

Interview

Most of your central characters seem to dislike the Culture.

The Culture is my utopia, my personal image of exactly the place I would like to live. I cannot imagine a better place, there's no way I can think of to make the Culture better resemble my own personal ideal for a utopian society. I'm very aware that that being the case it could get terribly boring if all I do is drone on about what a totally wonderful place the Culture is. It makes life more interesting, makes for a better novel if there's some sort of dynamic, a sort of tension in there. If you're writing from the point of view of someone who doesn't believe the same way you do it makes you think, you start to question your own beliefs and that's always a progressive, good thing to do. I tend to bend over backwards to look at the underside of the Culture. Having said that, the Culture does do its damndest to accommodate everyone, even people who hate it. It expends vast amounts of time and resources making sure everyone can live exactly as they want.

And it's incredibly annoying in that respect.

I know. There's nothing to hate about it apart from its smugness. It knows it's smug. The price of perfection, I'm afraid.

What would you do if you lived in the Culture?

I'd have a great time. I'd want to be in Contact, that's the ambition of choice in the Culture. Contact is the most interesting bit and joining it is about the only ambition it's possible to hold in the Culture. Contact is the Culture's saving grace. I think of the Culture as some incredibly rich lady of leisure who does good, charitable works - she spends a lot of time shopping and getting her hair done, but she goes out and visits the poor people and takes them baskets of vegetables. Contact does that on a large scale.

Of course, not everyone can join Contact.

Ambitions can be unfulfilled. Love can be unrequited.

You really dumped on the Culture in Excession, didn't you?

I was responding to audience request. I told a couple of my friends that I really wanted to write another Culture novel, that I was pining for it. They said the Culture was too bloody smug and safe - write something where it gets blown to fuck, kill it off, destroy it. I'm, "No!" They're, "Well, at least give it something it can't handle." Excession is a kind of grumpy compromise.

How seriously do you take the science?

I never let it get in the way of a good story. My defence is that I'm not really introducing any new absurdities, just taking up old ones. But even as you go along, you read New Scientist and you see stuff which may imply that hyperspace and faster than light travel aren't as absurd as all that. Obviously they're not possible now, but the intuition one has is that for scientists to say you'll never travel faster than light is just as daft as saying you'll never get into space - which people were saying only a few decades ago.

How much research do you do?

As little as possible. I read New Scientist and that's about it. A lot of research is just reading other people's SF. Nicking good ideas, basically.

Do you think humans are capable of moving toward a Culture-like society?

In principle, yes. It strikes me that it is possible to get your best possible utopia at any stage in your society's development - from hunter-gatherer to now. Though it also strikes me that the Culture would only work with people who are nicer than us - less bigoted, less prone to violence and genocide. We don't know to what extent aggression is necessary to achieve sentience, consciousness, space travel, a genuinely stable civilisation. We don't know if we're a particularly violent species or a relatively mild one - in which case you'd better hope we haven't been discovered yet.

Do you think we have been?

I very much doubt it, but it's possible. There is life out there - or if there isn't I'd find that thought incredibly worrying. If we had been visited, we wouldn't know it unless they wanted us to.

You're well known for your dislike of the Tory party...

I do absolutely despise the Tories. I find it hard to think of any saving grace for those bastards whatsoever. I just about disagree with everything they stand for.

But what do you think of new Labour?

I've been whining to my friends recently that I'm in the position of voting at the next election for a party that calls itself Labour but is actually to the right of Ted Heath's Conservative government. A few of my more deluded acquaintances have suggested that maybe the Labour Party will get in and suddenly get more left-wing. Yeah, that's happened a lot in the past. The Labour Party is a way of getting rid of those incompetent, corrupt, lying motherfuckers, but that's about it. I've toyed with the idea of voting for the Scottish National Party for years.

You think Scotland would be better off as an independent country.

I don't know. I certainly think that Scotland is a much more European-orientated country than England. Part of that is that Scots get a very strange feeling when they hear English people saying they don't want to be ruled from a foreign country and given this strange new currency - this is our experience of the last 300 years. Scotland as a part of Europe makes perfect sense. We'd make good Europeans.

There's a lot of talk about Scotland being the new Ireland as far as writing is concerned.

I think it's a post Lanark thing. I think Alasdair Gray's Lanark is the best Scottish novel this century, it was a landmark. Since then Scotland has been punching above its weight in terms of literature - we're just ten per cent of the UK, but we've got more than ten per cent of the best writers. To some extent it's just a coincidence, but there's also the feeling that because of the alienation that Scots have felt from successive British governments, because the Scots have consistently been saddled with governments completely different from the way we've voted, we feel that we're not part of that any more and therefore people look for ways to express themselves, express their difference. A

cultural divide has opened up and most English people don't understand the depth and width of it even now. That has made a difference. Writers in that situation have a different voice and are even more determined to express it.
