

Interview

He started a book with "It was the day my grandmother exploded". He's addicted to Civilization, but not civilisation. He is Mr. Iain banks, as told to Ed Ricketts.

Back in 1984, when Irvine Welsh was probably still smoking his debut fag, a young Scottish author was enjoying the reception of his debut novel, **The Wasp Factory**. The Times said: "Perhaps it is all a joke, meant to fool literary London into respect for rubbish." The Financial Times said: "A Gothic horror story of quite exceptional quality." The readers said: crikey, this is a bit of a stunnah.

Factory was a violent, sarcastic, funny tirade with a twist that blew your head off. It was the creation of Iain Banks, who's never quite escaped from the notoriety it brought him. Those who missed the point and dismissed Banks as a pulp fiction merchant also missed out on 13 other novels from this prolific and eclectic author. Not that they would like those, either; varied as Banks is in his subject matter, you could never accuse him of being circumspect.

As it turns out, shock for shock's sake isn't a priority. "I tried to offend people but it didn't really work. I didn't set out to offend anyone with **The Wasp Factory**. So a decade or so later I thought, with **Complicity**, I would try to shock people - you know, 'What's the most shocking thing I can think of?' And people said, 'Oh, it doesn't matter, it's just a Banks book.' **Factory** was supposed to be about sexism and... well, slagging off religion, really. But most people just regarded it as a horror novel. I'm resigned to the fact that, whatever effect I try to create - like shocking people - I'm doomed to failure."

The State of the Art

Banks is that rarest of things, a sci-fi author who also writes mainstream novels. Even rarer is that he's equally successful in both fields, yet there's almost no crossover between fans of Iain M Banks (his SF incarnation) and plain old Banksie. Many 'serious' novelists wouldn't be seen dead writing in the SF mould, so what's the attraction for Iain? "There's a theoretical answer and a practical answer. The theoretical one is that all the parameters that are a given in mainstream are entirely variable with SF; you can alter an entire society just to play up or play down a particular aspect of it. You can alter the ground rules the way you can't in mainstream. The real practical reason is that I like SF. I'm a technophile: I like technology, despite all the catastrophes it can cause. I believe in it. There's no way back to a time without it. So I like writing about the future, perhaps with some wariness, but in the end optimistically. It's the literature of ideas, it's to do with philosophy, psychology, sociology... anything ending with an 'ology', really. It's the appeal of ideas being central, rather than characters or relationships." A typical SF fan, then? Not entirely: "You have to be discriminatory. You can't say that all technology is good, but the delightful philosophical point is that we are our technology. You can't really separate us as a species now - it's not an option. The question isn't, 'Can we abandon technology?'; it's 'How do we use it in order to survive?' There's no argument about it... well, there is, but you know what I mean."

We do indeed. Arguments such as the tired accusation that the Internet will create a society of information haves and have-nots, depending on their level of wealth. "I suppose that remains a possibility. But I remember reading an interview with Noam Chomsky [linguist and startling ideas man] in which he made the point that most people on Earth have never made a phone call, and they're fairly unlikely to - unless phone companies start giving away phones and connections. That puts it into perspective. "The Internet might be a contributory cause, if you like, but it's more of a symptom than a cause in the end. Any technological development will tend to make things more unequal. It does depend, of course: we've got a fairly rapacious capitalist society around us, with no real competition ('Yeah, let's have capitalism to breed competition' - well it hasn't worked), but it does depend to some extent on inter-governmental action."

The Player of Games

It transpires that, although Iain is mad-keen on technology, he very rarely gets round to actually using it. Like any sensible author these days, he uses a word processor, and has done for a number of years. **But** work gets in the way of leisure, as Cameron Colley, **Complicity's** anti-hero, discovers. He's an addict of a suspiciously familiar god game called Despot.

"Yeah, that was sort of modelled on Civilization. It's what I thought Civ might grow into. I was such an avid Civ player that, when I sat down to write a book last October, I wiped the disks. And now I really miss it. You can't buy Civ any more, so I'm trying to get a copy of Civ 2. I used to play SimCity a lot, too. I've been fairly quiet on the games front for a while. I bought Rebel Assault, but... well, I'm more of a strategy games fan."

He does seem to lean towards the god game. "Yeah. Though I was a long-time ace at Asteroids. I've just got an updated shareware version which, guiltily, I keep playing. I keep meaning to get a dollar account and send this chap \$15... but Asteroids was my game, which does date me, I'm afraid. With all due modesty, I have to say I was brilliant at it."

Didn't he once consider modelling the spacecraft from your SF novels on a CAD package to get a better idea of what they'd look like? Did that ever happen? "No, no, no... that was A Big Plan. The only one of those that is lumbering towards fruition is the load of MIDI stuff I've got to do music and so on. I mean, I've got all the stuff, but I haven't actually done much with it yet. It looks bloody impressive, I can tell you, sat here on its rack - lots of really interesting coloured lights and twisty bits, sliders and stuff. But I haven't done much composition yet. I may actually have to read the manuals at some point... or the video manuals, anyway." Is that because of a lack of time, or...? "It's laziness, actually. When I think about it, it can't be a lack of time. I mean, I haven't got a day job."

Science fiction writers tend to be snapped up when it comes to PC game adaptations. Terry Pratchett's done it with his interminable and terminally twee Discworld stuff, Roger Zelazny with Chronomaster, Harlan Ellison with *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream...* You can't really conjure up a platform game based on *The Crow Road*, for example (though perhaps a shoot-'em-up based on *Factory*). SF stories are rich with ideas that can be neatly shoved into a graphic-adventure-movie-type affair. Has he been asked to contribute to a game? "I thought about it very early on, in the mid-Eighties, but recently I've been too busy writing books. I've had a few offers, but I think you get too spoilt writing books. The only other person who can really change my stuff is my editor - although my friends give me input, too - but I've still got the veto. So you get used to being like God. When it comes to games, other people want to change your stuff and prepare the game... with books you get to do exactly what you want to do. Mind you, it's not as bad as films."

Surprisingly, Iain's film adaptation career is even less successful. "There's been a lot of interest, but nothing much has happened. It looks like **The Crow Road** will be on television in November in four one-hour parts. Sounds like a mini-series... gee, my own mini-series! But that might fall apart at the last minute. I've discovered this with films. I'm in litigation at the moment over **The Wasp Factory**. Originally it was going to be made into a film by an American film company, but we didn't want it to become a typical American film, so we sold it to an Irish company. And then they got taken over by an American company. There was nothing they could do about it, of course, but there were lots of things we weren't very happy about - lots of technical stuff that I don't really understand. We told them we thought we should have the rights back because they had no intention of making the film: 'No, no, no, we have - honest!' So we're in litigation. Lots of money wasted... but it means, with a bit of luck, we'll get the rights back. To sell them on again. But I suspect the shelf life of **The Wasp Factory** is coming to an end - it was published in 1984, after all."

For a man whose books are filled with paranoia, cynicism, despair and black humour, Iain Banks sounds remarkably optimistic. Perhaps he has every right to be; his career just keeps on blossoming, he's offending all the right people and he has a new science fiction book out in June. Called **Excession** ("a made-up word!"), it's the latest episode in the life of the Culture, Iain's futuristic vision of a "Communist utopia". It will, he says, feature "lots of silly spaceship names. One of the things I found was that people would approach me and say, 'When's the next Culture

novel coming out?" in a slightly threatening tone. 'And will there be more silly ship names?' So, pandering to the market and prostituting my profession, I put them in."

Ah well, never mind. It's just a Banks book, after all.
