

# Iain Banks writes books about sex and drugs. Iain M Banks is a sci-fi nerd. Are they by any chance related?

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Phil Daoust talks to the man with the arcane initial about his Utopian future  
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What the hell are you doing in a place like this? It's a question you have to wrestle back down your throat when you see the company [Iain Banks](#) is keeping at Liverpool's Adelphi hotel. Among the white marble columns mill crowds of bulging T-shirts, bizarre facial hair and multicoloured waistcoats. The word 'Prithee' echoes in the air; the slogan 'PANIC YE NOT: go have a drink' stretches across a black-clad back. And, confirming that weirdos and real ale still go hand in hand, pints of Theakston's Old Peculier perch on every surface.

The addled masses are here for the Eastercon science-fiction convention, a chance to meet heroes, stock up on cybersex anthologies and elf-and-toadstool statuettes and make rather weak jokes about original gravity. This big, safe playground is not the sort of place you expect to find one of Britain's angry middle-aged men.

Banks is best known as the creator of controversial 'real-world' fiction like *The Wasp Factory*, *Complicity* or *The Crow Road* - all burning sheep, dodgy sex and exploding grannies. He's famed as a Porsche-driving, heavy-drinking, drug-debating, Tory-hating evangelical atheist. Those of us who enjoy sci-fi with plot, characterisation and self-awareness also think of him as a leading figure in the genre's minority Intelligent Wing. But what can he find to excite him in Eastercon's exhibition of alien art, its Tardis-style police box or even its poster for the Star Trek MasterCard (motto: 'Don't Klingon to other credit cards')? It would be easy to assume that Banks has just driven down from his home in Fife for a bit of book-signing and image-polishing. But no, he says, he's here as a fan himself, come to worship the likes of Brian Aldiss, the grand old man of British sci-fi. And, while we're on the subject, he's rather fond of the trappings that turn so many potential readers against science fiction.

'Big spaceships and impressive weapons - that's part of what I fell in love with as a writer,' he says over lasagne in a nearby Pizzaland. 'Mainstream literature seems like painting in miniature a lot of the time, and then suddenly you get to science fiction and you get the opportunity to work on a proper canvas. You become like Rolf Harris - you know, big, big brushes, broad strokes. There may well be more art in the miniature, but by God, it's more fun in the bigger visions.' This soft-voiced Scot even comes to resemble Rolf as he explains the attraction: all beard, glasses, bounding enthusiasm. His Warner Bros jacket gets a good flapping, and on the back Bugs and Taz become as animated as they ever are on screen.

He's having so much fun that one simile isn't enough to describe it. 'It's like, some of the most expressive, most emotional music comes from the piano - but you're limited in the effects you can produce. You've got a soft pedal and a sustain, but that's about it. Science fiction, and

especially space operas, are like working with' - he spreads his arms - 'a big organ! A cathedral-filling organ. You've got lots of stops you can pull out, a second keyboard... a footboard!' Forty-three-year-old Banks wanted to be a writer from the age of 11, and science fiction soon became his main love, creeping up on him as he read the yellow-spined Gollanczes from his local library. He wrote three sci-fi books before finding a taker for any of his novels, and has since had seven published under the semi-pseudonym Iain M Banks. Now, encouragingly for a man whose first published sci-fi novel was an attempt to out-Star Wars Star Wars, the movie-makers seem to be catching on. Pathe-Guild has bought an option to film *The Player Of Games*, published in 1988. Luc Besson, whose films include *Leon* and *The Fifth Element*, has been mentioned as a possible director.

Banks resists suggestions that his sci-fi writing may be achieving a crossover, but it has a better chance than most of appealing to non-techie, and not just because of its humour and clarity of style. He may stuff his books with thinking machines and bug-eyed monsters, but he has the ability to make readers connect with all his players, whatever their shape. And while Banks likes a big explosion as much as the next man - he is, after all, an amateur pyrotechnician - he's not about to let 'ravelling beams' or 'coruscating energies' push out interesting characters.

Banks's latest book, *Excession*, for example, gives us the alien diplomat Fivetide, who looks like an ill-favoured squid and breathes some deadly mixture of gases but reminds one irresistibly of Stephen Fry at his most bumptious - all flamboyant hugs, pursed lips and 'Mmmwwwah!'s. Then there's Grey Area, a sentient spaceship so despised for forcing its thoughts into animal minds that its peers refer to it as Meatfucker.

'All science fiction stories are still about recognisably human things,' Banks says. 'They have to be. You could set an entire novel among aliens or computers, but unless there's some kind of emotional dimension or plot dynamic that makes sense to the human emotions, it's going to be impossible to read the damn thing with any degree of pleasure.' Thanks to snobbery, he admits, science fiction doesn't always attract the best writers. But he doesn't see why it has to concede the intellectual high ground. Like other fans, he claims classics as diverse as *Frankenstein* and *1984* for sci-fi, seeing them as attempts to explore the effect of technological change on human society.

Banks himself has a vision for the future - part wish-list, part reaction to developments in artificial intelligence - and it accounts for much of his renown in sci-fi circles. He calls it the Culture, a 'vaguely left-of-centre utopia with no money and no real laws'. This dream, worked out in four novels, is beginning to overshadow the rest of his work, in the way that another galactic vision, Foundation, took over Isaac Asimov's. Ten, 20 years down the line, Banks may be known for nothing else. But, so far at least, he's not worried: 'If this is the worst I have to endure in terms of being misunderstood as a writer, I've done bloody well.'

'The Culture,' says this self-confessed slacker, 'is my secular heaven, the place I'd like to live, my place over the rainbow.' It's a place of universal wealth and limitless play, of genetically enhanced sex and internally manufactured drugs, where a virtual reality known as Infinite Fun Space means even artificial intelligences get their kicks.

He explained the dream in his 1994 article A Few Notes On The Culture: how a society of humanoids and self-aware machines might evolve and spread in partnership throughout the galaxy - and why beyond a certain point that would necessarily involve a mix of socialism, anarchy and determined hedonism. The last of these is vitally important to a man who once ran for rector of Edinburgh University under the banner of the Drunken Bastard Party.

'Briefly, nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited,' he wrote in A Few Notes. 'It is essentially an automated civilisation in its manufacturing processes, with human labour restricted to something indistinguishable from play, or a hobby. No machine is exploited, either ... any job can be automated in such a way as to ensure that it can be done by a machine well below the level of potential consciousness.' There's a whiff of rationalisation about the whole thing - I've written these books, now how am I going to explain the setting? - but some fascinating ideas. Culture humans can gradually change gender, for example, simply by thinking about it - hence no sexual discrimination.

'Maybe something like the Culture will be denied us because we are too horrible,' he says, back in Pizzaland. His dream assumes society will act rationally and use a leap in computing power to replace the waste and injustice of the market economy. 'But we could actually have something like the Culture now. You could have a fairer distribution of wealth and a more efficient system.' The film deal for the The Player Of Games has given Banks his best ever chance to spread his anarcho-pinko message. This, the most openly political of his sci-fi books, revolves around a clash between the Culture and (though the term is tautologous for Banks) an evil empire. It's unlikely to escape major changes, not least because the struggle is mostly expressed on a gaming board rather than through spaceships blasting the hell out of each other. But still - the Culture on the big screen! He must be jumping for joy.

'Actually, I've got very mixed feelings,' he says, and you remember that the man who dreams of donning his waders, picking up his stepladder and joining the masses pissing on Margaret Thatcher's grave also spends hours drawing the hardware that populates his novels. 'I'd quite like to see it done, but I've got rather anorakish feelings about the way the spaceships look. They're going to get it wrong - they're going to make them look like everybody else's...' An anguished look, then the words: 'But just the chance ...' And he cheers up again.

'One of the things you're in business for as a writer,' he says, 'is to try to change the world, to make more people think the way you think about politics, religion, whatever. It'll only be one extra little nudge, but it might be the straw that breaks the camel's back - but in a nice way ... um, the straw that changed the camel's mind.'

'I know the Culture doesn't exist, and it may never, but if enough people believe in it, it might help people think in a better way towards the future. I'm trying to produce a wee bit of light at the end of the tunnel...' Back at the Adelphi, Banks's potential converts have other things on their minds. It is time for Battle of the Bots, and a horde of twentysomething fans are baying for oil as a remote-controlled crash helmet known as Road Warrior lays into Keith the Knitted Robot, half Smash-ad alien, half tea-cosy. Around the pair lie the bodies of the vanquished:

K4.5, a pint-sized version of Doctor Who's mechanical doggy; the Bumblebot, a knobbly sphere vibrating away inside a Boddingtons box; and a fifties-style kids' toy called the Universal Battle Robot.

Some futures, it seems, are more civilised than others.