

Interview: Iain M Banks

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Your first releases were non-genre – *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking On Glass*, *The Bridge* – and then *Consider Phlebas*, of course. Was it always your intention to write science fiction?

Oh no, I started out writing when I was 14, and when I was 16 I wrote a spy novel, based on a lot of the spy programs that were on television at the time. The next one I wrote, when I was 18, was more influenced by *Catch-22*, it was an immensely long and overwritten near-future satire. It wasn't really science fiction at all, it was near future. And the next few novels were all science fiction, and I even thought of myself as a science fiction writer by the time that I wrote *The Wasp Factory*. I had a big internal debate with myself on whether it was right to abandon the genre that I loved and that I'd dedicated myself to, to write this mainstream stuff partly just to try to get published, because I was fed up with getting rejection slips from the same half-dozen publishers in London.

It was a long process then?

Yeah, I mean *The Wasp Factory* was done after I'd written my million words or so of rubbish. My apprenticeship! So I'd sort of, accidentally started out on my career as a mainstream writer, but that gradually took on more and more science fiction aspects, certainly science fiction/fantasy – *Walking On Glass* more so I think, and *The Bridge*. I think *Consider Phlebas* had been written before *The Wasp Factory*... no, after *The Wasp Factory* but before it was published, before I even knew I was going to get published,

because there was a year between being accepted and being published. So yeah, I thought of myself as a science fiction writer who was deigning to dabble in mainstream. It was back to front – everyone thinks it goes one way, but I went completely the other. But I've always loved science fiction, I've loved the freedom of writing science fiction, but also being able to write in two different genres, one of which I've exploited ruthlessly.

Can you give us an idea of what sort of writers influenced you, growing up?

Oh God loads, endless numbers. There are the writers that you think you've been influenced by, or you'd like to think you've been influenced by – Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen! I think the aforementioned *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*. Just the wealth of humour in both, and they had a serious point as well. It's hard enough to do comedy, it's hard also to do something that makes people laugh and are viciously realistic as well. But I think that everything you read, good or bad, influences you. With the bad stuff you think 'Right, I'm not going to do that', but you hope that in some way you're influenced by the good stuff and what you love. Actually I was influenced by the non-literary things as well, like the Marx Brothers movies, the radio, Monty Python, these things had an effect. Brian Aldiss is also one outstanding example, I loved that he straddled that post-war boom and into the New Wave, which he embraced enthusiastically and with such effect. M John Harrison, definitely, and all of the standard names – Heinlein, Asimov onwards.

When *Consider Phlebas* was released, it was commonly – and still is – seen as the book that repopularised space opera at a time when other subgenres were getting a lot of prominence. William Gibson released *Neuromancer* in 1984, for instance, and cyberpunk was on the rise. Would you agree with this assertion?

Yeah, I suppose, it's one of those things that only happens in hindsight. I just loved the scope of it – again, to quote Mr Aldiss, he came up with 'white screen baroque space opera', that was brilliant! And there were a lot of things that I was trying to do with it, to use a fairly epic format to demystify, to bring it down from heroes and princesses to the level of the grunts, that's why the mercenary gang are not particularly good soldiers, they're not impressive. I love space opera and I love the opportunity it gave me to work a huge canvas. I also felt that there was a moral high ground in space opera, and I wanted to reclaim it for the Left! I was fed up with reading these otherwise enjoyable books that ultimately turned out to be ultra-capitalist, or almost proto-fascist at times. I wasn't having this.

There's a new *Culture* book coming out soon, isn't there?

This October, it's called *Surface Detail*. And yes, it's another big, bouncing *Culture* novel – all of the usual stuff, except more!

Can you give us a brief idea of what to expect from it?

It's sort of a war-time study, set a bit after the last book in terms of the Culture's chronology. Things have changed a little, there are all of these sub divisions in the Contact part of the Culture, there's now an exciting opportunity for inter-service rivalry. There isn't Special Circumstances any more, it's other parts of Contact. The idea behind it is that it's possible to transcribe a person's personality, to create the real version of soul, and there's lots of people plugged into virtual realities, which is where they exist, forging Heavens and afterlives that are very pleasurable. But some people might want to create Hells as well, you know, people who haven't suffered enough in their natural lifespans. And over time these become networked, a galaxy-wide series of Hells, and this is something that would generally make most civilised societies a bit disturbed, especially the Culture. And there's a virtual war going on to decide which way it's going to go, and it's threatening to break out into reality. That's the background, it's also about a particular girl, a young woman, who is really tattooed. I mean, uber-tattooed. Utterly tattooed – her fingernails, her eyes, her teeth. Cut her open and her internal organs are tattooed, this comes from a genetic level, she's born that way. And she has a terrible thing happening to her, it's kind of a revenge part of the story. And there are a few other side stories as well, and it's quite long, the longest of them so far.

Do you have any idea how long you plan to continue the Culture series for? Is there an end in sight?

Not really! The honest answer is as long as I find new things to write about and make me excited about it. At the moment I still do, and the thing that I love about the Culture at the moment is that it's enormous fun for me, and as long as it stays fun for me you have to hope that it'll transmit to the reader. There's no built-in timescale, and one of the things that's been said about the Culture is that it does keep on going. One of the seductive problems and opportunities that science fiction offers you is that every single time, in every story, every novel, you can destroy the universe – it's in your power. But that kind of gets a bit boring, it's like watching Doctor Who – 'Oh no, we've got to save the world. Again.' And once you can do it, twice becomes... anyway. One of the things I wanted to do with the Culture is not destroy it, and part of the point of it is that it does just keep on going, it's kind of, deliberately surfing the breaking wave of technology and progress or whatever. So its continuance is kind of the point in a way, for the foreseeable future, I don't know, another couple of novels. Half a dozen!

The interest is still of course, with the movie option?

That's right yeah, it's been talked about, I've become very cynical about film over the years. There's a very gifted young director...

Dominic Murphy?

Yeah, he's a superb director. I think if anyone can do it, he can. But so much of the film industry is about money, it's based off of people who almost have none, and creative people are at the mercy of the money people – they always are in a sense. I have faith in

Dominic, but I have very little faith in the whole industry. If it comes off it would be great, but...

Would you be involved in the screenwriting at all?

Not really, no. I'll just let them get on with it and not try to sort of, interfere. If I were a screenwriter, the last thing I'd want would be the writer standing over my shoulder going 'Hey, you can't do that! It's black, not white you idiot! Stop!' I think it's best just to let them get on with it. And it's also such a different skill as well – writing a novel is all about telling, and writing a film is all about showing, there's an enormous gulf between the two.

China Mieville recently used his Arthur C Clarke Award acceptance speech to attack the Booker judges for ignoring science fiction in their shortlists. As an author, do you think that the genre is still looked down on by the mainstream, or is it becoming more accepted?

Very much still looked down on, I think. There's been a very slight uptick in acceptance, but I don't think that it's accepted in the way that crime writing. Put it this way, you can tell that science fiction is still looked down on, because even when a mainstream writer writes an obviously, and demonstrably science fiction novel, they almost inevitably claim that it's not.

Margaret Atwood, for instance?

Well, I'm sure she's a nice person, I've read some of her novels and they're very good, she's a good writer, but it quite cynical I think, that they don't want to be soiled with the label. I think that proves the point – 'Oh yes, it's a detective novel' and that's okay, and there's a difference between acceptability. The acceptability of the detective story and that of science fiction, there's still a long way to go, I think.

It's strange in a way, as there's more science fiction being printed than ever before. In history, really. Do you read much modern science fiction?

I do my best. I wish I read faster, I'm lumbered with this thing of trying to keep up with both my contemporaries and the mainstream, I never read sufficiently in depth in either to be honest with you.

Do you have any authors that you're particularly enjoying at the moment?

Anything that Dan Simmons does is worth reading. All of the usual suspects, I'm really bad at spotting up and coming talent, they have to be world famous before I notice them. Although definitely Ken MacLeod, and the occasional novel by Mike Harrison is always worth waiting for, no matter how long it takes.

There's been a lot made of devices such as the iPad recently, and e-readers, and the possibilities that they offer for eBooks. Do you think, given time, that digital books are going to supplant physical books?

Actually, yeah, I guess. It's a generational thing – I've never downloaded a track, but my entire CD collection is stuffing out on of the maximum capacity iPods, but I do miss the old-fashioned gatefolds, thank God I didn't throw them out! I can imagine, I suppose, having bought a book and not having the physical thing, but I always like to have the thing itself. So if there was some sort of package where I could buy the book and get the eBook then definitely. I mean it saves space when you're going on holiday, taking one slim thing that's got loads on it. So yeah, I really do, I mean I can read a lot off my iPhone, and it's not that bad. I can't see myself buying an iPad because I've got too many bloody Apple macs already – I've got an air, which is quite close, but it has a USB connection. A bit of a deal breaker for me with the iPad – the way I like to write, if I'm on a train I'm slightly paranoid about the book getting nicked, so I have it only on the USB. So if someone nicks the computer, I still have it, but you can't do that with an iPad.

Surface Detail is out on 7 October through Orbit, priced at £18.99.