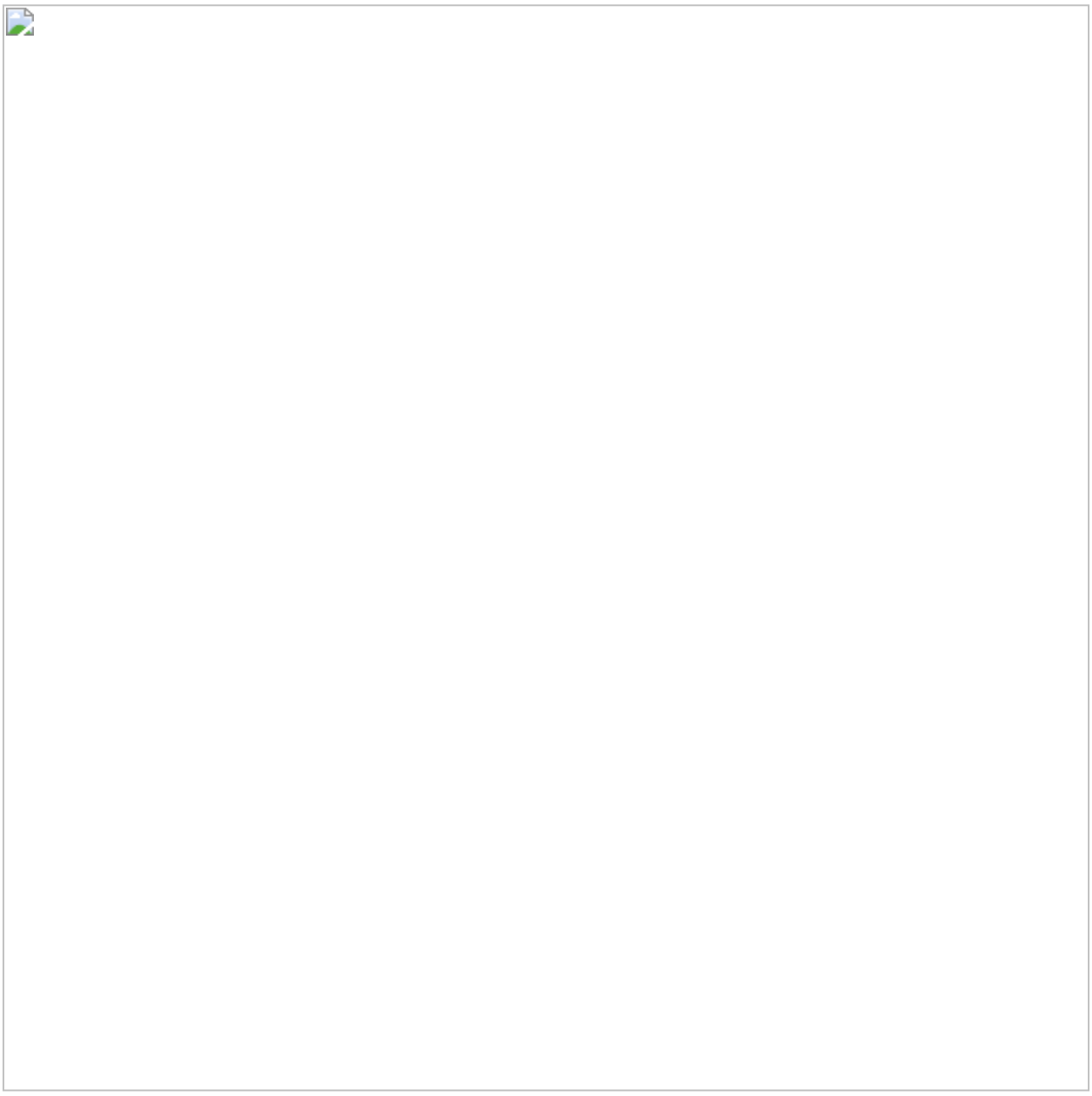
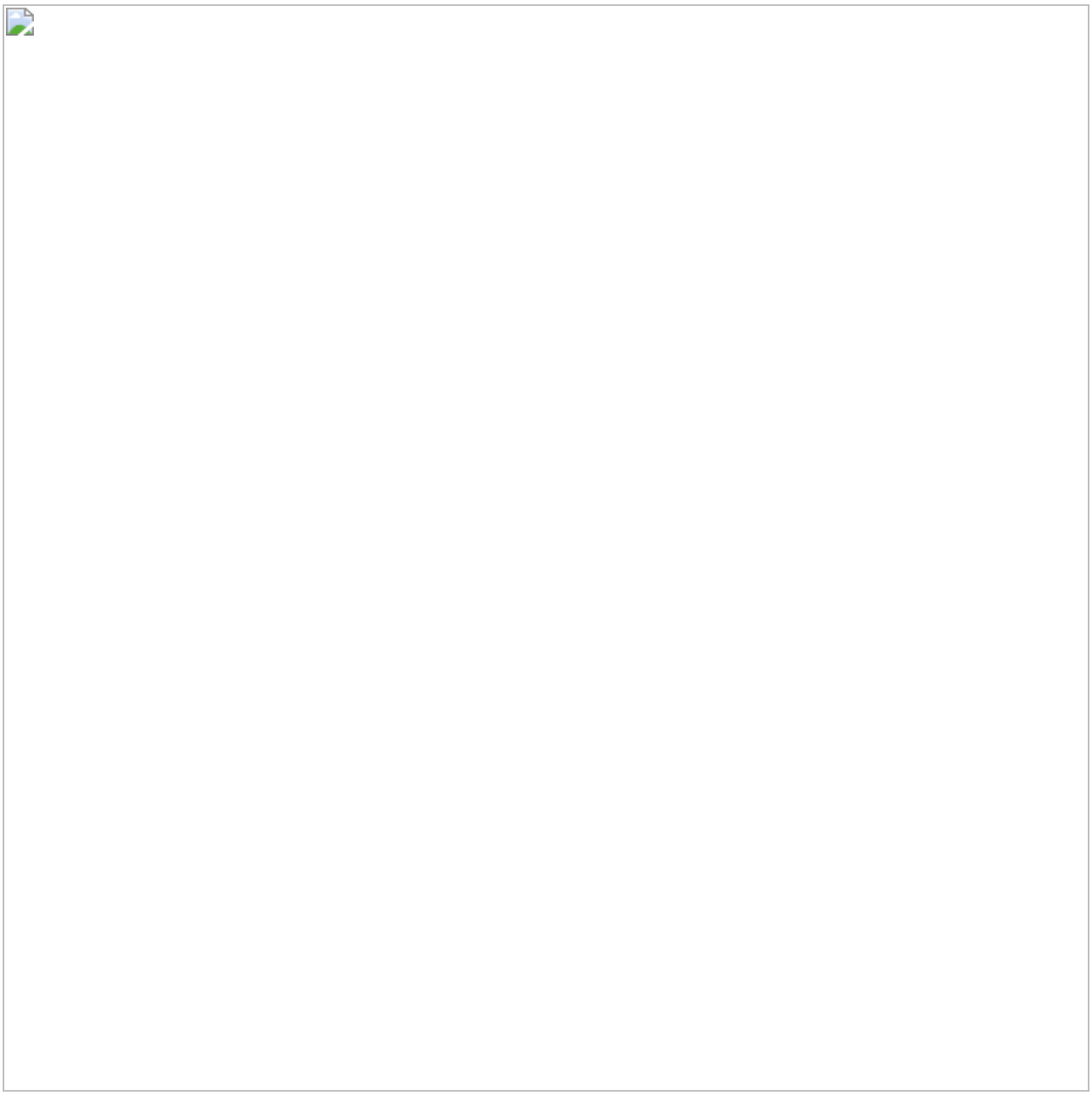
Interview: Iain Banks, author of Stonemouth

SUSAN MANSFIELD March 31, 2012



Iain Banks plays around with Scottish geography, but he's got small town life down to a T

THE East Coast Scottish town in Iain Banks' new novel feels so real I keep thinking I've been there. So, I ask him, where exactly is Stonemouth? Well, it's Montrose, except Aberdeen has been moved to where Dundee is. And there's a suspension bridge. There's a house there which is actually in Greenock. And there's a beach which is really that place in Fife, with the forest, what's it called? He pads off get a road atlas. "Tentsmuir Forest! That's the blighter!"



All the same, I say, I can see the place. “So can I. I can see what it looks like. I think you have to see it in your head. You have to fool yourself into thinking that it does actually exist, and then write as though it does. Writing is self-deception!” And he laughs a big booming laugh.

He laughs a lot in our interview, sitting opposite me in his comfortable North Queensferry home with his long legs stretched out on the sofa. From time to time, a train rattles over the Forth Bridge, which seems to run almost over the roof. The grand piano he is currently learning to play sits off to one side. (“I’ve been getting a bit better at my scales,” he says.) Even this interview counts as down-time, because at the moment Banks is deep in the writing of his next novel, a science-fiction title from alter-ego Iain M Banks, currently accruing at a steady rate of 2,500 words a day. “My head’s full of spaceships,” he says, when he fails to remember the name of one of the main characters in Stonemouth, and laughs again.

Banks is writing a book a year. They've been coming thick and fast for the last four years: The Steep Approach to Garbadale, Transition, then a science-fiction novel called Surface Detail. Stonemouth was last year's book, held over by the publisher till the spring. He's refreshingly honest about the reason for this burst of productivity. "Apparently because of the recession, a paycut was imposed upon me. Suddenly I was getting a third less per book, so I thought, 'That's anoying! I know, if I write a book a year again, I'll get the same money.' " He grins. "Don't worry, I'm still overpaid!"

"It means something approaching hard work, but that's a strictly relative term, compared with people who've got proper jobs. I'd been through this break-up with my wife Anne, the divorce and so on, and I think all that had affected me. When that was all dealt with, I felt more capable of handling a book a year." In fact, he looks as happy and healthy as I've seen him. He's 57 but could pass for ten years younger. When he goes to see how his partner, writer and film festival curator Adele Hartley, is getting on in the kitchen, he slides along the polished wooden floor in his socks like a schoolboy.

The increased productivity hasn't done his writing any harm either. Transition was his most ambitious book in years, and was widely praised. Stonemouth has echoes of one of his early bestsellers, The Crow Road. He is quietly self-effacing: "I think the more you write, the more you are likely to write a good one now and again!"

Stewart Gilmour, the protagonist of Stonemouth, is a typically Banksian hero: young (mid-twenties), quite bright, not particularly brave, has done a few daft things but is essentially good at heart. He is back in Stonemouth for the first time in five years for a funeral. Five years ago, after an act of fairly monumental stupidity at a wedding reception, he was run out of town by the local gangster clan. He is making a career for himself in architectural lighting, but has never got over Ellie, the girl he left behind in Stonemouth.

Like The Crow Road, the pivotal events of the book take place at a funeral and a wedding. "Funerals are good," says Banks. "Without devaluing it or trying to be glib about it, they are one of the most cinematic, theatrical things that happens in anybody's life. It's very good raw material for novelists. And a good wedding reception is always a hoot. I probably spent more time than I should have at the reception in the book because I was enjoying it so much," he grins. "That would never do." After the complexity of a book like Transition – multiple strands, time shifts and parallel worlds – he wanted "to get back to something nice and straightforward, just a good story. Something that had a nice atmosphere, despite the fact that it's about death and gangsters a lot of the time!" Stonemouth is also youthful. At its core is a group of twentysomethings meeting up again after five years. It has the feel of a high school reunion. Stewart and his friends are asking those twentysomething questions: is this the right job/town/relationship? What should I do with my life? "I think it's kind of inevitable at that stage, unless you're almost annoyingly determined in your own mind about what you're going to be doing," says Banks. "I was one of the really annoying ones!"

Banks knew he wanted to be a writer since childhood. He spent his twenties in a series of dead-end jobs which gave him time and headspace to write. When he was about Stewart's age, jobs dried up in Scotland and he made his way to London where he secured a job as a costing clerk for a legal firm, keeping it until The Wasp Factory was published, on his 30th birthday.

But it is to his third novel, The Bridge, that he keeps returning in conversation. Neither realism nor exactly science-fiction, it is an inventive fusion of the two, spinning off the iconic Forth Bridge which looms over his home. It is his favourite of his 26 novels, many would say his best. It also seemed to represent a crux point. After The Bridge, his fiction diverged into mainstream and sci-fi. Over the years, plenty of voices (mine included) have carped on about how he should bring them back together.

He did that with Transition, which was described by The Scotsman reviewer as "one of his most compelling and imaginative books in a long time".

Though it contained sci-fi elements, it was not an Iain M Banks title. "I wanted to do another book as complicated as The Bridge for decades. I'm very pleased to have done it, to have got that out of my system. I think to an extent you have to go between different approaches, especially if you're going to have any sort of long-term career. There are times when you're being more ambitious technically, and times when the ambition is different, when you're being ambitious in terms of popularity, I guess."

I suggest that Stonemouth is really doing on a small canvas what Transition did on an intergalactic one: both books are about power. In Transition, it's in the hands of a malevolent organisation called The Concern. In Stonemouth, it's the Murstons and the MacAvetts, small-time gangsters who control the drug trade in the town and maintain an uneasy peace, with the police turning a blind eye and the local politicians in their pockets.

Banks looks uncomfortable. "I don't really do themes. I might accidentally, but themes are an emergent phenomena of the writing of the book, of just trying to get a story out there. These are the sort of things I rely on academics and critics to spot. I just come up with the stories and write them as well as I can. There's not really a great deal of strokey-beard thinking going on."

Banks is a man remarkably free of pretensions. Some writers have paused to wonder how a personality so inherently sunny can devise the black humour and violence which punctuate his books. But there is anger in him too. Get him on to politics, and you might be surprised how bitter he can sound. We bat around drug laws ("idiocy"), the royal family ("ruritarian nonsense"), Tony Blair ("the war criminal"), the Daily Mail: ("I made a commitment a year ago that every time I refered to it I would say 'hate-filled-right-wing-rant-rag the Daily Mail'.") When Blair and Bush invaded Iraq, he tore up his passport and sent it to Downing Street. Years before, he'd been offered an OBE, which he refused.

Gradually, he says, he has come around to supporting Scottish independence. "In some ways reluctantly. I'd rather see a more left-wing or socialist Britain, but I just think that's not going to happen. We've got a chance. Scotland's the lifeboat, basically, the rest can

drown in their own right-wing nonsense if they want to. I think Scotland has a chance of being a viable, relatively left-wing or socialist country. Not madly left-wing, not Cuba, not even Venezuela. Just vaguely nice, you know?” A lot like Iain Banks.