

The Banksoniain #18

An Iain (M.) Banks Fanzine

September 2012

Worldcon 2014

Iain M. Banks has been announced as one of the Guests of Honour at the 2014 Worldcon. The winning bid to host the event was from London, which had set up a formidable bid team that had declared their intention early under the 'London in 2014' banner. They did not have a competing bid, but did have to go through the site selection vote, the result of which was announced at this year's World Science Fiction Convention, Chicon 7.

Details of the guests are kept under wraps as the voters, the members of Chicon 7, are meant to make their choice based on location, facilities and organisational criteria rather than potential guests. The result was that London got 864 votes, with 'None of the Above' getting just 2. There were also various jokey write in bids that picked up a few votes. Once the result was announced the guests and the name of the convention were revealed. As well as this occurring at the business meeting in Chicago, there was a gathering in a pub in London for interested parties on this side of the Atlantic.

The other guests, some of which have a Banks connection, are, in alphabetical order: John Clute (critic and author), Chris Foss (artist) Malcolm Edwards (editor and publisher), Jeanne Gomoll (fan), Robin Hobb (author), and Bryan Talbot (writer and artist). The name of the convention was also revealed, Loncon 3, reflecting the two previous Worldcons held in London in 1957 and 1965. There have been four Worldcons in the UK since then, two in Brighton (1979 and 1987) and two in Glasgow (1995 and 2005).

Loncon 3 will be held at the Excel in London between Thursday 14th and Monday 18th August 2014. Membership is currently £95. Details at: www.loncon3.org

Banks's Next Book(s)

Taking the imminent publication of *The Hydrogen Sonata* as Iain's current book, the next novel is the one he will probably be beginning to think about now and writing at the beginning of 2013, but who knows when it will be published. *The Hydrogen Sonata* marked the end of Iain's latest contract, but **The Banksoniain** can reveal that earlier this year he signed a new three-book deal, so no need to worry that your Banks fix will be withdrawn in the near future. On the *Stonemouth* tour Iain did mention one thing about his next mainstream book. During his appearance in Cambridge he said he planned to "dial up the weirdness".

In the meantime Iain has contributed to a non-fiction collection called *Generation Palestine*. For this he has written a piece explaining his "support for a cultural boycott of Israel due to the persecution of the Palestinian people." The full title is, *Generation Palestine: Voices from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement*, and the paperback ISBN: 978-0-7453-3243-7. The editor is Rich Wiles, the publishers are Pluto Press, and it is listed for release in March 2013.

Iain has written a non-fiction piece about the author of *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand, for the new incarnation of **New Worlds**, although the actual magazine has yet to surface. It is possible to register an interest at their website: www.newworlds.co.uk

The non M books look as if they are having a cover makeover, with three listed for publication in February 2013 and then ten in June, all with new ISBNs. More news on this in the next issue, the new covers are being created by Mark Ecob who has already produced the UK cover of the paperback edition of *Stonemouth*, listed for February.

Media Scanner

A number of media appearances occurred just after issue #17 was published when Iain was publicising the UK launch of *Stonemouth*.

Iain got to read a section of *Stonemouth* when he appeared on **The Radio 2 Arts Show with Claudia Winkleman**¹ (13/04/2012). The whole interview lasted about eight minutes whilst the host gushed about the book that she had not finished yet.

Iain was on **Start the Week**² on BBC Radio 4 on St George's Day when the topic was national identity and belonging. The other guests were David Hare, discussing his play set in an English public school in 1962, Rachel Seiffert promoting a book set in sectarian Glasgow, and George Benjamin the English composer.

When *Stonemouth* was discussed by the group the host, Andrew Marr, suggested that the town was somewhere between Lossiemouth and Stonehaven, to which Iain sort of agreed, before they talked about the drugs problem of Scottish coastal towns. They moved on to the problem of Iain in his late fifties writing about twenty-somethings. Rachel, having lived in Leuchars, said she recognised the scenery and asked about writing imaginary landscapes in his science fiction works. Iain replied that he had more control over the imagining worlds. David Hare asked about the lack of interest in describing Stewart's life in London. Iain revealed that early on he had decided that the book would be about the weekend the character returned, and so just has a couple of flashback scenes which are actually characters retelling stories.

Also on April 23 Iain went **One on One with Liz Green** on BBC Radio Leeds. They talked about many things including his writing regime which in theory is weekdays 9-5, but in reality can start at 4 in the morning, which his mother believes is because he was born around that time. His musical choices were: *Pelican* by the Maccabees (a song that energised him at the beginning of the year when he was writing), Anna Calvi's *Desire*

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01fcxpf>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01gf4pt>

(he liked the whole album for its weird, dark energy), *Meet Me Halfway* by the Black Eyed Peas (because he likes melody and this is a beautiful example of it), Dizzee Rascal's *Bonkers* (again the energy), *Intervention* by Arcade Fire (a different approach to music, and the start is just stunning), New Order's *True Faith* (the attitude, and the fact that they ended up standing for that whole age) and *Wild, Wild Life* from Talking Heads (an unimpeachable band he just loves).

The **Mail on Sunday** (08/04/2012) reported Iain talking about former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and saying, "I think he's been unfairly treated. His heart was roughly in the left place."

A profile of Banks by Jake Kerridge in **The Daily Telegraph** (12/05/2012) focussed on the influence of bridges in his life. Iain talked about the fact that as well as being able to see the rail bridge from his bedroom window, he "grew up watching the other bridge, the road bridge, being built. We moved away from here when I was nine, and it was finished the following year, 1964. So both bridges have loomed large in my life, literally and metaphorically." The same edition of the paper listed *Stonemouth* steady at #5 in its hardback fiction chart.

Iain had some difficulties in making his appearance at the Borders Book Festival which were relayed by **The Southern Reporter** (18/06/2012). Initially advertised to appear on the Thursday Banks had to cancel due to food poisoning. Recovering he rearranged for the Sunday but a tyre problem on his car meant he only just arrived in time on that day. The online newspaper had a link to a video of a nine minute interview³.

The Daily Record (25/06/2012) reported Iain's involvement in launching The Reading Relay, a Government scheme aimed at encouraging people to read more. Libraries across Scotland promoted books on themes linked to the Olympics and other sporting events this summer. The Launch was at Fife's Lochgelly Library on Thursday 21 June. In

³<http://www.thesouthernreporter.co.uk/lifestyle/borders-book-festival/banks-beats-food-poisoning-and-punctures-to-make-it-to-melrose-1-2361652>

the article Banks was quoted as saying, “I was an active kid, spending a lot of time getting scratches on my wee bare knees, but even so I spent hours in the local library - it was a home from home. I did a lot of my growing up in libraries, and completed my education there.”

Interviewed in the July/August issue of **New Humanist**⁴ Iain revealed that he has a document called ‘Culture Facts’ on his writing computer that he uses to check things. He said that he started it, “because I kept forgetting what colour the drones’ aura fields turn when they were being sarcastic.” When asked what he did to chillax Iain said that his inner curmudgeon still stuck with the word relaxed which “is my normal state. If I want to get stressed I do something foolish like visit London.”

Iain wrote on the **Radical Independence Conference** website⁵ (06/07/2012) about why he was supporting the Yes campaign. He concentrated on the “distinct and settled cultural difference between the Scots people and those in the rest of the UK”, saying that the Scots “just seem to be more communitarian” than the rest of the UK.

In an interview on **Radio New Zealand**⁶ Iain chuckled and agreed when Stewart Gilmour was described as, “a quintessential Banksian hero; young, quite bright and not that brave.”

John Mullan listed ten of the best literary bridges in **The Guardian** (14/07/2012). This included Banks’s *The Bridge* which was described as, “dominated by the Forth rail bridge – ‘Elegance and grace; perfect form’. Alex, an engineer, crashes his car while gazing at it. Meanwhile, his alter ego John Orr (in his comatose imagination?) is an amnesiac who lives on a replica of the bridge, whose structure is reflected everywhere.”

Iain was asked about his Heroes and Inspirations on the **SFX** website⁷. The varied list was: Brian Aldiss (“still feels relevant”), Jane Austen (“you can admire someone, and

take inspiration from them, without them actually having a big influence on your work”), Leonard Cohen (“not a lot of people know that he used to write novels as well. He did two...They are actually pretty good”), The Marx Brothers (“sheer anarchy”), Monty Python (“reinvented comedy for a new generation”), John Sladek (“the funniest science fiction writer of all time”), The ’70s (“pretty good time to grow up in”), Scotland (“being Scottish means a lot to me”), 2001: A Space Odyssey (“it sort of took sci-fi films to a whole new level”), and Star Wars (“*Consider Phlebas* only really exists because of Star Wars”).

Interviewed in **The Guardian** (21/07/2012) M John Harrison revealed that his book *Light* came about after “he got drunk with Iain Banks, who told him his trouble was that he didn’t have enough fun”.

Near the end of August many newspapers reported Iain’s support of the call to cancel the Edinburgh Festival performances of the Israeli Batsheva Dance Group. The letter was in **The Herald** (29/08/2012) and was signed by ten writers including Liz Lochhead and AL Kennedy. It noted that it would still be possible to cancel, and that “while Israeli artists and performers have freedom to tour, exhibits and performances by Palestinian artists are systematically banned, sabotaged and closed down by the Israeli occupation.”

The three performances by the group were all was disrupted to some extent. On the first night there were around 200 demonstrators at the Playhouse. Alistair Burt, Minister for the Middle East was quoted in **The Herald** (01/09/2012) as saying, “I strongly support the freedom of Batsheva to appear at the festival, and deeply regret the attempts to disrupt them. The UK absolutely opposes the targeting of institutions and individuals for no other reason than they are from Israel.”

The Daily Record (07/09/2012) reviewed Raymond Meade’s new album, *Fables and Follies*, in its soundcheck column. This has the track called *Carnivore* which includes Iain Banks reading a passage from *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, which was mentioned in our last issue. The album was released on 17 September.

⁴<http://newhumanist.org.uk/2832/qa-iain-banks>

⁵<http://indyconference.wordpress.com/articles/>

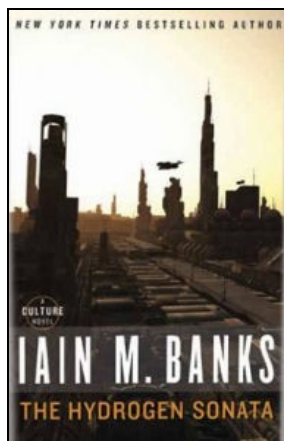
⁶<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/nineto noon/audio/2524431/feature-guest-iain-banks>

⁷<http://www.sfx.co.uk/2012/07/24/iain-banks%E2%80%99-heroes-and-inspirations/>

The Hydrogen Sonata

The previous issue of this fanzine had some early news of *The Hydrogen Sonata*, so this chronology picks up the pre-publication story from April 2012. If you want to know nothing about the book but the title then look away now.

The Fall 2012 / Winter 2013 Orbit catalogue in the United States listed the book with a physical description mentioning 496 pages, but given that it was still being edited at this point this could be dismissed. It also had some cover art which turned out just to be a placeholder.



There was also a plot summary:

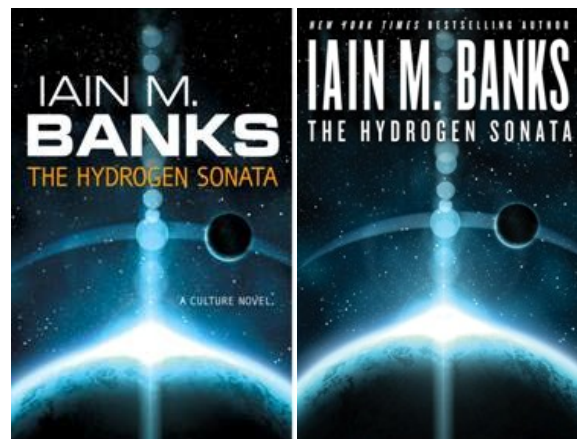
It is, truly, provably, the End Days for the Gzilt civilization. An ancient people, they helped set up the Culture ten thousand years earlier and were very nearly one of its founding societies, deciding not to join only at the last moment. Now they've made the collective decision to follow the well-trodden path of millions of other civilizations; they are going to Sublime, elevating themselves to a new and almost infinitely more rich and complex existence. Amidst preparations though, the Regimental High Command is destroyed and Cossont is blamed.

Wanted dead - not alive. Now, aided only by an ancient, reconditioned android and a suspicious Culture avatar, Cossont must complete her last mission given to her by the High Command—find the oldest person in the Culture, a man over nine thousand years old, who might have some idea what really happened all that time ago. Cossont must discover the truth before she's exiled from her

people and her civilization forever - or just plain killed.

An interview carried out on April 12 and published the same day at www.welovethisbook.com was mainly about *Stonemouth*, but it ended with Iain saying that, "second draft of *The Hydrogen Sonata* is due next week".

The actual covers, both UK and US, were publicised in June with a blog post on the Orbit website. The artwork plays on the atomic structure of Hydrogen with a single electron orbiting a single proton.

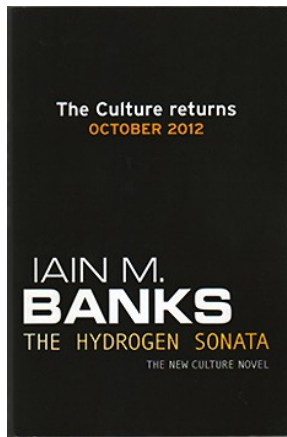


There was a special event with Iain and Kim Stanley Robinson at the British Library on June 9. The pair talked about their careers and writing science fiction. Iain read a passage from *The Hydrogen Sonata*, whilst Kim read from *2312*, and they also signed books. The Wikipedia⁸ page for the book says that Iain had read the first four chapters, although the reference cited does not say this.

By July the UK Amazon listing was showing a page count of 528 pages making the book one of the longest Culture novels yet. This means that it just comes in slightly shorter than *Matter*.

The first tweet of someone claiming to have a proof copy was on July 8, slightly surprisingly from a computer journalist in Australia. On July 23, author Saxon Bullock tweeted that he had a copy adding, "it's a long time since I've enjoyed a book this much." Near the end of August a proof edition was listed for sale on the Abebooks website, and early in September one appeared on eBay.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydrogen_Sonata



Also at the start of September the official website www.iain-banks.net changed its look to one based on the new book.



In a short interview on the **SFX** website⁹ Iain explained a little more about the premise, “The whole Subliming thing seemed to call for an ancient secret, and the oldest person in the Culture, a semi-mythic figure, felt like a way to link this particular civilisation back to the formation of the Culture itself.” He added that this character’s theme song would be, “TC Vilabier’s “26th String-Specific Sonata For An Instrument Yet To Be Invented”, book – terribly important, trust me.”

The first chapter of the book was posted on the **io9** website¹⁰ on September 18th. The chapter had the note (S -24) underneath where it said “One” – a reference to how long it is until the planned sublimation. The chapter itself was just over 2,500 words long and deals with the interaction between two non-Culture ships that results in the revelation of some information the reader is not privy to being exchanged and one of the ships being destroyed.

W H Smith will have an exclusive alternative cover, with gold lettering.

⁹ <http://www.sfx.co.uk/2012/09/06/iain-m-banks-interview/>

¹⁰ <http://io9.com/hydrogen-sonata/>

Unwritten Banks

The Wasp Factory as Musical Theatre

In April 2012 an audition notice was posted looking for dancers to appear in “a new music theatre production by Ben Frost based on Iain Banks best-selling novel *The Wasp Factory*.” Ben will both score and direct the work. He is an Australian now based in Iceland with a website at www.ethermachines.com

The production will not première until August 2013 at the Bregenz Festival, and although it is taking place in Austria, the performance language will be English. There are two workshops in January and May, before the main rehearsal period in July.

The Wasp Factory is part of the ‘Kunst aus der Zeit’ (Art of Our Times) strand of the festival which produces a new music theatre production every year with its focus on contemporary music. The 2012 Art of Our Times production was by the Berlin based theatre group, Nico and the Navigators, who explored “Rossini’s *Petite messe solennelle* with their unique mix of singing, dancing, acting and slapstick.”¹¹

Bregenz is on the edge of Lake Constance and the festival is famous for its floating stage, the Seebühne, although there are other venues for performance. Tickets will go on sale in October and 2013’s opera is *The Magic Flute*, which is on the floating stage, whilst in the Festspielhaus is Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*¹². After Bregenz it is planned that further performances of *The Wasp Factory* will be staged at venues throughout Europe.

You may well have seen the floating stage make an appearance in the Bond film *Quantum of Solace*. This was written by Neal Purvis and Robert Wade who wrote a screenplay for *The Wasp Factory* back in 1995. This was for Stephen Daldry who is involved in the current attempt to film the book. Daldry worked with Danny Boyle on the Olympics Opening Ceremony should now have more time for this project, although there has been no recent news on it.

¹¹ http://presse.bregenzerfestspiele.com/en/files/downloads/documents/01_Bregenz_Festival_2012_in_brief.pdf

¹² <http://www.bregenzerfestspiele.com/en/>

The Culture at 25

Consider *Phlebas*, the first Culture book published, although not the first written, see **The Banksoniain** issues #4 & #9, is 25 this year. To celebrate this fact Orbit are publishing a box set of the first three Culture novels on the October 4, the same day as the tenth in the loosely coupled series is released.



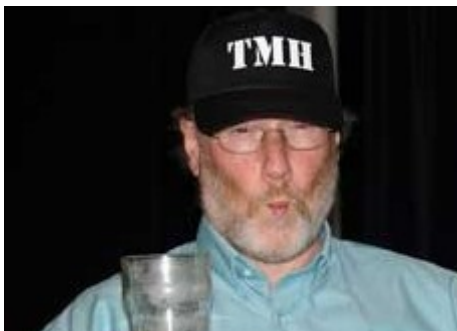
UK ISBN: 978-0-356-50209-0

US ISBN: 978-0-316-22508-3 (October 1st)

Here at **The Banksoniain** we decided to celebrate by asking some active fans for their thoughts on the Culture, and what it has meant to them over those years. Thanks to all the contributors. Most of them your editor knows through the Iain Banks Forum run by his publishers at:

<http://www.ianbanksforum.net/>

On the forum we tend to talk about Iain as TMH, The Man Himself. The discussions range from the chatty to the majorly in-depth, and anywhere in between. If you are interested in Iain's work it is a great resource. There are also areas where Iain (M) Banks appearances are listed, and news disseminated. Occasionally, some of us meet up in real life, and at one we gave TMH a cap.



First up is Richmond A Clements¹³.

I came at the Culture all the wrong way. You know when someone asks which one is best to start with and we always say *Player of Games*, and then we warn them that under no circumstances should they begin with *Inversions*. Well, guess which one was my first? It worked out okay though, I really enjoyed the book, and for my second I went straight for the jugular with *Use of Weapons*, and thus began a long standing theory of mine that the Bodyguard in *Inversions* was Cheradenine Zakalwe. A theory that was shot down in flames by none other than The Man Himself when I once put it to him. But what the hell does he know, eh?

So, what does the Culture mean to me? Outside the expected answers of rip-roaring action sci-fi and Massive Ideas and jet black humour, it does, in a way, hold a mirror up to us and shows us the potential we have a species. If we got our shit together, then why couldn't we, as a race, be as cool as the Culture. But of course like all good sci-fi, that mirror also reflects the bad also. The selfishness, the overconfidence and the backbiting. I don't know what my point is, in case you're wondering. All I know is that I love these little trips into the mind of Iain M Banks as we explore his playground universe. I know that, and I also know I really want a spin in the ship Clear Air Turbulence.

Conscious Bob

When I was young I was turned on to proper science fiction by I,Robot the collection of short stories by Issac Asimov, closely followed by his robot series. Later on I discovered that Asimov had coined the term 'robotics' and that made sense because of the three laws of robotics which affected all of his robot characters, they were more real because they had those rules and had to struggle because of them.

Much later on I read the first three Culture novels by Iain Banks which evoked the same feeling. Iain's AIs don't seem to have much in common with Issac's robots because the Minds and the Drones are cool, at ease with

¹³<http://www.renegadeartsentertainment.com/comics/turning-tiger/turning-tiger-special-edition>

themselves and their place in their society but like Issac's robots they are of us and yet apart from us. Issac forged that connection, Iain does not break it, the rules are still there even though the operating system is far more sophisticated. The written element that belongs to Iain originally, elegantly and emphatically are the Minds and drones are people first and machines second.

Iain is on record as attempting to claim space for the Left. I personally think, on the eve of the tenth Culture story, he's had a good go at claiming Artificial Intelligence for Humanity.

Here is a US perspective from forumite charismatic megafauna.

Ah, I recall that day 25 years ago like it was yesterday. I'd shown up days early with camping gear to get the first place in line at my local bookstore. I eagerly awaited the highly anticipated release of Iain (M., wondering what is with the M thing?) Banks first ever sci-fi novel *Consider Phlebas*, and wanted to be the first in the US to get a copy. I was sure it would launch a desperately needed revival of the moribund Space Opera genre. I, and the 100s behind me in line, were not to be disappointed.

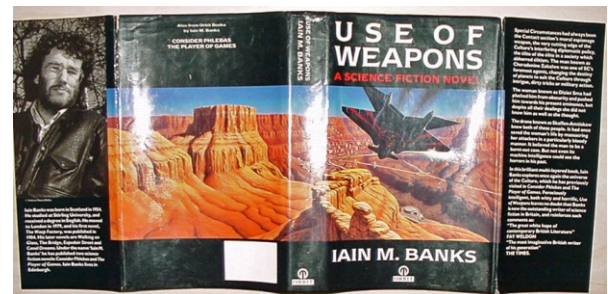
Unfortunately not a true story, but one that should have been. My introduction was prosaic, and a bit serendipitous. I encountered the Culture during a trip to my local library in 1996 or 97. I noticed a novel called *Excession* in the new sci-fi section. The synopsis intrigued me. Though my youth had been a time of reading sci-fi novels and short story collections by the hundreds, by the mid 90s I read little sci-fi. Cyberpunk, dystopias, and Star Wars/Trek books dominated the sci-fi section and little of it appealed to me. *Excession* blew me away. It was the best sci-fi novel I'd ever read (and remains so). I reread it immediately. I checked the library for more Culture books; *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games*, *Use of Weapons*, *State of the Art*, it was by far the best sci-fi I had ever read. Banks packed his novels with grand, visionary ideas and used the canvas of the galaxy to paint them on. He was innovative, literate, witty, funny, and unusually demanding of the reader's intellect.

What does the Culture mean to me, besides being the place I'd like to live my life (sigh)? The sheer integrity of the place comes to mind, so opposite the venal hypocrisy of our present age. The consensual non-exploitation and tolerance for difference supported notions I'd long held. A truly stunning version of an optimistic future, enduring in a dangerous universe. I will enjoy Culture novels for as long as I draw breath, as long as IMB continues to write them.

Happy 25th Anniversary Culture, and many more to come.

Here is Reg, with whom your editor once went to Paisley to see locations from, and including, *Espedair Street*.

Who would believe that 25 years have passed since *Consider Phlebas* first exposed us to The Culture? However, The Culture and Banks first exploded into my life in 1990 with this edition, from a book club.



There is a scene in this novel when Zakalwe, the hero, appears in the bedroom of a corrupt politician whom he has helped develop super powers; that was the effect this novel had on me – from the protagonist's perspective, you understand; having the power to infiltrate and baffle any security systems, to omnipotently confront those who do wrong and to right those wrongs.

But that was only Zakalwe and The Culture is so much more. Zakalwe meets Skaffen-Amtiskaw, a small suitcase sized drone in the service of Special Circumstances (SC) who relishes dismembering humans, and Diziet Sma, the epitome of an agent of SC and the Minds. Diziet is the ultimate warrior and philosopher, but dwarfed by the power of the SC Minds, "Contact section's moral espionage weapon" where "tactics cohered into strategy, strategy disintegrated into

tactics, in the sliding scale of their moral algebra.”

I struggle to understand how anyone could not be touched by the power of The Culture, and living there; no money, which is a societal sign of poverty (I was a social worker when I first read this), no limits on the imagination, no limits on the design and style of your life, body, mind, pleasures and wishes, no threats and no problems; hedonism without guilt.

I had thought I understood the fictional basis of the development of The Culture, why it is a necessity for humankind. 9/11 happened, and I naively thought this awful event could lead to a betterment of humanity, a step towards The Culture. The Culture remains fictional, and a glorious fiction it is too; it faces challenges from other races and cultures, challenges from outside our knowledge and experience challenges from Death and challenges from inside itself too.

The Culture, for me, is also a culture, and it is a mirror held up to ourselves, to Western society. 25 years of fictional Culture have taken us through thousands of years of their development and strivings, just like we observe ourselves via the news.

Champagne Socialist from the forum:

I was first introduced to Iain M Banks world of The Culture in 1995, just before the release of *Excession*. I met a girl at a party who introduced herself as Diziet, I had met a girl at university who's parents had seen fit to name her Twinkle (whether her parents suffered appropriately I do not know) so it wasn't the oddest name I'd ever come across, but still unusual enough that it raised an eyebrow and a question. I'm just glad she didn't go for the full Rasd-Codurersa Diziet Embless Sma da' Marehide or I might have just given up there and then.

She explained that it was the name of her favourite character in a book, and she quickly produced *Use of Weapons*. Now for a girl who was determined to emulate her heroine in every way possible, and who lacking interstellar travel and super intelligent Minds set about what was available to her with

enthusiasm... had brought the book with her. An attractive girl, at a party, with a sci-fi book? I was beginning to wonder if someone had slipped something into my drink.

We spent the rest of the evening talking about The Culture. Its history, from its formation out of the ashes of a near suicidal self destructive war of multiple civilizations, through the Idiran War and Azad. Its politics of utterly egalitarian anarchist democracy. The utopian 'post scarcity' society. Its Protagonists, human, drone and ship. Its ideals and morality (including some object examples), Contact and Special Circumstances, Glands, Sarcastic GCU's, Orbitals and everything else in between. Her keenness was obvious and infectious, In the morning she gave me her copy of the book.

That day I bought *Consider Phlebas*, *Player of Games*, *Against a Dark Background*, *State of the Art* and pre-ordered *Excession*. I had the bug, I wanted to be Cultured, and I devoured them all. I'd read through all of The Culture series twice before *Excession* was released.

I find the world of The Culture incredibly attractive. I don't know whether that is because I am a utopian idealist dreamer myself, or whether I am more of a utopian idealist because of my reading. Whether it's due to me being a Structural Engineer, and so find Orbitals and The Bridge appealing. Whether its just the sheer gravitas of the Culture universe or if it is simply that they are damn well written books.

They are certainly populated with well rounded characters full of subtleties, ambiguities and grey areas, both sympathetic and antagonistic, caught up in intrigues and adventures that are all... well... very intriguing and adventurous. It is a world where you can understand the motivation of its villains, that they don't see themselves as villainous, while still cheering on the heroes and heroines. Described with a singular imagination and wit, and which can create a real tension, because you are never quite convinced all will end well. Although the only dissatisfaction is that the book has ended at all.

The term 'eagerly awaiting' *The Hydrogen Sonata* doesn't do due justice. My feeling is much closer to that of the anticipation of a new lovers arrival. I didn't only discover the world of The Culture or other Iain [M] Banks books, but also the IMB forum, and through that many good, long lasting and... singular friends*.

I never met the girl again, and sometimes wonder if she was a member of Contact, proselytising The Culture prior to an intervention, except that TMH insists that The Culture isn't real...

*So a big hello and many thanks to (in alphabetical order) Numbers, Becky H, Big orange, Chiaroscuro, Conscious Bob, Deep Black, Disrepdog, Edash, Flashman, Hadonsman, Hendo, Jag, Flashman and rac.

Andi Evans

I was a bored 15 year old, it was the summer holidays, I didn't have much to do. So I was mooching around the shops and found myself looking along the book shelves in WH Smith. I wasn't a massive reader at the time, but I'd read a few books and had quite enjoyed some of them. I found my eyes drawn, for no particular reason, to a book with a fairly plain black cover and white writing called *The Wasp Factory*. This I picked up and scanned the back cover, it sounded interesting. I read the comments inside (not all positive) and found it more interesting. I bought it, took it home, read it and really liked it. I must get more stuff by this Iain Banks fellow I thought.

So I looked into his other novels and blow me but the chap had also written a bunch of Science Fiction novels. Now that was more my sort of thing. So I stated at the beginning with the rather oddly named *Consider Phlebas*, I'm still not quite sure why it is called that, and right there was my very first encounter with the Culture. I loved the concept, the way they did business, the massive ships, the weird names of places and characters. I liked that there seemed to be so much more to the Culture than appeared in that first novel. So I went on to *The Player of Games*, which I found in a second hand book store in hard back, then onto *Use of Weapons* and right through them all to now, where I sit

some 20 years on from buying *The Wasp Factory*, eagerly awaiting the arrival of *The Hydrogen Sonata*.

I've also read all of the non-Culture SF books and most of Iain's other non "M" books too along with *Raw Spirit*, well a book all about whisky and Scotland had to be worth a go right? I've attended numerous book signings and talks. I'm a keen member of his website forum and I already have my ticket for Loncon3. Long live Iain, and long live the Culture legacy.

Gary Wilkinson (FearfulSymmetry)

Iain M. Banks' The Culture hits a sweet spot that, for me, few other examples of science fiction ever get even close to. That subspecies of Space Opera labelled with the term Widescreen Baroque with all the cool stuff, the huge spaceships, the aliens, the ray guns, the exotic planets, the Big Dumb Objects, the ravaging beams of destruction. That is played out against a background that is truly cosmic (and multi-dimensional) in scale. That has that full-on sensawunda... But framed with plotting that is both subtle and complex and peopled with fully rounded characters (human, alien and machine). That includes both terrible horror and witty comedy with the action. With prose that is literary to such an extent that it borders on the experimental in places. That's somewhere in between the gung-ho American tradition of SF and the more downbeat British and European strand. That looks at the gnarly edges where a post-scarcity socialist dream utopia grinds up against a multitude of dystopias and we watch the sparks fly.

Because of all of that, I've bought and read every Culture novel that has come out, that it's always been there in my life. It's certainly the only sf that I read outside of the prime influential period of the mid-teens that's had a lasting effect. And at times it has been the only science fiction, certainly the only space opera, that I have read... when I found I could just not find that sweet spot anywhere else.

From *Consider Phlebas* to *The Hydrogen Sonata* we have had the grandest of space operas... let's hope for many more acts to come.

Banks on Tour

One of the early stops on the *Stonemouth* publicity tour was at Cambridge Wordfest on April 13. This took place in the Cambridge Union where many a famous talk/debate has occurred. Iain read a section of the book when Stewart had just returned to the town and was drinking with old friends.

He was questioned by host Steven Gale who first asked whether there was any particular image or idea that had sparked the novel. Iain replied that the general idea had been one of returning home after some sort of exile, revealing that he had toyed with the idea of having someone coming out of prison, but that this had developed into the offending a gangster scenario. Queried about the setting Iain said that *Stonemouth* was just a “biggish Scottish town” without a university but with a very large Tesco, adding that part of the inspiration was his walking of the Fife Coastal Path which he finished in stages in 2009. The combination of beach and trees at Tentsmuir Forest to the north of St Andrews had influenced part of the book.

With the protagonist returning after about five years away Iain said that he was wanting to show that some things had changed and show things hadn't, but the person that was returning was the most changed of all. This, he said, drew partly on the experience of his girlfriend who had spent some time in the Far East and noted that the pub names may have changed but the friends in them and their arguments had not. The two gangster families have given *Stonemouth* a stability that Stewart had not experienced whilst away, but it is also his perspective that has changed, partly through his job of lighting buildings.

Steven mentioned the gadgets in the book and Iain said he had been in mourning since *Tomorrow's World* had been taken off the air, and although he liked *The Gadget Show* it just wasn't quite the same. He admitted that at 58 he was not too sure how long he could keep up with the technology that for the young people he was writing about was natural. Asked about writing another coming of age / family saga like *The Crow Road* Iain said that family was important to him and a good

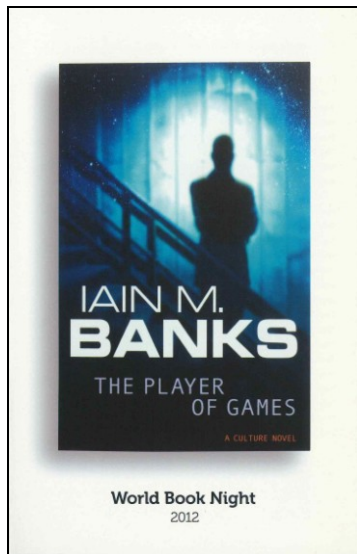
source of inspiration, and that he thought sufficient time had passed and the fact that he had added gangsters for him to be allowed to write another one.

Questions from the audience began with one about whether his characters shaped themselves. Iain replied that they occupied a relatively lowly perch in his world saying he was not a character writer and all his books started with ideas / plots. The characters needed to find niches in the machinery of the plot, and that this is what we did in reality. Asked about the gangster element of *Stonemouth* he expanded on his answer to Steven saying that he considered a variety of options during the planning stage and that the prison idea was to severe.

Invited to put his SF hat on and speculate about an independent Scotland he expressed doubt that it would happen in his own lifetime (but did contemplate being elected president) and admitted to being a recent convert to his pro-independence stance. David Mitchell and Alan Warner were the first two writers he name checked when asked about who inspired him, but he said there was a long list on his phone but it was switched off at the moment. The final questioner claimed to have found a paragraph in *Surface Detail* that contained twenty made up words. Iain said that this was the result of “Banks Syndrome”, and that he tries not to but it just happens. For an example of a complex Banks sentence from *The Hydrogen Sonata* see The Last Word column on page #12.

Iain was in London for World Book Night on April 23 to appear at an event which took place at the Southbank. *The Player of Games* had been chosen as one of the books to give away so Iain was there to do a reading from it. The edition produced had a cover based on the art of the current paperback edition but also identifying it as a copy given away. It also had an extract from Alan Moore's, *Voice of the Fire*, which Iain had specifically chosen to promote with his book. Back in 2007 when Banks had appeared on **The Book Show** on Sky Arts he had added a copy to the show's bookshelf of author's favourites, which was going to be a prize in a competition at the end of the series. He justified the decision by

saying he didn't think he could have written the book himself whereas with most fiction he reads he feels he could have turned his hand to. Iain also appeared on the radio that day, see the Media Scanner section on page #2.



The World Book Night Edition

Iain's usual appearance at the Edinburgh International Book Festival drew this report from the **Sunday Herald** (26/08/2012) by Alastair Mabbott. "Put old buddies Iain Banks and Ken MacLeod together, and suddenly you're in a snug the size of a big top, Banks holding court with expansive and garrulous charm, unable to stay on topic. Before long, we had been taken back to 1975 to witness Banks and MacLeod encountering Mormons at their friend Les's house ("one of the peak experiences of my life!") and learned of Banks's frustration that, of all his books, he still considers *The Bridge* to be the best."

Iain continues to support the Safe Space initiative. In the last issue we mentioned the book the group had produced for which Iain wrote a foreword. On 3 September he took part in a Writeathon that they organised in Dunfermline. This was the kick-off for a project to encourage people to write but also raise money for the charity by undertaking challenges from 5,000 to 52,600 words. The whole thing is going on into next year, so you can still participate. You can find out more, join in, or just donate at the website: www.safespacewrite-athon.co.uk

The dates for the autumn 2012 tour for *The Hydrogen Sonata* are listed on page #12.

Guardian Bookclub

Use of Weapons

The **Guardian** Bookclub¹⁴ covered *Use of Weapons* over four weeks in July/August and also had an event with the author in London discussing the book on August 1.

The club is run by John Mullan, professor of English at UCL. In the first week he discussed the twist in the story, and the clues that Banks had left the attentive reader, as well as structure which he said would qualify as "literary" if it were not a work of science fiction. He likened it to Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* which also has a mysterious hero.

Week two saw a focus switch to "space opera" and an exploration of the scale of this book and science fiction in general. Zakalwe is the individual that the narrative focusses on, but himself is a larger than normal life character, who questions whether he makes a difference in the grand scheme in the end.

The third week saw an article by the author of the book himself explain how the book developed. He initially thought the climax in the middle was a "brave example of radical, rule-breaking experimentalism", even though it did make the second half anti-climatic. Eventually Banks did see it as a fundamental flaw, but Ken MacLeod saw how a simpler structure with the forward and backward storylines would allow the climax of both to be at the end of the book. Another revelation was the fact that it was his editor, James Hale, who insisted that, "the authorial voice should never use the (false) name of one of the characters."

One new piece of information was the name of the book that Iain started writing at the same time as the first Culture novel. He only got 20,000 words into *Ecliptic*, before he lost interest and *Use of Weapons* "just sort of shouldered it out of the way."

The final week saw the comments of readers at the event with the author summarised. Questioners had concentrated on the structure and the interventionist policies of the Culture, as well as the fun of writing science fiction.

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/bookclub>

Banksoniain Calendar

2012

Marlborough LitFest
Saturday, 29th September, 18:00
www.marlboroughlitfest.org/

London Picadilly Waterstones
Talk and signing
Wednesday, 3rd October, 19:00

Bath, Topping & Company
Launch event for *The Hydrogen Sonata* in
association with SFX
Thursday, 4th October, 20:00
www.toppingbooks.co.uk/events/bath

Yeovil Waterstones
Signing
Friday, 5th October, 13:00

Bristol Galleries Waterstones
Talk and signing
Friday, 5th October, 19:30

Cheltenham Literature Festival
Talk and signing
Saturday, 6th October, 20:45
www.cheltenhamfestivals.com

Edinburgh (West End) Waterstones
Joint event with Peter F Hamilton
Wednesday, 10th October,

Manchester Literature Festival
Thursday, 11th October, 19:00
www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Formby Books
Friday, 12th October, 19:00
www.formbybooks.co.uk

North Lanarkshire Festival
Motherwell Library
Monday, 15th October. 19:00

Linlithgow Book Festival, with Ken MacLeod
Friday, 2nd November, 19:30
www.linlithgowbookfestival.org

N.B. Other Iain (M.) Banks events may be available. Updates at:

<http://www.google.com/calendar/embed?src=banksoniain%40gmail.com>

Do confirm event details and Iain's attendance with organisers before travelling.

The Last Word

There is a sentence in *The Hydrogen Sonata* that by my reckoning is 191 words long, and would be longer if the author hadn't hyphenated a number of those words. There may be others that are longer or more complicated, but this one caught my eye as it begins at the bottom of one page and just when you think it is really quite long goes over to the next, and you realise you are only half way through. There are fourteen commas, and a few other sundry items of punctuation including a pair of parentheses, and each word averages 5.68 characters and 1.92 syllables. It does contain a ship name, but it is one of the single word ones, so not artificially extended in that way.

I ran this through an online readability test, although for just one sentence that is a little bit of a cheat. One of the results it gave was a Flesch Reading Ease score of -149.59. The Wikipedia article on this says, "One particularly long sentence about sharks in chapter 64 of *Moby-Dick* has a readability score of -146.77." So Banks just pips Melville there. Another score the website gave was the Gunning Fog index, which is an "indication of the number of years of formal education that a person requires in order to easily understand the text on the first reading". For this sentence it was 83.10, which was pretty close to the Flesch Kincaid Grade level, a similar measure, that came in at 81.57.

For comparison, the equivalent scores for the first paragraph of this article are; Flesch Reading Ease: 62.25, Gunning Fog index: 11.35, and Flesch Kincaid Grade level: 9.88.

I will leave you to find it yourself, and if you spot a longer Banks sentence write in and let us know by email to banksoniain@gmail.com. There will be a prize, so there is a closing date of 23:59 GMT on January 31st 2013.

The Banksoniain is available as a PDF from <http://efanzines.com/Banksoniain>

If you have any corrections, comments, contributions, or want a paper copy then email: banksoniain@gmail.com

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