

Interview

In 1984, Iain Banks buzzed on to the literary scene with *The Wasp Factory*, a dark, controversial thriller that made him the "new voice in Scottish literature." 15 years and 19 novels later, Banks is still going strong and takes on the corporate world in *The Business*, a sci-fi/political thriller about an omniscient organisation that predates the Christian Church. Much like a small nation with an authoritarian government, The Business has numbered levels of management--but they are elected. "Financial Transparency" or knowing what everyone earns, is also part of their mission statement along with several other radically democratic business policies. Its heroine, Kate Telman, was literally pulled from the gutter as a small child and reared by a "Level 1." Years later, she is now a top executive doing her best to help her co-workers get a seat in the United Nations, which may require her to hook up with a fat, horny prince. In an interview with Amazon.co.uk's Rebekah Warren, Iain Banks explains why there isn't much difference between The Business and the CIA, what he hates about capitalism and how Kate Telman's character is based on him.

*What was the impetus for writing *The Business*?*

Actually, there was a series of letters that people sent to me and I wrote screeds back. It was on the theme that I wasn't a single person writing, but a whole shadowy organisation called The Iain Banks Foundation and that there was a separate tortured soul kept in the garret who actually wrote the novels. In one letter, there is a secret organisation with medical facilities deep underground where I was under treatment for advanced egotism. I thought it might be fun to try and use some of that. Eventually, it fell away, a bit like scaffolding against a building.

*From references to Augusto Pinochet's extradition to digital chips, yours is a very modern novel that in many ways encapsulates the vast conglomerates of today. Does *The Business* or something akin to it actually exist?*

Oh my god, I hope not!

What about Time Warner?

No, I don't think so, that's my publisher! (laughing). It is possible that it could have existed if it had all started a long time ago, but not now. It was just to have fun with the idea of a business organisation that modern tycoons would find horrific; the idea of total financial transparency and democratic management. That is, everyone knowing what everyone else is making and elected management.

The Business follows a set, Machiavellian political agenda to support its economic one; a distinct creed upon which it stands. How did you come up with the model?

One of the things I've always said about science fiction is that it lets you treat things that are normally constants as variables. In the mainstream, things are taken as given, but in science fiction you can actually alter them. It's nice to look at things that people assume are constants and try to fiddle around with those and see if they can be changed, such as financial transparency and democratic management. But it's also an attitude that's really comparable to the Catholic Church. It's been around a similar amount of time and has an equally long-term outlook. Whether it is actually any more decent than any other capitalist concern, I'm not sure, but there is certainly shall

we say, a 'Machiavellian' element.

You write that non-elected management creates a culture of employees "furthering their own selfish ends and status within the company" rather than "the far more productive pursuit of making all concerned more money." How far are we away from democratic management?

As far as we are from the ideal communist state I imagine.

So you don't think it could happen?

When I wrote it I thought, "this could actually work if we could set up rules about the way businesses are run." What has always appalled me about capitalism is that the first duty of any corporate officer is to the shareholders. Despite the fact that the shareholder may only have been a shareholder since 9 o'clock that morning. Their first concern is not to the public, or to safety & certainly not to employees who may have been with the company for decades. You can think of these things wonderfully well in fiction but when you try to do it in reality...

You refer to the CIA as "The Company" rather than as The Business. What is the distinction?

It's much younger and a bit more secretive--there aren't any signs on the Washington beltway stating where their headquarters are.

They're not as secretive and they're younger; that's it?

Yes. That's about it! (laughing) And not quite so concerned about accruing lots of money. The Business is probably cleaner--less to do with drugs. Ha-ha!

Besides having a chronic case of penal envy, what does Kate's character represent in the modern corporate world?

(Laughing) A sort of rational sensibility, I suppose. Deep down there's a decent sort of person as well, but she has a cover; a cover of pride. She is determined to win, to prevail by just being smarter than everybody else not by cheating. That makes her even more victorious in a way, it makes her a better person.

How did her character develop?

I think it goes right back to the childhood incident when the former Level 1, Mrs Telman, gets a flat tire and finds her on the side of the road selling Penny Dainties at 200% mark up.

Where did that bit come from?

It actually happened to me.

That was based on you?

Yes, but I didn't have such a deprived background. I had two very loving parents and lived in a nicer neighbourhood. We had--I must have been about 10 or 11--what we called the 'Olympic Games'--just running around and so on. I worked at a stall and barely had a penny. However, my Uncle had given me a bunch of Irish pennies, so I went to the bus station and got all these sweets

for free. Then I sold them at a ridiculous mark-up to my friends. I went back and told my Dad and he was not very happy about it. I don't think he actually said it was wrong but he said, "Look, you are sort of stealing from your friends." If he had said, "Well done, next time charge even more," I don't know what I would be now--probably a captain of industry.

So the CEO of Time Warner didn't get a flat tire and find you on the side of the road?

(Laughing) No, not quite!

What did you enjoy the most about writing The Business?

Definitely the phone conversations between Kate and her best friend, Luce. They're such good fun; it made me laugh.

When you were writing scenes with Level 1, were you ever tempted to put your pinkie finger to the corner of your mouth, like Dr. Evil in Austin Powers and say...

"One million dollars!" (Lots of laughter)