Interview

The science fiction community regards Iain Banks as one of Britain's sparkiest, most imaginative and wittily offbeat sf novelists. The literary establishment regards Iain Banks as one of Britain's sparkiest, most imaginative and wittily offbeat mainstream novelists.

And never the twain shall meet.

Novels lacking that crucial middle initial are regularly lauded by the literary critics, novels with it are either ignored outside the SF field or curtly reviewed with grudging sufferance. This says more about the biases of criticism than Banks' undeniable talents, and while he may be bemused at this demonstration of literary apartheid, he's philosophical about it. "It can be irksome at times." he admits, "particularly as both sorts of novels are written in more or less the same way. The only distinctions are technical ones. You have to do research or check the facts when it comes to the real-life stuff, the mainstream stuff; but in SF - well, you have to check facts occasionally, but not usually. Especially with the kind of SF I write."

Is there any sense in which the mainstream work informs the science fiction, or vice versa? "I don't know. I'm the last person to ask, perhaps. There are definite similarities in some of the ways that the books are structured and the way dialogue is generated. But I don't know if the two types of novel actually **inform** each other. They're written by the same person, that's about it really, and I don't think there's very much cross-fertilization, to be honest. It's more that there's a similar frame of mind involved.

"One thing I will say is that I definitely feel more at home with SF because you have more control. If you get to a point where you think, `For that to happen, the whole society has to be different.' it's no problem in SF; you just go back and alter the society. If it happens in a mainstream novel, you can't really do that. So, I feel slightly more comfortable writing SF. But by a degree, a **fraction**, writing mainstream fiction is more rewarding, simply because you feel you've achieved more having had to wrestle with reality as well as with your imagination. I've always said that if I was forced at the point of a gun to choose between the two, I would rather go on writing science fiction. I enjoy it far more. But I would hate to have to give up either one."

Banks' first four SF novels, **Consider Phlebas, The Player of Games, Use of Weapons** and **The State of the Art** (1987-1991), are set in the universe of the Culture. The Culture is a complex, galaxy-wide human community predicated on pacifism, and whose rulers, in a typical piece of Banksian irony, are prepared to use dirty tricks up to and including murder to preserve the status quo. "The Culture is my idea of utopia," Banks says, "Or at least as close as you can get to utopia with what we regard as recognizably human stock. I would **love** to live there, and that has been the guiding principle behind the whole thing. I just thought of the best possible place you could live in. Not that it always comes out that way in the books, because I'm trying hard not to make it look wonderful."

But neither his most recently published SF novel **Against a Dark Background**, or the forthcoming **Feersum Endjin**, are set in the Culture. "I suppose they **could** have been," he allows. "Largely it's because I didn't want to get pigeon-holed writing **only** about the Culture. And it's what everyone expects. I might get boring, and I just might get bored. Actually, that isn't true, because I enjoy writing about the Culture, I feel so at home in it, as I've said many times before.

"When I conceived **Dark Background** my feeling was that I didn't want people to think,`Ah, it's a Banksie, and Banksie with the "M" in it, so it must be a Culture book.' I didn't want to be that predictable. Also, although I **could** have written **Dark Background** in particular in the Culture, it would have taken too much away from it. I had all sorts of little technological fixes that the Culture couldn't accommodate. But the main thing was just wanting it to be something different."

Certainly the world in which **Dark Background** takes place has a much more fractured, moribund flavor to it than the Culture. "Yes, there's no real sense of a civilization progressing in a lively way, therefore people turn in on themselves and become introspective. Irrationality is coming in. There's a feeling that this society is gradually building up to something, something terrible, which actually does happen towards the book's end. But even then, it's not the usual `everything's going to completely change' scenario beloved of so many SF novels. There may be different people in certain positions of power or whatever at the story's close, but it will still be roughly the same society. By doing that, I was trying to act against what you normally expect to find in the genre.

"I've read so many SF books where the action is terribly, terribly important to the fate of everyone and everything. That fate of a whole planet can hang on the outcome of a protagonist's actions. Sometimes, the fate of the entire **universe**! Well, if you look at history, this is very unusual **indeed**. What usually happens is that people suffer and die and get involved in all sorts of mayhem and catastrophe and it doesn't make that much difference in the end.

"That was one of the idea behind **Consider Phlebas**. There's a big war going on in that novel, and various individuals and groups manage to influence its outcome. But even being able to do that doesn't ultimately change things very much. At the book's end, I have a section pointing this out by telling what happened after the war, which was an attempt to pose the question, `What was it all for?' I guess this approach has to do with my reacting to the cliche of SF's `lone protagonist.' You know, this idea that a single individual can determine the direction of entire civilizations. It's very, very hard for a lone person to do that. And it sets you thinking what difference, **if** any, it would have made if Jesus Christ, or Karl Marx or Charles Darwin had never been. We just don't know."

Banks wrote six novels, totalling around half-a-million words, before breaking into print. He has been cannibalizing some of the ideas in those early, unpublished books ever since. "The funny thing was that everyone said I was an overnight success. But it took me 16 years to get anything published. So `over-decades success' might be more appropriate. **Dark Background** itself was based on one of those unpublished books, from 1975, I think, but it has been completely rewritten. It's the last of the old stories, and it's quite a relief to have gotten them all out of the way. The story had a special identity and I feel I sort of betrayed it by writing it so badly. The idea of the Lazy Gun [a weapon with an unpredictable sense of humor], for instance, was a piece of daftness I wanted to make use of. Ideas like that are worth the anguish of writing the whole thing again. I've paid my dues to it now. **Phlebas** was an old one too; it was written just after **The Wasp Factory** [his first published book], in 1984. I've found that rewriting an old book took much more effort than writing one from scratch, but I had to go back to do right by these things. Now I can go on and start completely new stuff."

He has described **Against a Dark Background** as being somewhere between SF and fantasy; as almost a commentary on fantasy, in fact. What did he mean by that? "It was a slightly jokey way of trying to explain what it was. I decided that I wanted to use the tropes of science fiction to deconstruct fantasy as a form. It almost sounds convincing when you talk about it!

"It's a multiple quest novel, and it takes the well-known idea that Arthur C. Clarke had many years ago that the technology of an advanced civilization would look like magic to a less advanced civilization. So any magic that is in **Against a Dark Background** is in the shape of very advanced technology, because it takes place in a setting which is much more scientifically correct, if you like, than the Culture. It's very much in a realistic milieu, insofar as you can say that about a science fiction novel, and yet it has the shape, and sometimes the form, of a fantasy novel. But the workings-out of the plot undermine its fantasy feel because things point back to reality. I've tried to insert realistic elements that one wouldn't put into an average SF novel.

"There's a kind of mythic quality, or rather an attempt to explain how myths arise from ordinary things that are misunderstood. For example, there's a bit at the end where a couple of the characters find a fabulous piece of pure diamond in the shape of a gigantic crown. One of them wants to impose their idea of what this thing is - that it's some kind of holy relic or whatever, you know? - and the other says, `Well, it's a drill bit actually.' The first one points to an inscription and says, 'But the runes, the runes!' Then the other character explains that they're serial numbers. That makes it

sound a bit like [fantasy humor novelist] Terry Pratchett. There's more to it than that, I wanted that scene to be representative of what tends to happen when people mistake one thing for another because of their expectations. It's an example, an extreme example, of how people bend reality."

This idea ties in with the irrationality of the various fanatical religious sects in the book. principally the Huhsz and the Fellowship of the Gun. Are they just a plot device, or is Banks trying to convey his feelings about religion in the here and now? "Both. I'm against religion, and always have been," he says. "That comes out in virtually all my books. You can argue it's an easy option for me to attack religion, but that doesn't stop me from doing it. And I think including assorted religious nutters adds some extra spice. In a sense, **Against a Dark Background** uses weird faiths as symptomatic of the bigotry, calcification and imminent breakdown of our own society. You only have to look about you to see an increasing number of these loony cults coming in. Perhaps it's a millennial thing. So, there are two functions: using religion as a target that I enjoy shooting, and as an image of what's going on in the here and now."

Part of the plot of **Dark Background** involves several characters in search of a rare book, itself a stage in the quest for the Lazy Gun. In the process, Banks has some fun with literary traditions and includes a few nods in the direction of fabulous imaginary tomes like the **The Necronomicon.** How conscious were these references? "Funnily enough, I think they're **unconscious** mostly. The whole thing was basically set up as a yarn, rather on the same terms as **Consider Phlebas**, which had distinctly yarnish tendencies, I mean, when you come down to it, that was a story about a shipwrecked sailor falling in with a gang of pirates and going in search of buried treasure.

"I'm aware that you can't write a novel which involves a quest for a book, or is partly about that quest, without thinking on it for a bit. But I didn't try to overload the text with extra imagery. I think that's a game too much. You can get beguiled by trying to get as many different references in, and nods and winks, and you can lose the story in the clutter that results. So, I don't try to do that. Any such references are generally subconscious rather that conscious. They might be there, but I'm not that aware of deliberately putting them in."

Against a Dark Background features a massive, incredibly convoluted neo-Gothic structure called the Sea House, home of the Huhsz. [Note: this is incorrect. it is the home of a religious monk-like group, but not the Huhsz - David Simmons] It has echoes of one of fantastic fiction's most renowned habitats, Gormenghast castle in Mervyn Peake's classic trilogy. "Although Peake's books had an enormous influence on me when I first read them, I didn't deliberately think of **Gormenghast** when I was writing **Dark Background**, but it's definitely there. It's present in **Walking on Glass** as well, and I acknowledged that in the book. I read Peake at a time when I was at such an impressionable age, in my early teens, that it made an indelible impression. I can't deny it must have had some influence on the Sea House. Then again, as soon as you think of a very, very large and eccentric building, it's bound to be compared with Gormenghast, simply because Peake got there first.

"A couple of years ago, I went back to Peake's **Titus Groan** and, although the Gormenghast trilogy had been really special to me when I read it in high school, I found that I didn't think the writing was particularly good. Nevertheless, the **idea** of it, and its whole baroque complexity, was very important. The driving imagination behind it was so weird and magnificent that you glossed over the occasional cliched descriptions."

Something Banks shares with Peake, although their styles and approach are radically different, is a knack for inventing bizarre yet curiously believable names for his characters and locations. **Use of Weapons**, to take a random example, includes assassin Cheradenine Zakalwe, a robot called Skaffen-Amtiskaw and a woman called Diziet Sma. "As a matter of fact," Banks laughs, "many people say, `Why are your names so **weird**?' But I work to make them sound plausible in the context of the future societies the characters live in.

"There's a name-generating mode I get into which basically comes down to looking at everyday things, like the titles of books that happen to be around me at the time, and extrapolating from them. The trick is to stop thinking about the names of these things as entire words and just see the

syllables involved. Some name-generating can be incredibly easy. For instance, you can look at this carpet and that door and say, `Cardoor!' Then, you realize you can't use that because it sounds like the door of a car. So you play with it and come up with `Headoor' or `Doorhead' or something and gradually a name emerges. It's kind of a brainstorming session. Luckily, nobody sees me doing it or I would be carted off to the funny farm.

"I tend to sit down and generate a load of names in one go. After I've done that, I have my supply for the next book. one thing I've found is that if I haven't got a name ready and can't think of a good one, I can sit there for ages. I can be there for hours and not think of one. Sometimes I take names for companies and businesses I come across. Like, I happened to see some headed notepaper from a firm of lawyers called Gumsip and Slurridge. Isn't that **great**? Gumsip and Slurridge! I've had that lying around for ages and never found anything to use it in. But one of these days..."

As far as the characters themselves are concerned, Banks has a tendency toward creating strong female personalities. "I suppose I have a predilection for strong characters of both sexes," he contends, "I find it fairly easy to write female characters, but I don't want them to act just like men, because that has the implication that only men can be strong central characters. The thing that worries me is that, because I'm writing action-based books, the women might seem too much like men. Maybe I'm being over-cautious, but there were a couple of occasions when I found myself putting something in and thinking that. There's a scene in chapter two of **Against a Dark Background** where [heroine] Sharrow is saying goodbye to her lover, and he slaps her. She punches him on the jaw and knocks him down. So, she's bested him in male terms. Then, as my concession to her gender, she sniffs a bit afterwards. But, normally I make very few concessions to my woman characters in the `traditional' sense."

And few concessions to the readers in terms of empathy with the characters. In Sharrow's case, readers are asked to sympathize with someone whose actions inadvertently killed 468,000 people. "Er, yes. But it **was** an accident. Honest. She's not meant to be sympathetic, at least at the outset. She's meant to be fairly hard, and if you met her you wouldn't think she was particularly sympathetic. Not the sort of person you would welcome living next door to you at all. I have the kind of readers who expect to respond to a character like that, and to identify with them.

"Same thing applies to my mainstream novels. Take **Complicity** for example. The main character in that, Cameron Colley, is a sleazeball journalist, totally selfish, into drugs and booze and he's having a sado-masochistic relationship with a woman. He's a deeply unpleasant character. My hope and expectation was to offend as many people with **Complicity** as I did with **The Wasp Factory** [which concerned cannibalism]. **Complicity** was to some extent written in reaction to my previous mainstream novel, **The Crow Road**, because I thought that was a bit too comfy and middle-class. I still liked it, but I thought there was definitely a side to it that would make some people sit back and say,`Ah, signs of authorial maturity in Banks at last!' I wanted to knock **that** smartly on the head. So, I decided to write a novel to forestall that possibility. Something on the edge; something sharp and bitter. And I intend to stick with this thing of alternating the books - SF, non-SF, and so on - as that seems to work well for me."

Banks writes fairly substantial books and little in shorter form. Is this because novels can spoil an author for short stories? "Yes, in a very specific way. Because very few of my ideas have **got** to be short stories. I write lots of short stories, but they all get put into novels; they tend to get embedded in there. Unless something works really well as a short, the same idea - the same bit of a story, as it were - will do more work in a novel because it has resonances back into the rest of the book. And when you go past it, if you do it right, it will have further resonances. You just can't get that in a single story. Some ideas have an internal elegance that's best expressed in short form. Little gems, you know? I don't think I've ever written any of those! In the end, I don't think I would have written as well, or enjoyed overall the body of work as much, had I written more short stories and fewer novels. Or even novels that had less twiddily bits in them.

"As to writing long novels, usually endings and beginnings suggest themselves; where to come in and where to go out tend to be fairly obvious. Well, they **seem** fairly obvious at the time, but when

you think about it rationally, you can't really understand why. But it's not something that requires any great thought. Which is just as well, because I don't give it any!"