Probably accounts for my interest in Very Large Structure. Mind you, where the predilection for bashing them together in best Space Opera fashion comes from, I've no idea. Probably from reading the stuff. The rest is just looking around at what's going on and putting into the stories whatever seems relevant. I just think, suppose this actually all happened, what would happen around it? What would be the props? What would be on the radio at the time? What would they be drinking, eating, driving?

What is Banks writing at the moment? When will it be finished? What's the next book due to be published, and what's it all about?

"**Feersum Endjinn** in the latest book, due out in the States next summer. It's set in the far future, on Earth for a change, in a slightly degenerate but still mostly post-scarcity civilization, what's what is left after everybody else takes off for the stars. These people are those who have voluntarily renounced space travel. The book tells how they deal with a severe threat and it's partly set in a kind of post-modern, almost post-tech cyberspace called the Crypt. There's one character - out of four main ones - who's, umm, grammatically challenged and can't spell either. He effectively names the book, hence the eccentric spelling.

"I'm not writing anything at the moment; I'm out to play for the rest of the summer, then I start thinking about the next book - it'll be non-SF as the last one was SF - and write it during the winter, when the nights are long and there's less fun to be had outside. What ever the hell it's going to be, it'll be published in September next year. Assuming I think of something. (My wife worries about

this casually dilettantish approach to our livelihood but I can't seem to work up any enthusiasm for creative angst; probably I'm not clever enough to get frightened)."

How does Banks write? Straight on the computer? Extensive planning beforehand? Research? Chapter by chapter, outline or how?

"I think, jot - still partly in diaries and notebooks, though onto the machine as well now - then I draw up a plan which I stick to punctiliously. Unless the plot develops a good excuse for heading in some other direction, of course, though I try to keep that sort of thing to a minimum. I write straight onto the machine (a spanking new Power Mac 6100/60 with 24/1000 Mb for you techies out there). I used Locoscript PC on the old PC I had (with a 30Mb hard disk I only ever filled up a third of - har har) but I'll probably use Claris for the next book. Or MS Works' UP. Or even Locoscript Pro again if I can get the blighter to run under Soft Windows, which so far it's shown a stubborn lack for interest in doing.

"I try to stick to an 8-hour day and a 5-day week when I'm writing, and aim for 15,000 words a week. I do a rough revision of the previous day's output for the first couple of hours in the morning and then start on new stuff (though I usually advise beginning writers to just pile on through to the end). Some days I give myself off. Some days I do more than I need. Sometimes I end up writing through the night, or getting up at 4am to start work because I've woken up and can't stop thinking about the book...

"I do a whole-book revision at the end and then send it my editor and start another revision; we get together and argue and fight and drink and laugh a lot (or phone and fax if time is tight or I'm in a can't-stand-London mood) and agree on a final revision and I take one last trawl through the thing and do almost everything we've agreed. Unless my editor finds an excuse to get his hands on the script last, in which case **he** does most of what we agreed. I get to correct the proofs, of course, which is my last chance to sneak in last minute changes, but usually I just make sure it reads right and there aren't any pages missing."

What does Iain Banks do in his free time? What does he love beyond SF∓F? Beyond writing?

"Well, driving (mostly too fast), glen walking (a gentler form of hill walking), speculative sailing (Iain's pal Les: `Banksie, we've been sitting here becalmed for the last two hours; let's start the engine.' Iain: `Och, but look; there's a patch of sort of ruffled-looking water down the loch there; can't be more than a mile away. Let's just give it another couple of minutes...'), drinking, eating out, reading and playing games (badly)."

If you could not be a fire-engine driver, what would you be?

"I never wanted to be a fire-engine driver, but if I couldn't be a writer, I think I'd like to have been either an astronomer or a geologist. Not that I'd have been any good at either of course, but I just like the idea."