Iain Banks

James Knight, Murdo McLeod December 2, 2009

Interview By James Knight, Photo By Murdo Mcleod

Iain Banks is a belligerent Scotsman whose place in the late-20th-century order of literary things is incredibly unique. In a publishing world that likes to restrict writers to one genre or another, Banks has forged a career as a roundly applauded writer of both science fiction (which he writes as Iain M. Banks) and books that don't have robots and spaceships in them (which he writes as plain old Iain Banks). His first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, appeared in 1984, and just as Martin Amis's early work had done half a decade earlier, it defined British fiction for its time. Banks's debut also established many of the

formal and thematic calling cards that would continue to be found in his writing. Namely, an unreliable narrator, an obsession with both the future and death, and lots of violence and drinking. Throw in a preoccupation with control and sexual and emotional cruelty, and you've got yourself a Banks corker. The ending of *The Wasp Factory* is way too good to spoil here, but it makes the finale of that Japanese movie *Audition* seem about as shocking as an episode of *Barney & Friends*. It wasn't labeled "the lurid literary equivalent of a video nasty" by the *Sunday Express* for no reason at all. In 1987, Banks's first science-fiction novel, *Consider Phlebas*, rescued the genre from the clammy hands of the types who hang out at Star Trek conventions and moan about how David Lynch ruined *Dune* (which he didn't, by the way). Banks's initial foray into science fiction presented a utopian postscarcity future society called the Culture whose inhabitants are looked after by artificially intelligent beings known as Minds. Despite a bunch of all-knowing, all-powerful AIs running the show, this future is troubled enough to deal with war, the use of torture, and integration with foreign societies. All of which are more than a little applicable to right now, today, December 2009. And speaking of now, 13 straight-up Iain novels and 11 Iain M. novels later, his latest work, *Transition*, is the first to marry his two genres inside a single cover. Very exciting for Banks fans like us. PS: If you haven't read *Raw Spirit*, his wild eulogy to his native Scotland's whisky industry, move that to the top of your queue please. It's great. **Vice: Let's start with your latest novel. *Transition* has no "M" on its cover, but it contains elements that pitch it into sci-fi territory. Is the "M" gone forever to make way for a synergy of your science-fiction and straight fiction work?**

Iain Banks: Nope, the "M" will be back next year, plastered firmly onto the cover of the new Culture novel. That is, it will be unless I, or my publishers, suddenly decide that it really needs to be dropped. Having, with *Transition*, published what could certainly be seen as a science-fiction novel with no "M," it'd be even easier now to make that leap. And I'm pretty sanguine about the whole thing—it wouldn't bother me either way. As to *Transition* representing the future of my work, no. After this one, it's back to the Culture, improbably spacious spaceships, sarcastic drones, and exotic weaponry for the next project. I start writing the blighter in January. There's no title yet, but the plot is coming along very promisingly. Should be a cracker. ***Transition* could be read as an attack on US foreign policy. It inverts our reality, pitching the Christians as terrorists in an Asian-controlled world. It also dwells on torture, which could easily reflect Guantánamo.**

Well, it wasn't meant to, but I keep getting asked that question so maybe I'm going to have to start saying yes, it was. Let's just say that I wasn't especially thinking of US foreign policy when I wrote it. The torture aspect is something I've been thinking about for a long time and finally decided I've got right. For what it's worth, here's what I think: Torture is always wrong, should always be banned, and should never, ever be practiced or tolerated—even at secondhand, as it were, by the state. If there is ever genuinely a situation where torturing somebody will directly save lives, and that happens extremely rarely, then the person who might be contemplating doing the torturing should know that they will subsequently be prosecuted and punished for it, even if they get a medal as well. That should concentrate the fucker's mind. What it boils down to is that a society that condones torture to protect itself doesn't deserve to be protected in the first place. **You**

have dealt with the theme of war and its religious justification in *Look to Windward*, which you dedicated to Gulf War veterans. *Complicity* offered shadows of the Gulf conflict. September 11 is dealt with in *Dead Air*, and *The Steep Approach* to Garbadale could be read as commenting on the war on terror. Would it be safe to say that you feel pretty strongly about this war and the West's attitudes and approach toward it?

Yes. War exerts a certain grisly glamour, and the ways that societies justify wars to themselves fascinates me. Basically, though, I'm against war. If you're a person, don't start fights. If you're a state or a society, don't start wars. You have a right to defend yourself, but that's all. Probably most people would agree with both of these statements, but then, in the real world, it gets more complicated. Anyway, for what it's worth I think that the war on terror is about as sensible—and about as winnable—as the war on drugs. Again, I wouldn't want to pile too much this-is-what-I-think responsibility onto *Transition*'s shoulders, but I guess taken with the rest of the books you mention, plus the Culture novels in general, it marks out the fuzzy, arguably woolly, boundaries of my thoughts on the subject. **You have a reputation for structural complexity, be it the unreliable narrators or multiple narrators of *The Bridge* or *Walking on Glass*, the parallel worlds that Transitionaries can move between in *Transition*, or the alternate, simultaneously ascending and descending chapters in *Use of Weapons*. When you come to approach a new novel, is formal innovation and complexity a concern or does the narrative dictate the form?**

It has to come from the narrative. Actually, in the case of *Use of Weapons*, it came from [Scottish science-fiction writer] Ken MacLeod; he suggested the ascending/descending chapters idea and in doing so effectively rescued a manuscript I was going to treat as a lost cause. Doing that sort of stuff for its own sake means you're just being self-indulgent or trying to show off. It might look cool to some people but you'll lose more readers than you'll impress. **Alcohol and drugs are all over your novels, from the Culture's drug glands to the lifestyle of Prentice McHoan in *The Crow Road* and Cameron Colley in *Complicity*. *Transition*'s Transitionaries move between alternate dimensions via the injection of Septus, and you detailed the world of whisky in *Raw Spirit*. As an admitted indulger, did the presence of substances in your work reflect their presence in your life? And now that you don't indulge, will they disappear?**

I still drink. I have a reputation as a champagne socialist to maintain, after all. But drugs seem to have lost their appeal. Could be just an age thing, though I still believe our drug laws are stupid, wrongheaded, irrational, and almost certainly create net harm. I have tried writing while high, stoned, drunk, whatever, but it doesn't work. You might think it has worked at the time, but when you reread it sober, it's generally just embarrassing drivel. I suspect I'd still do coke now and again but a) my girlfriend is very antidrugs and b) it's hard to justify, given the amount of violence associated with the manufacture and distribution of the stuff. By indulging, you're sending money to some deeply unpleasant people. So I miss it a little, but only a little. I guess having taken a few drugs over the years has had the effect of making me confident about writing about them, but I wouldn't want to overstate their importance in either my life or my work. **Your pace is very fast. In these uncertain financial times, do you think that more writers will have to take a more workmanlike approach to the craft of writing novels?**

That might be an effect. Equally possible is that people—writers and readers—might turn to wild fantasy to escape the grimness of reality. I wouldn't claim to be an authority on the state of the novel, but it still looks pretty healthy to me, and I think the idea that it will somehow cease to be is just silly. Theater didn't disappear when cinema came along, and paintings didn't stop being painted because somebody invented the camera. **You are releasing an abridged audiobook version of *Transition* on iTunes. Do you think that this kind of thing will become standard operating procedure for you?**

The iTunes version of *Transition* is an interesting experiment, but not really that different from a standard CD audiobook. I guess if it's judged to make money—either directly or by selling more copies of the CD or paper versions—then it will become standard procedure. The Sony e-reader and the Kindle represent a more radical change. How those affect book buying will likely be profound.