

An Interview with SF Author

Iain Banks

Carried out in April 1999, in a hotel room in Liverpool, England.

Interviewer: Johan Anglemark

All careers have a start

I tried to write my first novel when I was fourteen. I thought I had until I actually counted out the number of words and discovered it was only about a long short story, but it filled three school jotters. I actually wrote the first novel when I was sixteen and then I did one when I was eighteen and I'd written five novels, that's about one million words - one of the novels was very long - by the time I was 30; that was when *The Wasp Factory* was published. I was actually 30 years old; it was on the very day of my 30th birthday, kindly arranged by my editor and my publishers.

I can't say there's a single incident that was decisive in making me a writer. I started in a way in primary school, I think. Any child wants to be praised, you want your teachers and your parents to say "Well done, you're doing well", and I think this is in the same way as if you're into sports or something, over time you'll try all the different sports. You try running, you try swimming, you try pole vaulting, whatever... you try to find whatever you're best at. In the same way, when you're a child you try lots of different things and I found that I wasn't that wonderful at arithmetics or maths or whatever, but I got very good marks writing stories in English, without even trying really, and at the same time enjoying myself doing it.

My teachers were very impressed, my parents thought this was good, and it was great, something I enjoyed doing and people liked it as well! Then I discovered that these people called "writers" actually got *paid* for this and actually made a living from telling stories and I thought "Great! That's the job for me!" There was just this glad realisation that this was something, a talent or whatever that I had, that I could develop. And I suppose some stubbornness, that I was determined to try and keep on trying. I still had those five books rejected, but I knew better, I was right and they were wrong!

I think partly I was saved by the fact that I do write quickly. If writing took up all my spare time, if I had no social life because I had to work when I was writing, I probably would have given up. The fact that I can write very quickly when I get going means I can write a book and still have a social life at the same time, basically the same as everybody else. That helped a lot, I think. And like I said, being stubborn. Well, I call it "determined," but my wife says it's "stubborn."

The first books

The very first book was a spy story, an espionage story kind of influenced by the writer Alistair Maclean, who I was very keen on at that time. The second novel was much influenced by two books, one was *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner and the other one was *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller; that was kind of a very near future - not really science fictional - satire, comedy or whatever. That's the one that was very, very long, it was about 400,000 words plus. And after that, the next three novels were all science

fiction. Those were the first of three drafts, first of all *Use of Weapons*, then *Against a Dark Background* and then *Player of Games*. So those were three novels I had written before *The Wasp Factory*. I went back to those much later when I had started publishing science fiction, it was *Consider Phlebas*, and re-did them.

From the second and onwards I was sending them off to publishers, but feeling dismally and not getting anything published. There was some interest shown in *Player of Games*, the original draft of it, and it came fairly close to being published but obviously in the end wasn't. That's when I decided to write *The Wasp Factory*, trying something that wasn't science fiction just so I could send it to more publishers.

When *Player of Games* was published, it was a rewrite. It was a lot better. I was quite pleased with the original draft, but the new draft was *much* better. In the original draft, Gurgeh's motivation for leaving the Culture was *purely* because he got bored, there was no sort of blackmail aspect to it, and there was no surprise end, nothing about that Mawhrin-Skel was Flere-Imsaho. Moreover, there was none of this framing stuff there from the beginning. At the start of every section of the book you're being *told*, it's actually Mawhrin-Skel the drone talking to you rather than relating a story. There was none of that, so there was a whole level of the book that was missing in the first draft.

My original intention was to become a science fiction writer, but then I had to turn to other motifs to get published. I was down in London and I had never particularly *wanted* to go to London to live anyway but I just *had* to, I couldn't find a job in Scotland. I wasn't enjoying it *that* much. It was OK, a lot of my friends were there but I would still rather have been in Scotland. I kind of thought that by the time I was 30 I wanted to find a publisher or else I was going to go home, so it did strike me that the way to basically do that was to write something that wasn't science fiction, there's a better chance as there are more publishers of non-sf, of mainstream literature or whatever. I had some terrible arguments there with myself, was I selling out, was I doing the right thing. I thought of myself very much as a science fiction writer, I shouldn't have to do this.

The Wasp Factory: The first sale

When I sold *The Wasp Factory*, as far as I know noone ever thought this was the same guy that wrote these science fiction novels. I think it was about publisher number six that finally took *The Wasp Factory*, or publisher number seven, I can't remember the first half dozen I took it to; all rejected it. I went to Macmillan and they said yes.

All the explanation was the rejection slip. It wasn't the publisher's business to give advice to writers, all it said was "Thank you for showing us this, it doesn't fit the present list" or whatever.

Oh, I did get one great rejection slip in the early seventies when they said that “Unfortunately, due to the current paper shortage we’re not publishing any novels.” That was back in the day of shortages, you know.

This probably steered me into this dual career. I think if *Player of Games* had been published I could imagine I might only have written science fiction. It’s very hard to tell. There was at least a 50/50 chance I would have been a science fiction writer and A) would have found it very difficult to break out if I had wanted to and B) wouldn’t really have thought of it. I would have been a science fiction writer, I write science fiction and that’s it. Yeah, I think probably *Player of Games* not being published might in that sense have been a good thing, or else I’ve never had this luxury of having two different careers. It keeps *me* interested, it means I’m not writing the same book each time. I think I’m privileged to be writing in two different genres.

Now there’s the question of whether my satisfaction matches the reaction I get from the readers. I think it is fairly close... I suppose I rate *The Bridge* most highly, and I think that probably more people actually like *Complicity* and *The Wasp Factory*. I’m very proud of those as well, but I think *The Bridge* is technically the best, different voices and all and different matters of style and so on. This is complicated, you know. I like complications, maybe that’s why my favourite of my sf novels is *Use of Weapons*, because it is complicated. It is very fulfilling when you try something complicated and it works. So I think *The Wasp Factory* and *Complicity* are probably the two that people most admire or like best or whatever, but *The Bridge* is probably my personal favourite. I think there is a fair amount of agreement that *Canal Dreams* is the least successful. Although whenever I say that in front of a big crowd of people, there is someone at the back, I can always spot them, whose face collapses and they come up to you after when you do the signing and they say “But I’ve read all your books, and that’s my favourite!”

I think also with the science fiction, I feel so protective towards the non-Culture books, *Feersum Endjinn* and *Against a Dark Background*, because they’re not Culture and they’re not this popular... But people want book series, don’t they? They’re sf junkies and they want their regular fix. I’m terribly reluctant to provide it, but it *is* sort of a series I guess, and yet it’s not. People don’t necessarily want a consecutive storyline, but they want a common background.

Well, I think so do I! Not when I’m reading -- I don’t tend to read trilogies very much -- but I *love* writing within the Culture. It’s very enjoyable for *me*. I think it shows as well. I’m kind of wary about that, worried about enjoying it too much, it’s suspicious it’s that much fun! It’s supposed to be a hard thing being a writer, struggling in a garret and all that stuff...

At a leisurely pace

I write one book per year. Say a science fiction novel comes out one year, and the paperback of the previous book comes out some time... the science fiction, hardback or softback is published in late May or June and the mainstream is published in late August or early September, which means there are always two publicity tours per year, but it's just a book a year.

I write one book at a time, quite quickly. I usually write from October until December, and sometimes if it's a short book November–December, so two months and that's it. I keep going at it. I try to do 15,000 words a week, an 8 hour day and a five day week in theory. In practice it's not always like that, but I'm going to try to slow it down a bit this year. I'm going to write a book I can normally write in two months over three months. I'm going down to 10,000 words a week and a more relaxed lifestyle. I'm going to give myself more days off, as I'm getting older. We'll see how it goes. So it's a fairly intense process and I couldn't really do two books at the same time.

Everything I've written is in print. *The Wasp Factory* is 15 years old now so, yes, I can certainly afford to slow down, in financial terms. I'm not sure what to do next, I'm just coming to the end of the next science fiction novel, which I'll be writing at the end of *this* year, the last of a four-book deal, and obviously my agent's thinking about the next deal, so I've thought maybe I should do a book every two years instead of every year?

I don't know whether it would affect the way I write. It's hard to say. I'll wait and see how this experiment this year goes, writing 10,000 words a week over 10 weeks instead of 15,000 words over six or seven. If it goes alright I might just sign another four-book deal or whatever, as has been the case the last two deals, two mainstream and two science fiction. I'm still undecided.

Crow Road

I've never experienced a really bad writer's block. Well, there was one time when I was halfway through *Crow Road*, it took longer than I'd thought, on into January, I think the Gulf War started or something, and I watched television instead of the word-processor screen. But that only lasted for a week or two. As long as I don't take too long off, more than about a long weekend off, and go straight back into it I'm fine. Once it gets longer than that it's a little problematical, but compared to what other writers are talking about, it's trivial. Not a writer's block at all, just laziness!

Crow Road was a very fun book to write, it was a good time. I suppose it's a bit of a relaxed book, too. Some people wonder whether there's a lot of autobiographical stuff in it, but there isn't, really. There are very, very small bits of autobiographical stuff, a few tiny things like a friend of mine was out walking at lunch time outside of our school

and he trod on a charity flag thing, you know, and this pin went up into his foot. I'll always remember that! And I *did* have an aunt who fell through a greenhouse window, through a greenhouse, but recovered! A great-aunt or something, a distant relation, she was about 85 or something and she was out painting the house and fell off the ladder and through the greenhouse, and recovered happily. And Prentice's life hasn't got anything to do with my life.

The film based on *Crow Road* impressed me. I thought it was a good job, very relieved as well. It's the same people who are going to do *Complicity* as well, the same writer, Brian Ellesley and Gavin Miller, who did *Crow Road* for television, have just finished shooting *Complicity*.

The grey zone between genres

Some of my books are very clearly either science fiction or mainstream, but others fall very much into a grey zone in between. Especially *The Bridge*. Obviously it is very much a non-realistic novel. I did see one review of it as a science fiction novel, which I thought was perfectly fair. I think it's certainly a science fiction novel if you choose to define science fiction in particularly broad terms.

I think *A Song of Stone* is probably closer to a mainstream novel, but it's kind of set in not quite a reality, it's very, very close. It's Northern Europe in the late 20th century and that's about it, but there's nowhere on a map you can point to and say "It's here." The landscape is kind of inspired by the area around about Stirling, where I went to university, in Scotland, but it doesn't happen near either. I tried for a universal feeling for a change, for usually the mainstream books are very centered. Where it takes place and when are very clearly defined, down to exactly what roads the characters are travelling upon and what's happening in the world at the time and what records are in the shops and this one I thought I would try and make more universal.

My publisher has shown no interest in my keeping my genres separated. I almost get insulted at times. They don't put any pressure on me at all, ever. Don't they care about me? I have never had any sort of interference of that sort whatsoever, unless I'm very thick, and don't take heavy hints! They just let me go on. It's great, in all seriousness, it's wonderful. They trust me I suppose.

Well, my editor would tell me in no uncertain terms if the thing wasn't up to his standards. Once he saw a book, it was a novel called *O*, the letter O. I had finished it and I wasn't too sure about it and I gave it to my editor and he said "I think you should actually throw this away, it's not good enough." I said "Yeah, you're probably right". So I wrote *The Bridge* instead.

I don't think I would get away with *anything* just because what I write sells. My editor

would step in. I think I've got more critical of my own stuff. I've got a very good idea of what *I* would want to read. *A Song of Stone* I'm very, very proud of, but I'm not surprised it hasn't sold quite as well as some of the others have; there's virtually no humour in it, it's very, very bleak. It's even bleaker than *Complicity* I think.

I think also just having a very unsympathetic central character -- Abel, the narrator of *A Song of Stone* is not a very nice person -- makes it difficult for people to identify. I enjoyed using the language, I enjoyed this fluorescence of light and using that as a sort of counterpoint to the brutality of the situation. That was good. But it wasn't a *fun* book to write. I think *Whit* and *Excession* was examples of me having too much fun.

I don't experience writing science fiction and mainstream as two radically different things. The book is a book, whatever ideas you come up with, and they all gradually fall into place, it's the one thing you're working on. You don't suddenly find yourself writing science fiction in a mainstream novel or vice versa, it's always perfectly clear. Again, there's such a long time in between novels, months and months and months, the whole spring and summer and autumn, really, between the last book and the one I'm sitting down to write when the time comes. I have such a short attention span and limited memory so I've entirely forgotten what the previous book was. There's not as if there was going to be some sort of cross-contamination.

I guess that if I typed "The End" to a science fiction novel on a Friday and then on the Monday started on a mainstream novel, maybe it would be hard to expunge all traces of the previous genre away from the new book, but it just doesn't work that way. To me they are all just books; I am very aware that I'm writing mainstream or science fiction, but that's very compartmentalised. Basically, whatever I'm bringing to the book it's just a book, a novel, and then the genres are irrelevant. You're just trying to tell a story as best you can.

My two audiences are like a Venn diagram, you know, with two intersecting circles, and the intersection is fairly big, I think. Exactly how big I just don't know, I certainly get depressed about how many science fiction fans will read the mainstream, much more than the other way around, because lots of people just don't read science fiction at all, just refuse to read it. One of those circles in the Venn diagram is bigger than the other, because the mainstream outsells the science fiction. It used to be by 3 to 1, then 2 to 1, and I think with *Excession* it came close to being almost as many copies of that sold as a mainstream novel. I'd love to see proper market research done, but I can't be bothered myself. It's not my job, actually!

I don't sell a lot in America, though. The science fiction sells better than the mainstream, certainly, but not as you'd particularly notice. I don't have American publishers batting down my door, saying "Have lots of money and come over to America and promote your books". I just don't write the right sort of stuff for America.

I think a lot of British writers have a sort of mid-Atlantic field of writing. For several generations now, British writers have grown up with very American influences. In my case it's relatively trivial, I don't make that much money out of America at all compared to what I make here. I'm not trying to pander to US audiences at all, that's not why I want to write. It appeals more to Brits and to Europeans, I guess.

I sell pretty well in Canada and Australia, and I think Spain and Italy. The most "exotic" translations I've had have been to Hebrew and Japanese, and Russian. That was a fun one.

I write mainstream and sf because I like it. I think I find it slightly more fun to write sf than mainstream, especially the Culture stuff, but as I said, that's dangerous, potentially. A fun mainstream novel will definitely be easier to write than a uninspired science fiction novel. But as a general rule, especially if it's the Culture, it's slightly more fun.

Upcoming books

My new book, *The Business*, is a mainstream novel. It's almost like a comedy, it's quite gentle. Apart from the beginning where a guy wakes up and someone's been taking out half of his teeth and a torture scene towards the end. Well, it's not a proper torture scene. This guy bought a new Ferrari and the central character, the heroine, is sitting in the car with the doors locked and the way she gets him to talk is to keep revving the car up to the red zone, and he can hear his engine going crazy. That would work for me, I have to say, as a petrolhead myself, a connoisseur of fine cars, I'd talk. That's it really, there's nothing else really unpleasant in the whole book. It's a comedy, sort of. It's about this very, very old company, commercial concern that's been around since the time of the Roman Empire, which actually *owned* the Roman Empire at one point about 66 days back in 250 AD or whatever, but been undercover really since then, completely undercover...

Despite that, it is mainstream. It starts in Scotland and goes to England then the States and Pakistan and then a fictitious Himalayan kingdom that somewhat resembles Bhutan and Nepal but isn't, and then back to England again. Then Switzerland. It probably most closely resembles something like *Espedair Street*, or *Complicity* with all the wireless taken out. A female central character is a bit more like *Against a Dark Background*, though.

The upcoming science fiction book will probably be the Culture, because I'll probably won't be able to think of anything else. Culture is like the default state, if I can't think of anything else then I'll write in the Culture. I keep meaning to plan a couple of years ahead. Sometimes I do, but I ignore the plan. I had a four-year plan worked out for this

last contract and just ignored it, but it's nice to know it's there! So, probably a Culture novel, but it might not be. I'd rather write something that isn't a Culture novel, a non-Culture sf novel this time, but it would have to be really good, really spectacularly page-turning and wonderful and I might not be able to come up with something that good, so we'll see.

Enjoying life

Some people say "I hope he won't write any more stuff like *Feersum Endjinn* or *The Bridge* with the impossible dialect stuff..." I love doing that sort of thing. It's a real holiday in the book. Even though I might be enjoying the novel itself and enjoy writing anyway, it's a bit of a chore when it actually comes to sitting and writing. You have got to get all the spelling right, and make it grammatical; so it's just such fun, like taking off all your clothes and running naked through a shopping mall or something when you can use any spelling you want, and all these absurd phrases. It's just such enormous fun doing it! Then you have to think "Oh, that was fun, now I can go back to being normal again" and put the clothes back on and write "properly" again. It's such a hoot, I love it, but it does make it very difficult for people whose first language isn't English, and especially for translators.

I don't always write, as I've mentioned. I drive quite a lot, I like driving so I drive around the country quite a lot on my motorbike. And I just loaf. It's amazing how time flies! I do write letters, I always write back to people who write to me but that doesn't take up very much of my day. I get a fair few letters. It might be one or two every day. I shop, I'm quite good at shopping. My wife isn't, though... I read, obviously. I used to play *Civilization II* far too much, but I threw the computer out. That's it, really. It doesn't sound like very much, but the day just tends to pass. We go on holidays quite a lot as well.

I still enjoy science fiction conventions. I always drink too much, and end up feeling delicate, worse than today, but I have a great time! It's a four-day party! Nobody treats authors any differently, I think. I don't really take the whole being a famous author thing, and certainly not myself, too seriously. That's the thing I like about science fiction conventions, that there are pros and fans together. That's why I don't go to the World Fantasy Convention, or even the British Fantasy Convention, because it tends to be all pros. I went once or twice when I lived in London, but to me, it's not a proper convention. The whole strength of sf conventions is that you have the producers of the stuff and also the consumers together, all standing at the bar waiting to be served... which is a great thing! It's a different sort of fame, it's not the kind of fame where you can't live a normal life, the fame associated with movies and music and soap stars or whatever, which I think I'd hate.

Opinions of Scandinavia

I'm being invited as a guest to Norway next year. I've been there before. I hitch-hiked in 1975 I think it was, across from Denmark into Sweden and up towards Oslo and then to Bergen, where I stopped going north and started going south again. Bergen's the furthest north I've been, either Berlin or Venice is the furthest east. I've never worked out which one is the further east of the two. Then Rabat in Morocco is the furthest south. I have very faint memories of Bergen. It rained, and I felt very at home in that.

The bad part about Scandinavia is perfectly simple: the price of the drink! And at a convention in Helsinki you couldn't go up to the bar and get a round at the student's union or wherever it was, you had to buy them one at a time. You went up to the bar and said "I want five beers" and they said "No, one beer." It was the rule! But that was Helsinki. They probably thought you'd drink all five yourself! I think that's the only thing I have against Scandinavia, the price of the drink. Apart from that, my recollection of Finland is just a lot of trees, and very flat, while Norway was much more mountainous.

I like mountains. The only trouble with going to Norway is that when you come back to Scotland it looks almost flat in comparison! We think we've got big mountains, and then you go to Norway and think "Fucking hell!" It's as if you've taken a picture of Scotland and then stretched it vertically. Everything is about five times as steep and ten times as high. So I was very impressed. I also remember the Oslo underground. Most people when they build an underground system they must dig through clay, like in London. But my respect for Norwegian engineers went up when I realised the whole thing was built out of solid rock. Really a mad thing to do!

© Johan Anglemark 1999