A Few Questions About the Culture: An Interview with Iain Banks

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Iain M. Banks's Culture is one of the most well-known and best-loved science fiction utopias. Beginning in 1987 with Consider Phlebas*, Banks published eight (or nine) novels, a novella and one (or two) short stories in this setting, exploring the joys and complexities of his far-future post-scarcity society before his devastatingly untimely death in 2013. Working both with and against the space opera traditions of the UK and the US, Banks was frequently cited as a leading figure in the British Boom, using the Culture texts as a political platform and an ethical playground. These interviews were conducted by email between April and June in 2010 as part of my PhD on the Culture, drawing on the extraordinary way Banks's writing investigates and interrogates language, the body, the relationship between the self and society and the relationship between the self and the other, to consider what it is to be a person. The full, strident, and often playful answers he gives here are entirely characteristic of his writing and persona more generally. —Jude Roberts*

1. The Culture

Jude Roberts (JR): When did you first start to imagine the Culture? Was it in response to any particular event or influence?

Iain Banks (IB): Long ago. In the 1970s, at least. Partly it was in reaction to a lot of the SF I was reading at the time. The British stuff mostly seemed a bit miserablist and the US's too right wing. I wanted SF that combined what I regarded as the best of both: the thoughtfulness and sense of proportion of the UK's and the energy and optimism of the US brand.

Use of Weapons coverThe way the Culture came about initially was as—I thought at the time—a single-use solution to a particular problem. I was getting ready to write *Use of Weapons* and I knew that Zakalwe was this sort of ultimate warrior guy, just very martially able, but I wanted him to be on the side of the good guys somehow. Squaring that circle was the problem, so I came up with the idea of the Culture as his ultimate employers: a society basically on the side of the angels but willing to use people like Zakalwe (utopia spawning few warriors, as the later-written poem says) to do its dirty but justified work. The "justified" bit always having something to do with statistics; from the beginning the Culture had to be able to prove—rather than simply assert—that it was generally doing the right thing, even when it interfered without permission in other societies. That was it, initially, but then the Culture proved to be the nucleus around which all my other until then rather nebulous ideas started to cluster and take shape, and it just developed—naturally, it felt—by itself, from there.

JR: How much of the history of the Culture do you have worked out? In "A Few Notes on the Culture" you said that it emerged from seven or eight societies coming together. What happens after that? What I'm interested in is, how much conflict is in the Culture's history?

IB: A lot, probably. I've never worked it out. I've left it fairly open in case I ever want to set a story there. Though I suspect it's only the Culture as it exists, fully formed, from the time of the Idiran war onwards, that truly interests me. The Culture in its pomp is what attracts.

JR: What was the motivation/inspiration (both yours and the Culture's) for creating [the Culture's language] Marain?

IB: The Culture's motivation was attempting to make a universal language, free from cultural bias, but embodying what you might call encouragements to think clearly and rationally—even

humanely (so not really culturally neutral at all, then). I was doing it as a laugh, as a sort of tiny hobby, for a brief while. It was quite fun working out how much information you could pack into a nonary grid and I did start work on a Culture-English dictionary, but it was always going to be too big a job, and it all felt rather arbitrary, just pulling phonemes out of the air and deciding, Right, that's what General Contact Unit is in Marain (something like Wukoorth Sapoot-Jeerd, if memory serves). . . I've recently had an offer to do this properly, as it were, but I doubt I'll take it up.

JR: Apart from a few bits of poetry and Ziller in *Look to Windward* you haven't written much about artists/writers in the Culture. How important is creativity in the Culture?

IB: Very, but only at an amateur level, as we would understand it, and not just because there is no need—or way—to be a true professional in any field in a society without money. In the Culture you express yourself creatively because you enjoy it and feel it to be personally fulfilling; you don't do it to prove how completely brilliant you are to peers, potential sexual partners, and the world in general because at the back of your mind you know almost any Mind could do it better.

JR: There are very few animals shown in the Culture novels. Are there many animals in the Culture? Also, you use birds a lot in your writing. Do they represent anything in particular for you?

IB: You're right. Actually, there are not enough animals in the Culture. When I think about it, I always mean to include more, but then I keep forgetting to. Not the thought that counts, sadly, in this case. Birds. . . I don't know. Symbol of freedom, perhaps?

JR: To what extent do you think your political perspectives and attitudes inform your writing about the Culture?

IB: A lot. The Culture stories are me at my most didactic, though it's largely hidden under all the funny names, action, and general bluster. The Culture represents the place we might hope to get to after we've dealt with all our stupidities. Maybe. I have said before, and will doubtless say again, that maybe we—that is, homo sapiens—are just too determinedly stupid and aggressive to have any hope of becoming like the Culture, unless we somehow find and isolate/destroy the genes that code for xenophobia, should they exist. Plus we'd have to develop AIs and let them be themselves; another big ask.

JR: While you have often been resistant to attempts to characterise your writing as distinctively or definitely Scottish, would you be prepared to acknowledge the politics of your Culture novels as Scottish—as opposed to English or American?

IB: A bit of all the above. I am conscious of being Scottish, British, European, English-speaking Anglo-Saxon-Celt, and what you might call Western. Also a citizen of the world, and all that. A humanist. I would like to think that the politics of the Culture novels is more kind of generally socialist or communitarian, rather than specifically Scottish.

JR: Could you elaborate on what "humanist" means to you?

IB: I think I fit the dictionary definition of a Humanist pretty well: non-religious, non-superstitious, basing morality on shared human values of decency, tolerance, reason, justice, the search for truth, and so on. My personal take on this goes a little further—as any serious SF writer's would kind of have to unless they reject the very idea of both AI and aliens—to encompass the rights both of these (as it were, still potential) categories, but other than that I'm probably fairly typical.

JR: To what extent does your writing about the Culture endorse the Culture's point of view?

Consider Phlebas coverIB: Probably too much. I started out bending over backwards to present the opposite point of view in *Consider Phlebas*, making it look like the Culture represented the bad guys, at the start, at least, but, let's face it; La Culture: c'est moi.

JR: Many critics and reviewers have claimed that the Culture represents the American Libertarian ideal. Given that this is clearly not the case, how do you characterise the politics of the Culture?

IB: Really? I had no idea. Obviously I haven't read the output of the relevant critics and reviewers. Let's be clear: unless I have profoundly misunderstood its position, I pretty much despise American Libertarianism. Have these people seriously looked at the problems of the world and thought, 'Hmm, what we need here is a bit more selfishness'? . . . I beg to differ. This is not say that Libertarianism can't represent a progressive force, in the right circumstances, and I don't doubt there will be significant areas where I would agree with Libertarianism. But, really; which bit of not having private property, and the absence of money in the Culture novels, have these people missed? The Culture is hippy commies with hyper-weapons and a deep distrust of both Marketolatry and Greedism. One rests one's case.

2. Influences and approaches

JR: I've just been reading M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device*. How much do you feel you have been influenced by his work?

IB: A great deal, though possibly less than I'd have liked. I can't recall consciously invoking Mike or *The Centauri Device* when I was thinking about *Phlebas*, but I'd like to think it was somewhere at the back of my mind at the time.

JR: Are there any feminist science fiction writers whose work you admire and/or consider to be an influence on your writing?

IB: I admire pretty much any female SF writer just because they have to have an extra dose of self-belief to tackle such a male-dominated genre. Singling people out I'd have to mention Le Guin, C.J. Cherryh, Octavia Butler, Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree Jr., Gwyneth Jones, and Joanna Russ, though probably only Le Guin could have been any sort of influence on me, and I don't know that she actually was.

JR: How concerned are you with the way you represent female characters?

IB: Very, though it's not something I fret over; it's kind of built-in, by now. It depends a lot on what sort of story I'm writing, though. With the Culture stories it's generally a given that women will play a large (and symbolically important) part in the narrative; see answer below. Elsewhere, I'm a bit more conscious of always trying to help redress the (im)balance I find in so much other fiction and other fictive media.

JR: Almost all your stories involve some kind of game. What is it that interests you about games and game playing?

IB: I think both stories and games are, at least potentially, kind of rehearsals for life; basically pedagogy, wrapped up in a sweet coating to make the learning fun. And they're both linear, have themes, characters, and so on. So the same things interest me about both games and stories; principally the potential for serious play.

JR: You've used the word "play" to describe your use of form and narrative structure. As I'm sure you know, in recent years the term play has been used to describe a certain kind of postmodern engagement with the world. To what extent do you consider your work to be postmodern?

IB: I confess I don't think about it at all. I've never been good on literary or societal theory. I've long since decided people like me just write what we do and let other people worry about the analytical side.

JR: Have you read any work by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Emanuel Levinas (or any other continental philosophers)? If you have, what did you think?

IB: The little I've read I mostly didn't understand, and the little I understood of the little I've read seemed to consist either of rather banal points made difficult to understand by deliberately opaque and obstructive language (this might have been the translation, though I doubt it), or just plain nonsense. Or it could be I'm just not up to the mark intellectually, of course.

JR: You have written quite a few novels that use Freudian imagery and tropes—*The Wasp Factory*, *Use of Weapons*, *The Bridge*, *Walking on Glass*—What do you think of Freudian psychoanalysis?

IB: Never been entirely sold on it. I suspect Freud's theories tell you a great deal about Freud, quite a lot about the monied middle-class in Vienna a hundred-plus years ago, and only a little about people in general. Like Marx, he was too keen to insist that his area of study was genuinely a science. Also like Marx, though, he provides a genuinely useful and insightful (if, especially in Freud's case, limited) way of looking at people and their hidden lives (well, more implied lives with Marx, relating to their economic function within a society). Anyway, I can honestly say that I've never deliberately included any Freudian imagery in my stories, so what's there must be the result of my subconscious. . . . Uh-oh. . .

3. Humanity, and posthumanity

Excession coverJR: Farah Mendlesohn has said, talking about *Excession*, that space opera celebrates the human. Do you consider the Culture novels to be a celebration of the human?

IB: I think space opera in general celebrates a certain manic wildness and vivacity of vision, a refusal to be constrained. I think the Culture celebrates something slightly different from—or at least on the outskirts of—the above, by being about what we call human values but which, I'd argue, are more like sentient values; values to do with intelligence, empathy, altruism, and the promotion of (comfort, contentment, satisfaction, pleasure, joy, bliss, and ecstasy) along with the alleviation of suffering.

JR: In "A Few Notes" you said that the ship body fulfils the same function as the human body, i.e.: it's just a transportation system. You also said that being able to physically change the sex of your body is important to maintaining gender equality. These two statements seem to contradict one another, the first saying that the body isn't important at all and the second saying it's crucial. How important is the body in the Culture?

IB: I don't think the two statements do contradict each other. Without a body you're helpless; without a ship or something similar, so is a Mind. What I meant in the first instance was that the ship was not there to be commanded in the *Star Trek* manner; the Mind, the AI, was what really mattered, not the thing it inhabited. Of course the ship/body/housing is important, but what holds the personality is the entity at its centre. In the same way, it's our mind—housed within our human body—that contains the essence of who and what we are; we can imagine—with the appropriate future medical technology—regrowing a lost limb, or major organ, without that changing who we really are, but re-growing the brain (without the information that the original brain held) would make us a totally different person. Same with a Mind and a ship. That does not mean that embodiment and context are not important; they are, vitally, but ultimately what matters is where all the information is held. In the end, the body matters quite a lot in the Culture, which is why it's made quite clear that despite having gone through periods when non-human bodies were highly fashionable, the vast majority of people in the Culture in the novels (all of which take place when the Culture is in a stable, cruise-phase, mature-technology state, many thousands of years after its inception) are mostly human in their form, albeit with significant modifications.

JR: Have you considered giving Culture humans the ability to abandon gender altogether?

IB: Yes, and there is mention of people who have done just that, I think, in the novels. At the very least it's implied, I believe. In the new one, *Surface Detail*, there is a fairly major character we follow throughout the novel who is effectively neuter.

JR: In "A Few Notes" you said that Culture-humans can turn off their pain receptors. In *Consider Phlebas* when Fal falls while mountain climbing it says that she lay in pain for a day. What level of control over pain and other bodily stimuli do Culture-humans have?

IB: It varies; not everybody has the full works, as it were. Also, not everybody chooses to use what they have, plus the whole system is not perfect in every individual. Generally, though—in theory—everybody has full control. You can turn off pain at will. Though it's a bit like ignoring the red warning message on your car's instrumentation; it's a signal something's wrong and you need to power down and get some repair work done. And for some people the warning signal itself is almost as distressing as raw pain itself.

JR: You have written about several characters whose lives involve or have involved an intensely traumatic experience. I'm thinking of Andy in *Complicity* and Zakalwe in *Use of Weapons* in particular here, but there are many others. What is it that interests you so much about trauma and its effects?

IB: To be frank, it's the excuse it gives me to make my characters do extreme things, or at least put themselves into extreme situations. I'm very conscious that I've lived a pretty easy and non-traumatic life, and I can't imagine me doing the stuff necessary to create the stories I'm interested in (I've too much to lose, I've nothing to prove to somebody who denied me love. . . whatever), so I need to imagine what it would take to make somebody (and specifically somebody I can identify with sufficiently to write convincingly about) behave in such a brave/foolhardy/dangerous manner.

JR: You often write about the perpetrators of violence, far more often than you write about the victims of violence. What is it that interests you about perpetrators?

IB: They're the instigators, they're the ones who've made a choice to behave badly; that sets them apart, makes them worthy of study (condemnation, too, of course, but that's not the immediate point if you're merely imagining them to write about them). Random killers might happen to kill interesting people, but as a rule we are all just average people, with—mercifully, maybe—nothing much to distinguish us. We live, procreate, die, and that's the way it should be; we've done our bit. In a sense there is no particular further urgency to the understanding of ordinary people, rewarding though that might be in its own way, whereas it is important to understand those who choose to inflict violence on others because they're the ones we need to deal with, and ultimately the ones whose behaviour we need, as a society, to alter or preempt.

JR: You've suggested that we might need to change our genetics or remove the gene for xenophobia as a potential prerequisite for achieving a Culture-like utopia. How much of what it is to be human do you think is in our genes?

IB: Well, all of it, in a sense. We ain't nothing without our genes. But genes themselves don't create any culture directly, obviously, so the question is about the balance; how much of what we count as creativity—for example—is essentially determined genetically (how much of it could you predict running a really good sim, say, of a statistically relevantly-sized human society) and how much is due to chance and the individual workings of thought, reason, and emotion within individual human brains? I think we are, as a species, overly predisposed to irrationality and xenophobia, too quick to turn to violence, and have an insufficiently critical and flexible approach to authority and to institutions that we believe can relieve us of our individual moral responsibilities, and that there may be gene sequences that code for these attributes. Just glad I won't have to sit on the ethics committee that decides whether to do the experiments to find out. . .

JR: Given that there are (I assume?) no gods in the Culture universe, what does subliming mean? Does it differ from transcendence? If so, how? Why doesn't the Culture sublime?

IB: Subliming means leaving the matter-based universe and ascending/disappearing into the pure-energy state represented by the compressed dimensions string and brane theory talk about. I haven't made this entirely clear yet in the novels, though I still might in the second draft of *Surface Detail*. Still scientific, still materialist, in a sense; definitely not any

sort of religious nonsense. The Culture has decided to forgo Sublimation, for a while at least, in order to stick around in the physical universe, in the Real, and do what it can to make it a better place, Subliming ultimately being a selfish act.

JR: *Transition* is clearly also all about selfishness. Is selfishness a central concern for you at the moment, both creatively and politically?

IB: Absolutely. We live in a Greedist culture; we are ruled by Greedists, in the grip of Marketolatory. Selfishness is the the new black and I despise it. And I really do blame Margaret F. Thatcher; she did everything in her considerable power to turn selfishness from a vice into a virtue, and we are living with the consequences now, the most selfish of the selfish having wrecked the world economy and got away with it—salaries, stock options, and bonuses restored, like nothing happened—after putting their own empty greed before any other consideration. Quite a legacy.

JR: How great an impact did the 1979 election have on your thoughts about political utopia?

IB: Almost no impact, at least immediately (see answer above for subsequent thoughts); my sights were already raised way beyond the impact of such relatively minor events. I was thinking about the Culture, risen from the debris and glories of a dozen civilisations each made up of hundreds of such statistically irrelevant states.

4. Utopia

JR: In the past you have said that you are a short-term pessimist and a long-term optimist. Could you expand on this a bit: why are you pessimistic about the short term? What changes do you anticipate taking place between the near and far futures that change your pessimism to optimism?

IB: On a personal level, it's damage limitation; a sanity-keeping measure. Expect the worst and anything even only half-decent seems like something to celebrate. The pessimism comes from a feeling that as a species we seem unable to pass up any opportunity to behave stupidly, self-harmfully (the Copenhagen climate talks being but the latest example). The long-term optimism comes from the the fact that no matter how bad things seem and how idiotically and cruelly we behave. . . well, we've got this far, despite it all, and there are more people on the planet than ever before, and more people living good, productive, relatively happy lives than ever before, and—providing we aren't terminally stupid, or unlucky enough to get clobbered by something we have no control over, like a big meteorite or a gamma ray buster or whatever—we'll solve a lot of problems just by sticking around and doing what we do; developing, progressing, improving, adapting. And possibly by inventing AIs that are smarter and more decent than we are, which will help us get some sort of perspective on ourselves, at the very least. We might just stumble our way blindly, unthinkingly into utopia, in other words, muddling through despite ourselves.

JR: How much of the scientific debates about AI do you follow? Have you read anything by Hans Moravec?

IB: I'm not terribly interested in the debates. Maybe I ought to be, but I feel they're like the debates physicists and engineers had about rocketry, decades ago, when they eventually decided that you could never build a rocket able to carry its own weight into orbit—let alone anything else—and that was that. (They just hadn't thought of staged rockets.) I strongly suspect that, barring catastrophes, AI is inevitable, so debates about its possibility are pointless, while any other debates—regarding its nature or characteristics, say—are jumping the gun. Probably still worth having I guess, to prepare ourselves apart from anything else, but essentially premature and of limited use due to their overly speculative nature.

I read Moravec's book *Mind Children* a year or two after it was published and was quite impressed by it. I don't recall that it changed my mind about anything or gave me any fresh ideas (always the secret hope with books like this), but it was interesting.

JR: In your panel discussion at Odyssey [the 2010 UK Eastercon, at which Banks was a Guest of Honour] with Ken [MacLeod], he said that you are optimistic about technology because "the ability of ordinary blokes and folks to work out, using a pocket calculator, when they were being cheated on their pay, which he had actually seen, made Iain feel that technology is empowering."—Do you agree? What were the circumstances in which you saw people checking their pay on calculators?

IB: Up to a point, yes. I think I saw this happen at the building site for the Inverkip power station, back in the seventies. For a few months I was the office clerk, dealing with pay and bonuses for the workforce, for the firm responsible for the main pipe work within the power station.

JR: You also said, in the same discussion, that you like to be in control of the technology in your life—checking your e-mail when you want to, not when it tells you, etc.—is this element of being able to control the tech in our lives important to the way you think about the Culture?

IB: Definitely, yes. A lot of that is to do with the Culture not being Capitalist, so that nobody has to work. People do things for fun, for the challenge, for a hobby, not because if they don't, they'll starve. So the tech is absolutely at the command of the humans (and drones, and AIs/Minds, in the sense that the unthinking—or at least, unfeeling, non-suffering—tech is separate from them), rather than people having the sensation that they are controlled by the technology around them. Also, it's not a coincidence that the presentation of the Culture's relative Utopia—the way that people live on a day-to-day basis—is generally rural, with lots of pleasant green spaces around, but with fast transport links to concentrated urban spaces, where people go to mingle and have fun.

JR: During the utopias panel at Odyssey you made a distinction between practical utopia and idealistic utopia. What makes a practical utopia?

IB: In a sense a practical utopia is just doing the best you can with what you have to hand. In other words a practical utopia is a society which is run for the general benefit of all, rather than for the particular benefit of a few, no matter what level of technological progress you have attained, minimising suffering and maximising well-being. So this can apply to a hunter-gatherer society as well as one based in sophisticated space colonies. In other words, it's a political argument. An idealistic utopia is one which exists in a post-scarcity environment and can pretty much do whatever it pleases. The slightly depressing realisation—which leads to the short-term pessimism mentioned above—is that we never really do this; we almost never make any serious attempt to minimise suffering and maximise well-being (though, in a sense, we keep on trying to; people establish communes and little sort of mini-attempts-at-utopias all the time, but they never lead to very much). We keep on behaving tribally, xenophobically, selfishly. This is why I'd contend that we are, as things stand, essentially incapable of achieving any practical utopia. We probably need to change ourselves at the genetic level to have any chance of doing so. I'd love to be proved wrong on this, but even so, if I were a betting man, I'd be wagering on the side of the cynics.

JR: The example you gave of utopian fiction (the Hampstead or Campus novel) are both based on a utopia for some that comes at the cost of those who are not shown in the novel. What stops the Culture from being this kind of utopia?

IB: Well, the fact that you can't tramp off, find somebody who is in any meaningful sense economically supporting—or oppressed by—this society, grab them by the collar and shout "Here's your downtrodden masses!" Hampstead exists, and university campuses exist, within a certain exploitative economic system, obviously. The Culture by its very nature does not. Materially it is entirely self-sufficient and the entities doing what might be described as the dirty work are little more than computers, usually controlling mindless robots; they are not capable of suffering, or experiencing boredom or frustration or dissatisfaction. The entities supervising them might be humans or drones but they exist at a level that lets their work resemble play; a game. It's rewarding, just way any well-designed game or satisfying job is, and for its own sake. I only wanted to use Hampstead and Campus novel as examples of kinds of relatively utopian novels; ones in which the protagonists don't have to worry about mundane stuff like working on a farm or in a factory or office to keep a roof over their heads. I was trying to suggest that these were our equivalents of utopias, limited and conditional though they might be; places where people were able to live lives

free, to a significant degree, from the exigencies of toil, economic exploitation, and the threat of penury. In the "Reasons: the Culture" section of the appendices in *Consider Phlebas* there's the line, "The only desire the Culture could not fulfil from within itself. . . was the urge not to feel useless." In that need alone it is not self-sufficient, and so it has to go out into the rest of the galaxy to prove to itself, and to others, that its own high opinion of itself is somehow justified. At its worst, it is the equivalent of the lady of the manor going out amongst the peasants of the local village with her bounteous basket of breads and sweetmeats, but it's still better than nothing. And while the lady might—through her husband and the economic control he exerts over his estate and therefore the village—might be partly responsible for the destitution she seeks, piecemeal, to alleviate, the Culture isn't. It's just trying terribly hard to be helpful and nice, in situations it did nothing to bring into being.

 **Look to Windward coverJR:** When you talk of "the lady of the manor", the gender here significant. To what extent would you consider the Culture to be a feminised society? Also, in *Look to Windward* you give an example of the Culture bringing into being, however unintentionally, precisely the kind of situation it is trying to avoid and/or resolve. Doesn't this suggest that the statistical approach is fundamentally flawed?

IB: I've always thought of the Culture as being more feminine than male, at least as far as how we as a species would react to it if we were ever exposed to it. To the Culture, of course, such gender-based evaluations are puzzling, not very helpful, and profoundly missing the point; in a society with relatively easy sex-change and perfectly asexual Minds running the really complicated stuff, gender is pretty much irrelevant.

I think there's an argument that you need the male predisposition to aggression while you're "growing up" as a species, but that gradually (though absolutely—and preferably immediately—as soon as you invent weapons of mass destruction) you need a different approach; time to pass on the baton, chaps. If we accept that women are, compared to men, generally more caring, less aggressive, and more open to using discussion as a way of resolving disputes, then the less your society and civilisation is concerned with the day-to-day stuff of securing borders, procreating like crazy to keep the numbers up in the face of high rates of infant mortality, and managing and distributing scarce resources and so on, the less you need men calling all the shots.

No, I think it just proves that you'll never get it right every time, even if you do your best and have really good statistics which you use properly and with the best of intentions. The Chelgrian civil/inter-caste war is the Culture getting it wrong, but at least they admit it, and that lesson goes into the statistics and changes them, making subsequent interventions less risk-keen and more likely to work better. I hope it's obvious from the novel just how horrified and guilty the Culture feels about this, and how near-unique it is.