

Interview

Iain Banks is a writer with a dual personality. Olaf Furniss met Iain, or is it Iain M., for a trip into the unknown.

Olaf : I heard a story of a couple of girls sitting in the pub with a copy of the Wasp Factory saying 'the guy that wrote this must have been a complete sicko.' Apparently you were sitting at the next table and said 'no I'm not!' Is this story true and are these reactions common?

Iain : Yes. That rings a vague bell actually. It's kind of assumed that I must be a nutter. Certainly that's what my editor thought. When he decided to publish 'The Wasp Factory' he was very nervous about meeting me. I think he expected me to be a cross between Rob Roy and Rasputin. Instead, in walked this lawyer's clerk in a three piece suit and a tie.

Iain : When you can personally persuade people that you are not a complete monster then they can accept that. But until they meet you they can't. They have to believe you come from autobiographical sources or that you must live out these things, and the very fact that you have these unpleasant ideas makes you an unpleasant person.

Olaf : Your science fiction books seem to balance the 'Culture,' which is quite civilised, and really brutal societies. Is that your view on how things are going to turn out?

Iain : It's a kind of good evil thing, it's an obvious thing to do. I regard the Culture as my utopia and it comes up against the baddies. Well they almost always are baddies. Some are misguided, but its more fun if they're just plain bad.

Iain : A common denominator between the science fiction and the mainstream stuff is that it's taking great swipes at religion. I'm always attacking religion through the usual bogey man in virtually all the books.

Iain : With 'Whit' I thought I'd better write something more sympathetic to religion to see what I could do from the point of view of the character. You can become too convinced of your own rectitude and your rightness.

Iain : I think that is the conflict between reason and faith. I am absolutely 100 per cent on the side of reason. I don't believe in belief without reason, which is what faith is. Faith is almost belief for the sake of it.

Iain : I support rationality and I'm all against faith. If you can't question something, you've basically fucked up your evolutionary programming. You leave yourself open to horrendous actions. That's something that comes across in all the books to one degree or another. It's reflected in some of the science fiction books with the clash between the Culture, which is very rational, and the more faith based, short-sighted bigots who are being selfish and nasty. Like the Tories really.

Olaf : Some of your darker work comes across as being drug influenced. Is it something you've indulged in or is it coming straight from your imagination?

Iain : I've tried a lot of things in terms of drugs, although I missed out on ecstasy because I'm too old and I can't be bothered. And I never did try heroin because it sounds iffy.

Iain : The only thing that directly relates to any drug experiences is a bit towards the end of 'The Bridge,' when the central character is talking about having an acid trip with his girlfriend in a place called Baltos which is a beach in the Outer Hebrides.

Iain : I did something similar. I wasn't with my girlfriend but a couple of my pals. One of them was staying straight and me and my other mate got totally wrecked on acid. It was great. I had a few skiddy experiences like not being able to tell vertical scales and wasn't sure if I was about to step off a one inch high rock or off a cliff. But once the first rush was over I wasn't too bad. I thoroughly enjoyed it. That was the only thing that is directly drug influenced in the books.

Iain : I have tried writing under the influence of various pharmaceuticals and it doesn't work. You always think you've written the most brilliant thing in the history of the universe and the next morning you wake up it's just drivel. Just shite.

Olaf : A lot of your influences seem to be Scottish. Can you see yourself living abroad and writing from another perspective?

Iain : In theory, yeah, but I like Scotland. I didn't want to move in the first place. I only came down to London because I couldn't get a job.

Iain : My wife and I once thought it would be a wheeze to hire an apartment in Paris for a year, spending all our time in pavement cafes. I thought yeah, that would be an ideal lifestyle. But we didn't really get round to it.

Olaf : Can you see yourself setting a book in the past?

Iain : It appeals in a theoretical way but it would probably mean doing too much research. I'm an incredibly lazy writer and that might put me off.

Olaf : In your science fiction books there always seems to be a nagging droid or stroppy spacesuit. Is this a dig at technology?

Iain : It's not really a dig. I think this is the practical result of having machines around and artificial intelligence being fairly easy. A very complicated machine probably would be sentient. But I just love doing the drones. I love drone humour. I don't know why. I love writing about the drones, there is a particular quality of bitchiness about them.

Iain : I think other complicated machines will also be sentient. It's making a lot of assumptions but I'm reasonably confident about them. It's fun for me and that makes it fun for the reader.

Olaf : Are you online?

Iain : I'm not online. But not because I don't think it's a good idea. I do. I'm convinced I would just spend all my time surfing and doing no work whatsoever. I probably wouldn't go outside at all. I actually juked my copy of *Civilisation* when I started writing my last book because I was spending too much time playing it.

Olaf : Do you think the freedom on the net will continue?

Iain : I don't know that much about it. I know a fair amount from what I've read about it in theory. As it is a network rather than a tree with a central trunk you can't monitor everything, so the chances are that it will stay as free as it is. Gradually people in authority are going to have to realise there are battles they cannot win. One of them is keeping information in the electronic age as secure as you could in the printed age.

Iain : The other thing is drugs. Eventually they are going to have to admit that the drugs war can never be won unless we go back to some neo-Victorian dark age, in which case everything is up for grabs. I think we'll see an acceptance of the liberalisation of drug laws and the same applies to censorship, pornography and all the things that at the moment the government don't want us to do, know about and have fun with. I can see that collapsing about the bastards' ears, and not a moment too soon either!

Olaf : What worries you about the future?

Iain : The only thing that really annoys me, and I might even live to see it, is something that in the end will be a good thing. That's anti-geriatric treatment. It's obviously going to cause problems with population but before that, what's going to be even worse is that at the moment the one thing no matter how much you despise and detest someone like Reagan or Thatcher at least they are going to die. We know exactly who's going to get anti-geriatric treatment when it's still very rare and very exclusive and expensive. It'll be fuckers like those. It'll be the captains of industry and the billionaires. Those scumbags are going to hang around even longer. The poor have always died sooner but it'll make that worse. And it's going to be really, really annoying that they can cheat death in the same way they cheat taxes.

Iain : It will eventually sort itself out. But in the meantime it's going to be really annoying.

Olaf : What book are you proudest of?

Iain : I think 'The Bridge' is probably the best, but 'The Wasp Factory' is not far behind. It's hard for me. I've got such a warm glow of feeling for 'The Wasp Factory.' It's kind of hard for me to separate that feeling of gratitude to the book from its actual worth as a novel.

Iain : 'The Bridge' is more intrinsically complicated. It's a much more complicated machine. I'm more proud of having constructed it and the fact that it still works.

Olaf : Do you read your own reviews?

Iain : Sometimes, if it's a publication I buy anyway. In a sense it's a no win situation. You either read them and go 'oh that's good' and you get a big head and think you're God and don't have to try too hard. Or you think 'I'm hopeless, I'm awful, no one understands me and you get all depressed. I don't really see the point to be quite honest.'

Iain : With the Wasp Factory it was such a hoot to read some of the reviews. The bad ones were so bad I just couldn't take them seriously, I was in hysterics over them. The people at the publishers were upset, but I was just giggling on the floor. After that no reviewer could hold any terror for me, or any great promise.

Olaf : If you were being fired out to the moon what would be the one possession you would take with you?

Iain : I've got a motorbike that I'm very pleased with. I've got a Honda 500 and at the moment that is probably possession number one.

Olaf : Is there one record you would take with you?

Iain : The original Warren Zevon which was going to be called Desperado until the Eagles nicked the title.

Olaf : What is your worst nightmare?

Iain : Waking up to find the last twelve years have all been a strange but vivid dream and I'm still a lawyer's clerk.