

# **THE DRINK TANK 351**



**RAISING A GLASS TO  
IAIN M. BANKS**

# EDITORIAL - CHRISTOPHER J GARCIA

I was on the staff of the newsletter at the 2010 Eastercon and I was the undesignated purveyor of the comedy. I like trying to write comedy, but all too often I blow it. The Guests of Honour included Mr. Iain M. Banks. There was a whiskey tasting scheduled, led by Mr. Banks, and it had filled up the moment they opened sign-ups. It was a good thing, and we had to add something about it to the newsletter. I then took it on myself to make a gag.

“The Management is saddened to inform you that the Iain M. Banks Whiskey tasting was filled in less than 30 seconds! Mr. Banks sends his person regrets that he could not share the event with a greater number of the attendees. In related news, reports of a Harvey Wallbanger tasting with Mr. Iain Banks are, at best, unsubstantiated.”

I ran into Iain later and told him that I wrote the gag, and he said he thought it was a great gag. I felt very good to hear that.

Iain M. Banks died on June 9th. He was 59.

I am not the biggest reader of Mr. Banks, but I always enjoyed his work. I'm kinda known for jumping into the middle of a series, often with the second book. For example, I've never actually read the first Harry Potter book. I know, I know. Anyhow, the first Banks I know I read was *The Player of Games*, the second of the Culture novels. I had never read any Banks at that point, it was 1994 or so and I was in the middle of taking the only Science Fiction class I've ever taken, and it was my weekly novel. It took me a while, but I worked at it and read and read and read.

I kept thinking that this was what all novels would read like in twenty years (which would be very much now) and that this was the start of new fiction.

Reading Banks in the 90s was like reading books sent back in time from today. His prose was clear, and not easy for me, but incredibly rewarding. He had a way of putting

forth simple concepts, like patterns and games, and taking them far down a path I never saw coming. He was the master of the deep dive science fiction novel. There was a future-future feel to all of them. Each came across as more important than just the novel itself. It was telling us what was coming.

And somehow, he was also a part of the mainstream.

*The Wasp Factory*, a novel I picked up on a whim not long after I read about Banks' inoperable brain tumor, is as dark a novel as you'll ever find. It wasn't a horror novel, or maybe it was, but it wasn't treated as a horror novel. I got lucky, found it in an English edition at Recycle Bookstore. It's dark, violent, full of torture. It's brutality of a *Hostel* or *Saw* franchise nature. It's incredibly well-done, smarter than any reader could be. There are many paths, but there's also a them of the desire for transformation and control of systems greater than ourselves. That's very much a science fictional concept, no?

His mainstream works are not genre works, but I'd say they are at least genre adjacent. I know that technically they're thrillers and family dramas, but often

you get the feelings I often associate with SpecFic books. *Canal Dreams*, which I know a bunch of people rate pretty lowly, is a lot of fun, basically *Die Hard* on a Boat in the Panama Canal. *Whit* is a book about a Cult that is both fun and shockingly human that feels like something the great TC Boyle would write. *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* might have been the most fun I had reading a novel in 2009. I've got *Stonemouth* and have been intermittently reading it, and loving the tone. As much as I am a genre fan, Iain Banks provides a clarity of prose, plot, and character that is incredibly admirable.

Iain M. Banks does that as well, but with bigger worlds. It was as if he dealt with a universe we'd know at times so that he could go and create others to play in.



LETTERS OF COMMENT TO [GARCIA@COMPUTERHISTORY.ORG](mailto:GARCIA@COMPUTERHISTORY.ORG)

# GONE BEFORE HIS TIME: IAIN M. BANKS DEAD AT 59

BY SEAN POWELL

FIRST APPEARED AT [NERDSRAGING.COM](http://NERDSRAGING.COM)

Two months ago, Iain M. Banks, author of such mainstream and sci-fi classics as “The Wasp Factory”, “Use of Weapons”, and “The Player of Games”, announced that he was terminally ill with cancer of the gallbladder. All public appearances were cancelled, and Banks stated that his latest novel, “Quarry”, would be his last. His lifespan was now measured in months.

Sadly, those months have now come to an end; Banks’ wife, Adele, announced today that the celebrated author died early this morning.

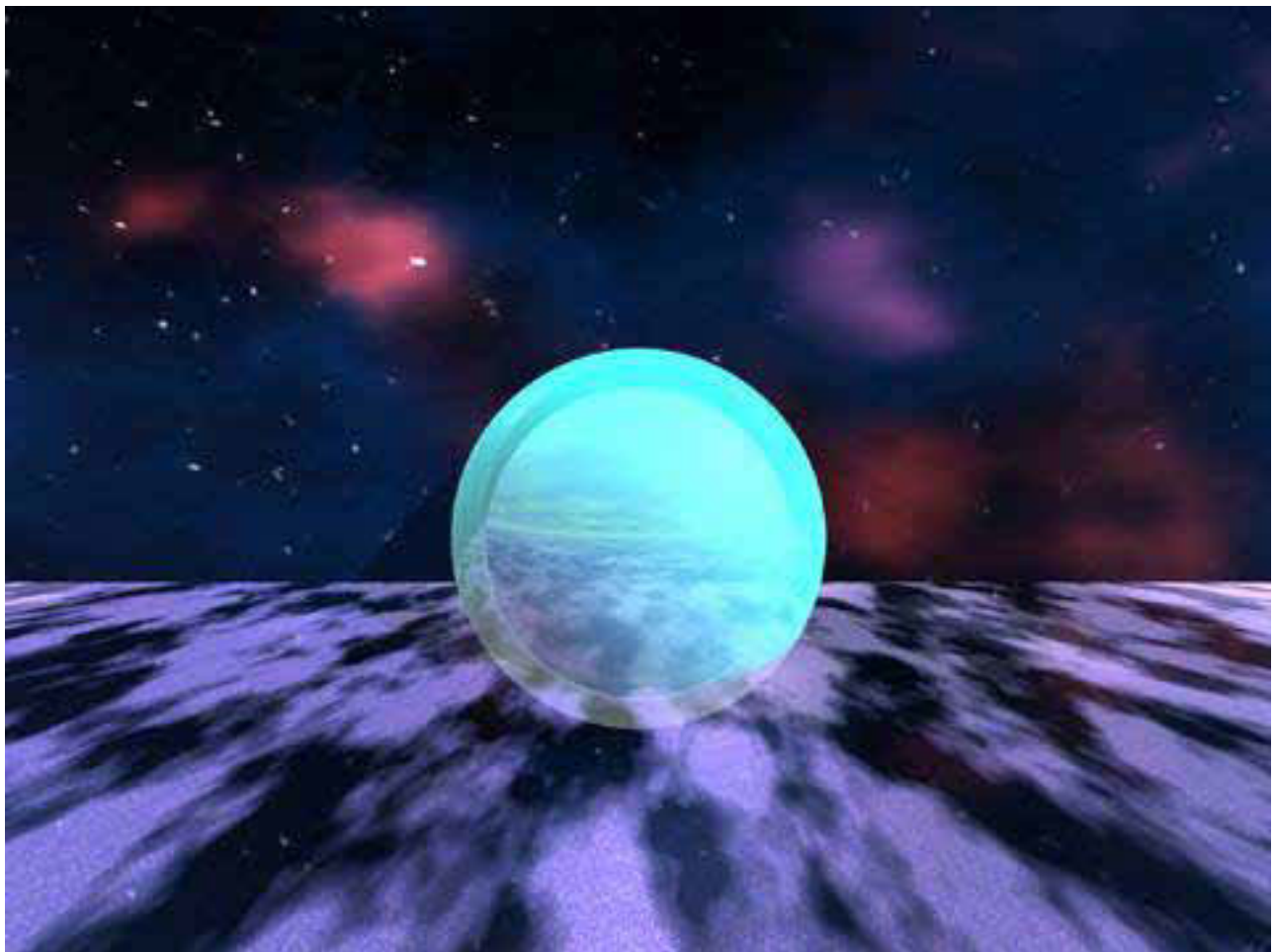
Adele posted on the official website that, “Iain died in the early hours this morning. His death was calm and without pain.”

Iain Banks was a remarkable author, one of Scotland’s most celebrated faces of science fiction. Ironically, “The Quarry”, which Banks had requested be rushed through publication so that he could see it on shelves (it is due to be released on June 20th) is the story of a man battling terminal cancer.

Banks won myriad awards for his books, including the British Science Fiction Association Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, multiple Locus awards, and a Hugo. He had been writing full time since he was 30 years old (with the publication of “The Wasp Factory”) and wrote his first novel at the age of 16. Fans remember him as a warm, gregarious man who continued to update his blog throughout his illness and loved receiving personal messages from his followers. He was an aficionado of single malt whisky and even dabbled in theatre and music, composing several songs for “The Curse of Iain Banks”, a play performed at the 1999 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Without a doubt, the literary world has suffered a major blow today. The admins at Iain’s official blog, [banksophilia](http://banksophilia.com), have requested that fans continue to come by and sign the guestbook, as Mr. Banks delighted in receiving personal messages via the site.

R.I.P., Mr. Banks, and thank you.



Art from Michele Wilson

## SOME BRIEF WORDS FROM SOME FINE WRITERS

"I never met Iain Banks, but I feel like I owe him a debt because he's one of the writers I read to help make me a better writer.

The first book of his I read was *The Player of Games*. I was working in a bookstore and we were given sample copies of some trade paperback reissues put out by Harper Prism. That was one of them, and I raced through it. And then I didn't stop. I read *The Bridge*, *Excession*, *Feersum Endjinn*, *A Song of Stone*. . . You get the idea. If it came through the store, I read it.

When the *Publisher's Weekly* review for my novel *Discord's Apple* came out (starred!) and said that the book was "brilliantly structured," I was really pleased but I also felt like a bit of a fake. Because I stole the structure from *Use of Weapons*. Not entirely -- I mean, I reversed it and twisted it up a bit. But yeah. Iain Bank's writing made me a better writer, and I'll be forever grateful."

**Carrie Vaughn**

Iain Banks is dead. I'm crying in an empty house. A good man and a friend for almost 30 years.

**Neil Gaiman on Twitter**

So sad to hear of death of brilliant and charming Iain Banks. *The Wasp Factory* was the first book I finished and then immediately read again.

**John O'Ferrell**

He didn't take things too seriously, and in a way I'm happy that he refused to take death too seriously -- he could still joke about it. I think we all thought he would have a bit longer than he got.

What made him a great writer was that he was childlike; he had a curiosity about the world. He was restless, he wanted to transmit that in his work, and he treated the cancer with a certain amount of levity, the same that made him a great writer.

You never knew what you were going to get, every book was different.

**Ian Rankin**





# IAIN BANKS - A PERSONAL REFLECTION

BY TONY KEEN

I met Iain Banks maybe a dozen times over a twenty-five year period. Most of those meetings were pretty fleeting, and I'm not sure he remembered me from one meeting to the next. We certainly weren't friends, though we had many friends in common (most notably his second wife Adele, whom I've known since she was an undergraduate). I've always been shy with people I don't know, especially if they seem in any way important. My failing, not anyone else's.

A bit over a year ago I got involved in a project headed up by Andrew Wilson, to pull together a collection of critical essays on Banks, a project that had Iain's blessing. One of the aspects of this that I was particularly looking forward to was the opportunity to get to know Iain better.

That will now not happen. Oh the book will happen – on that both Andrew and I are quite determined. But Iain will not see it appear.

It was my brother's friend Craig, hero of role-playing fanzines, who first introduced me to Iain Banks. We were in a pub, and he was raving to me about this novel he'd just read, *Espedair Street*. He was particularly impressed with the line "One thing about not knowing what to do, and tossing a coin to decide, having made up your mind you'll definitely do whatever the coin says; it sure as hell lets you know what you really want to do, if it says the wrong thing." I agree – it's a terrific line, but Iain's work was always full of terrific lines. I got hold of *Espedair Street*, and then the earlier novels. I took a bit to get into the sf, but *Use of Weapons* convinced me. I didn't religiously read every novel when it came out, and there are some I still have to catch up on (I shall fix that over the coming months). But Iain has given me more reading pleasure than many over the past quarter-century. Nevertheless, it's the first novel I read that remains my favourite, even over Iain's own choice, *The Bridge* (which is certainly among the best-constructed). (And on a drunken night in Manchester, I told him that.)

I have a strange relationship with the first four novels; my copies keep disappearing. My current copy of *Espedair Street* is signed by Iain, with a message telling me not to lose this one. I am on, I think, my third copy of *The Wasp Factory*. Right now I don't know where *Walking on Glass* is. I blame alternate universes myself. I remember a Glasgow Eastercon some years ago – I was in a programme item being compered by Phil Raines. It was about endings, and how they are often (like the end of *Blade Runner* or *2001* – Phil's examples, not mine) disappointing. I talked about *Use of Weapons*, and how I had guessed the final twist some chapters before the end, and then been convinced by Iain's writing that I had guessed wrong right up until the point where it was revealed that I had guessed right. Next thing I heard was this story being repeated to Iain by another participant. Hey, I thought, that's my story!

But at least he got to hear it.

Iain is gone now, but he leaves behind a legacy of brilliant works. *The Crow Road*, as charming a murder mystery as you could want. *Excession*, the marvellous novel in which you discover how decisions actually get made in the Culture. *Inversions*, which only very subtly lets you know that it is a Culture novel at all. *The Business*, which has an obsession with foreign locations that would delight Ian Fleming. *Raw Spirit*, supposedly non-fiction, but which I sometimes think of as a novel in which the lead character is called Iain Banks.

I will probably never lift a single malt again without thinking of him. And when I do. I'll think of all the others I've lost to cancer. Of my friend Martin, diagnosed in February of 2011, dead by August. Of a friend's partner, who's been given months to live. Of my own father, dead before he was forty. I raise a glass to all of them.



# IAIN BANKS, GONE TO JOIN THE CULTURE

BY JOE GORDON

## FIRST APPEARED ON FORBIDDEN PLANET BLOG

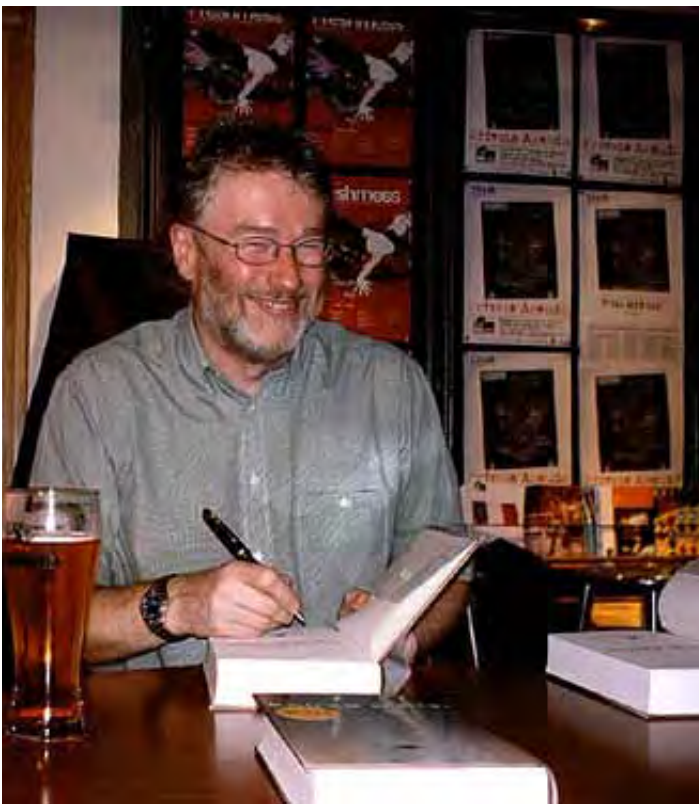
It's Sunday evening, I've just learned that one of the UK's most innovative and hugely bestselling novelists, Iain Banks, had succumbed to the cancer he only announced he was diagnosed with recently. The news of Iain's illness at only 59 was a real shock to many of us in the literary world; friends and readers (and readers are often friends in our book world) were shellshocked at his announcement. To find this evening that we've lost him so soon, when we still held some distant hope that a treatment may help prolong his stay on this planet is devastating. I've had the honour and pleasure of doing many a book event with Iain over my years in the book trade, and I'm sitting here right now, like many others I expect, thinking this can't be bloody right, trying to square my mental image of a hugely genial, friendly, good natured bloke with a love of life with this news that he simply isn't here anymore, and it makes me feel sick to think of it. And he was

genial and friendly – the first time I met Iain I found it hard to think this smiling, open chap I was chatting to was the man who devised the disturbing *Wasp Factory* (one of the most astonishing Scottish novels of the 20th Century).

Iain straddled literary genres with ease, creating his science fiction (including the remarkable *Culture* novels) and also his 'straight' literary fiction (if you could call anything Iain wrote 'straight!') and also deviating into some non fiction for his whisky tour of Scotland (he once told me one of the few books where the research required was a genuine pleasure to undertake). Few writers get to be successful in both a genre and be equally accepted in 'literary' fiction (a cumbersome, imprecise term), but Iain did, and both his fiction and science fiction both were covered by the literary critics. His science fiction, in particular his *Culture* novels, displayed a displeasure at the inequalities of the world as it is but, like Clarke and Rodenberry, a hope and belief that humanity could be better, more evolved, more equal, more caring, more enlightened.

Iain often stuck by those principles in his own life – when Blair and his acolytes fudged 'intelligence' to prove why we should invade Iraq Iain refused invites to Blair's Downing Street gatherings of various artistic worthies and instead cut up his British passport in disgust at this action and said he would do without foreign travel and getting a new passport until the wars were ended or Blair out of office. I am glad that in his last few months he got to go abroad again, having a honeymoon with his long term partner Adele (many Edinburgh geeks will know her for her sterling work in the city's *Dead by Dawn* film fest). I received an email from Iain when he was away with Adele a few weeks ago in Venice. I replied saying I hoped he wouldn't feel compelled to emulate Byron and challenge the locals to a swimming race down the canals. No chance, came the quick reply, I've seen what goes into those canals... That was Iain, humour always there, even at times like that, facing what he was facing.

The very evening before I was due to start here



*(Iain signing copies of the Algebraist back in 2008 in Edinburgh's Traverse theatre. Books to sign for readers and a pint by his hand equals contented author. Pic from my Flickr)*

at Forbidden Planet several years ago I was treated to a huge, slap-up feed with Iain, Adele and fellow Scottish SF author Ken MacLeod. I had a bad experience with my former bookstore and Iain and Ken had been among the writers I had worked with who stood up and defended me, which was a huge morale boost for me at a very difficult time in my life. It was to be a cheer up, could be worse night out, but by then I had met with our own Kenny who had asked me to start at FP, so it turned into a celebration night. Huge amounts of curry and wine ensued. Despite his huge bestselling status for so many years Iain remained the same friendly, open and very approachable man, the sort of bloke you could just stand in the local pub and chat to over a pint. We lose him just before his publisher, the very fine Orbit Books, one of the homes to the best in British science fiction, could get his new book out. I know they have been rushing to try and get the book out much sooner than possible, everyone thought we would have a bit more time, but again that bastard devil Cancer has had its way instead (and in the words of the current advert series "up yours, Cancer") and now the book will come out just that bit too late. And ironically one of the main characters is a man facing terminal cancer. Sometimes when art imitates life it is interesting; in this case it may well prove interesting but also rather bitter to the many of us who loved Iain's writing. I've been so looking forward to the Edinburgh International Book Festival this August, but the thought of that annual major literary bash without Iain's usual presence seems so damned wrong.

We've lost one of Britain's finest writers (held by many to be among the top 50 most influential and important writers in the UK since 1945) and a major influence in our beloved science fiction genre, and worse we've lost a damned good man, and far, far, far to bloody young. If you enjoy a good drink then when you have a decent ale or even better a good dram of single malt, raise a wee toast for Iain, he'd doubtless appreciate that. And maybe as well as picking up *The Quarry* later this month from Orbit readers may, if they are able, want to consider a wee donation in his memory to [Cancer Research](#), still fighting fighting against this damned disease which takes too many of us (are there any of us who haven't lost a family member or friend to it?). In a small mercy his wife Adele said that his passing was without pain. Goodbye, Iain, your inventiveness brought so many of us onboard and you took us with you on some extraordinary expeditions into the imagination. Rather than dwell on losing Iain so damnably young I prefer to remember him smilingly signing books for fans, chatting away to them and other writer friends and booksellers after the author event was over, usually in the bar over a pint, beer in his hand and big, open grin on his face. My thoughts go out to Adele, his family and closest friends who have had to endure the thought of his dreadful illness and now his sudden passing. Somewhere, in the vastly distant future, when mankind has perhaps evolved to be more like the Utopian Culture he imagined I hope one day there will be a Mind piloting a starship and it will choose to call itself after Iain.



(taken just last year, two of Scotland's bestselling authors beginning with 'I', Iain Banks and Ian Rankin, enjoying one of Edinburgh's fine hostelries, pic from my Flickr)



# IAIN BANKS - A WEE TRIBUTE BY RICHARD BARNES

## FIRST APPEARED AT

[HTTP://RICHARDBARNESWRITER.BLOGSPOT.COM/2013/06/IAN-M-BANKS-WEE-TRIBUTE.HTML](http://richardbarneswriter.blogspot.com/2013/06/ian-m-banks-wee-tribute.html)

Iain Banks, one of our finest sci-fi writers, indeed one of our finest writers, died on June 9th, 2013. It's always sad when one of your favourite artists passes – the notion that I won't get to read another new Culture novel, or enjoy the jet black humour of his, supposedly, mainstream fiction is heartbreaking.

“Excession” was the first of his books that I read – a terrific piece of space opera that, for me, blew the genre apart. At the time, to my shame, my sci-fi reading had largely deteriorated to Star Trek and Star Wars levels, in prose at least. In comics I had soared with Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman (among others), but my novel reading remained distinctly pedestrian. And my rambling attempts at writing had been at wonky, quest based (Tolkien rip-off) sword and sorcery, and a space war-based (Star Wars rip-off) sci-fi.

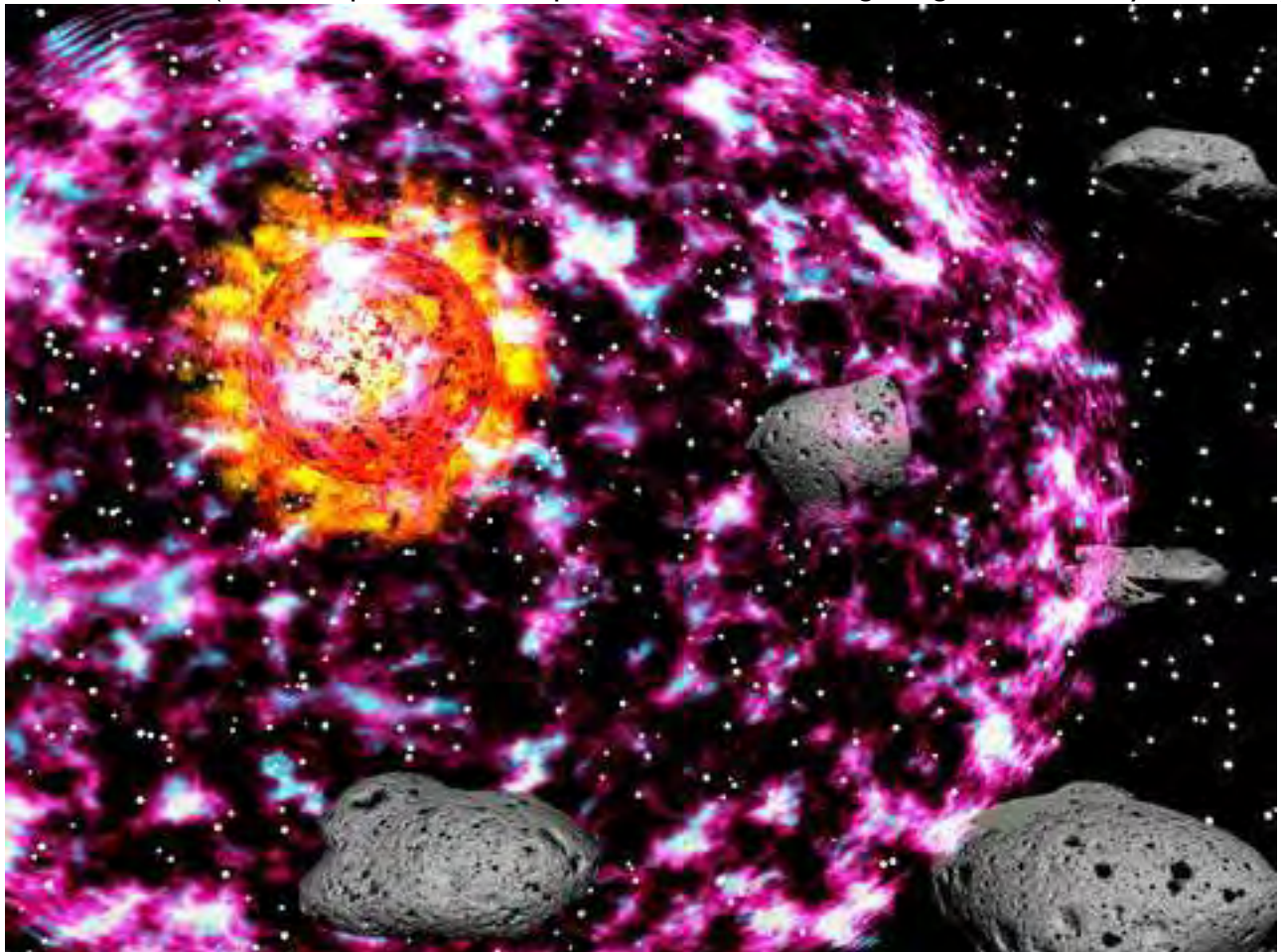
And then, I picked up “Excession” from the library and realised that imagination could fly so, so much farther.

The Culture (Bank's super-advanced space-

living, egalitarian, super-liberal society) was light years away from the simplistic societies envisaged by the two big sci-fi franchises. Let's face it, much as I still love Trek and SW, they are really just Earth bound stories and characters thrown into space. They are hardly “real” sci-fi in that they hardly deviate from modern Earth technology. A gun with a laser beam is still just a gun. Banks took a step back and really thought about where technology could take us.

The stars of the Culture are not boldly going humans – it's the vast “minds” that are the heart and souls of the city-sized starships. In Excession, the villains of the piece, for want of a better term, are not sinister megalomaniacs intent on conquest and power, it's a bunch of many legged gas balloons whose whole society revels in cruelty and oppression. And even the “Afront” pale in comparison to the grim society of “the Player of Games”.

The “humans” in the Culture can simply “gland” mood enhancing drugs into their systems, they can



Art from Michele Wilson



transfer their minds into other bodies (alien, human, whatever), they can change gender, they don't die - unless they choose to, and even then they may be uploaded to a virtual heaven long before they finally decide to switch themselves off.

After reading *Excession*, my *Star Wars* rip-off was retired. My Tolkien rip-off is not quite dead, but if it is ever resurrected it will be in a radically different form.

I can't claim that my writing will ever reach Bank's giddy heights of imagination, but the lesson learned is that I have to try.

And his so-called mainstream work? Read "The Wasp Factory" and ask yourself how mainstream that is.

When I see yet another sodding vampire/ werewolf/ shadow world beneath our world/ kids of destiny with exceptional powers story on the shelves - I wonder how those writers live with themselves. Of course, my own work is probably a pale rip-off of Iain Bank's so I can't get too judgmental.

I have few regrets in life, BUT - on the one time I actually got to meet the great man, I didn't ask him anything. He was signing copies of "Dead Air" in a bookshop near my work one lunchtime - I bought a copy in a rush and got it signed for my brother as a Xmas prezzie - I was rushing so much I didn't think to ask him to explain what the hell "Walking on Glass" was about, or just what that thing was in "Excession", or at what point in writing "Use of Weapons" did the big twist come to him....

I was lucky enough to meet his one-time pub-

lishing editor, John Jarrold\*, who explained how he handled the big twist in the publicity and just why "Inversions" is actually a Culture novel, NOT sword and sorcery as my non sci-fi reading friend once thought.

For those who have not read Iain Banks, I'd suggest starting with "Consider Phlebas" as a first Iain M Banks - it's the first Culture novel and a great trip around how it works. As for the equally superb Iain Banks (without the M) work - maybe try "Espedair Street" as it's not as jarring as "The Wasp Factory". Frankly, anything with his name, with or without an "M" will take you places that you never thought you'd go.

To those who knew and loved Mr Banks, their loss must be immeasurable and my thoughts are with them. One hopes it is a small comfort that his work will live on and continue to excite readers forever.

### **A wee bit of Culture fan-fic/ flash-fic:**

"I need to sublime."

-Ahem, the Culture does NOT sublime.

"Ok, how do I shuffle off this mortal coil?"

-There's always the after-life. And there's lots of options.

"No. That's just a different kind of physical plain. I want out. Altogether."

-Tricky. No-one has died in the Culture for millennia. Ten thousand years ago, some guy managed to get his body dropped into a star from a non-culture ship a long way from any Culture influence. Even then, we were able to reconstruct him.

"I know. And I wish you'd never bothered."

-Heh. No one f\*\*ks with the Culture.

Richard Barnes is a writer based in wonderful New Zealand and blogs at <http://richardbarneswriter.blogspot.co.nz>. Now, go and buy his awesome ebook "The Royal Wedding from Hell" from <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/178959>. Iain Banks would, probably, have loved it.



Still from Sunstone by Ed Emshwiller & Alvy Ray Smith