Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Paul Kincaid February 2019

Paul Kincaid wrote an award winning study of Iain M. Bank's work. His writing has appeared in a wide range of publications including New Scientist, Times Literary Supplement, Literary Review, New York Review of Science Fiction, Foundation, Science Fiction Studies, Interzone and Strange Horizons. He is a former editor of Vector, the critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association.

Lucius Sorrentino: It might be interesting to learn something about how he came to his socio-political beliefs and how that found its way into his writing.

I think Banks was inherently left wing. Scotland has always been more left of centre than the rest of the UK, largely because Scotland, quite rightly, feels it has been second-best in the opinion of the British government. This was particularly the case in the 1970s and during the Thatcher years. In the late-70s there was an independence referendum for Scotland that came up with a pretty clear majority in favour of independence, only for the UK government to retrospectively change the rules. They said it wasn't a majority of everyone in Scotland, only of those who voted, and therefore independence didn't happen. That is something that comes up in *The Bridge*, and it is pretty clearly a defining moment in Banks's political awakening. Then, under Thatcher, Scotland was always used to try out unpopular ideas, like the poll tax. There was a satirical programme on British television at the time in which Scotland was referred to as "the test bed". There are several places, both in his fiction and in his interviews, where Banks says how much he hated Thatcher. And let's not forget that his closest friend from schooldays onwards was Ken MacLeod, who was involved in several forms of extreme left wing politics, so that would have been an influence also.

As for how these ideas found their way into his work, I think that Banks would say you cannot avoid putting your views into your fiction. Fiction is inherently political, and anyone who tries to pretend otherwise is simply wrong. And so the politics had to be there in everything from *Walking on Glass* to *State of the Art*.

Martin Dudley: I've always had trouble envisioning the Culture Ships. There is a pretty low tech video in YouTube, but that's all i could find. I remember there is a book due out from Orbit this year with some drawings by Banks. Any comments or recommendations for images of Ships?

I've not yet seen any of Banks's illustrations of his ships, or a copy of the book (I've not seen a definitive date for when it is due out, it seems to have been promised for ages). Speaking personally, I can't picture the ships either. Or rather, they are just such massive spaces that contain so much that you could fit any sort of structure or landscape inside them. And it is these insides that I find far more interesting than the outside. I suppose if I do try to picture them, I end up with something like the extraordinary ships you get in *Babylon 5*, only much bigger.

Beth McCrea: What surprised you most in your research about Iain Banks?

I've been reading Banks ever since *The Wasp Factory* came out, and I knew him well enough to go out for drinks with him, so I'm not sure anything surprised me. What pleased me was that when you read the books altogether, one after the other, you realize how much interplay there is between the so-called mainstream and the so-called science fiction, you keep seeing the same themes and images recurring. Actually, there was one thing that did surprise, which I only found in one interview, which is that *Transition* used a structure and a villain that he had originally intended to use in his previous novel, *Steep Approach to Garbadale*. I think that is the most revealing instance of the crossover between the mainstream and the science fiction.

Eva Sable: Some authors are generally regarded as more literary, and don't get classed as science fiction authors, or, more properly, don't accept that designation. As Banks was both a Literary and Science Fiction author, did he have any thoughts on that subject, and is that distinction why there are "M" and "non-M" books?

This is a lovely question, but a really big subject.

Let's start with the M and non-M. Iain's full name was Iain Menzies Banks, and when he sold his first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, he wanted it to appear under the name Iain M. Banks. But he began to worry that it might remind readers of Rosie M. Banks, the very bad romantic novelist in the P.G. Wodehouse stories. So he agreed to drop the M. But Menzies was an old family name, and he got into a lot of trouble from members of his family for dropping it.

Then came *Consider Phlebas*. His publisher was Macmillan, a venerable and important fiction publisher, but not one with any experience or track record when it came to science fiction. Banks was a critical and popular success, at the time he was probably their best-selling author. They were uncomfortable with the thought that the switch to science fiction might cause him to lose readers (a perfectly reasonable fear, given the attitude towards science fiction of the literary establishment of the time) so they asked him to use a pseudonym. He toyed with the name John B. MacAllan (after his two favourite brands of scotch), but in the end decided it was his chance to please his family by reinstating the M.

Now, as for the difference between the M and the non-M books, I don't think Banks considered that there was one. His first three books all had strong elements of the fantastic in them. At the time that *Walking on Glass* appeared, I was on the committee for a science fiction convention, and that novel convinced all of us that Banks would be an interesting and appropriate guest. So I invited him to come along, he did, and as a result dug out *Consider Phlebas*, which he'd written immediately after *The Wasp Factory*. The science fiction wasn't so much as change of pace as just the next stage in his career, and after that convention he knew he'd have an audience for it.

In broad terms the M allowed him to play around with what Brian Aldiss called the widescreen baroque, while the non-M could be more intimate, more personal. But that wasn't hard and fast. Many of his non-M books (*The Wasp Factory, Walking on Glass*, *The Bridge, Canal Dreams, Song of Stone, The Business*, etc) had distinctly fantastic elements. Most, though not all, of the novels he wrote before *The Wasp Factory* were science fiction. And then there was *Transition* which was published as by Iain Banks in the UK and by Iain M. Banks in America.

He enjoyed science fiction, but he enjoyed crime, he enjoyed contemporary family drama. I think he felt that he should be able to move from one to the other depending on what stories he thought of, or what interested him at the time. He was happy to call himself a science fiction writer, but really it was up to the readers to decide what labels should go on his books.

Martin Dudley: His nationality seemed to infuse his writing. In his non-SF work, he often used Scottish settings, and his SF work somehow carried a very Scottish sense, especially of humour. I know he was pro-independence, did he feel his "Scottishness" helped his writing?

Yes, he was very Scottish. I think he saw himself as a Scottish writer first and a science fiction writer or a mainstream writer a long way behind.

An anecdote: I first met Iain not long after *Walking on Glass* came out, but before *The Bridge* was published. One day my wife and I turned on the radio and there was someone reading an extract from a brand new novel. We didn't know who it was or what the book was, but we both said at the same time: "That's Iain." It was one of the Scottish barbarian passages from *The Bridge* and the voice was very distinctive.

There is a strand of Scottish writing that I have called the Scottish fantastic. It stretches from Hogg's *Justified Sinner* and Stevenson's *Jeckyll and Hyde* up to Alasdair Gray and Irvine Welsh, but it also draws on ideas from the Scottish psychologist R.D. Laing. The Scottish fantastic tends to feature characters with divided or distorted identities, and characters who build elaborate defences against the world. Banks was squarely in that tradition (he has specifically named Gray as an influence, and Welsh has in turn been influenced by Banks).

Of course it helped that Scotland provided a setting for most of his (non-M) fiction. And the typically pawky Scottish sense of humour comes out in just about everything he wrote.

Cynthia Allen: I love his books. I do notice that he used the same idea twice - a man has lost his memory, goes on a quest, and then finds out what a monster he is. Do you have any insight as to why that was one of his favorite themes?

I think all writers tend to get certain ideas or themes stuck in their head and it can take two or more books to work it out. (There are certain recurring themes that crop up in just about every one of Philip K. Dick's 20-odd novels.) Banks is no exception to this. It's not so much that it is a favourite theme, more that it works for one story but that story doesn't exhaust it, so he returns to it again. I suspect it's not one of the books you are talking about, but you'll find a variation on the same theme in *The Wasp Factory* and *Espedair Street*, which are otherwise very very different books. And I have seen a convincing argument that *Excession* has the structure of a traditional fairy story.

Marina Akushskaya: Some ideas on how the Special Circumstances should handle the contact with other, more primitive civilizations (should they bring them on the Culture's level or not, and if the answer is positive, then how to proceed - as seen in discussions in Inversions, for example) remind me of the problems heavily discussed in some of the Strugatsky brothers books about the Progressors

(people from the future Earth who actually try to help the less advanced cultures on the other planets), Hard To Be A God being one of these books. Do you think it's possible that Banks was familiar with the Strugatsky brothers works and ideas, or is it all just a coincidence and some case of "great minds think alike"?

I'd be surprised if Banks didn't know some, at least, of the Strugatsky's work. He was very well read in science fiction. And *Hard to be a God* in particular was one of the relatively few Strugatsky novels available in the West at that time.

As for how Special Circumstances should behave. I think part of the point of the novels is that their behavior is morally questionable in almost all circumstances. *Look To Windward*, for instance, is all about the consequences of the Culture behaving very badly towards another race. So one of the things the novels are trying to do is make us think how Special Circumstances should behave. My own take is to trust in what the Culture *says* it believes in, rather than what it actually *does*.

John Grayshaw: If you were a spaceship in a Banks novel, what would your name be and why? ☺

My name would be: "I Haven't A Clue".

I love his ship names, I just wish I knew how he came up with them in the first place.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the authors who influenced Banks?

He read very widely in science fiction, but his stated aim with the Culture was to write space opera without the right wing and militaristic aspects of practically every American work.

One key influence was M. John Harrison, whose *The Centauri Device* was a direct influence on Banks's space opera. Also the criticism that Harrison and John Clute wrote in *New Worlds* was a major influence, providing the intellectual underpinning for the Culture.

In the mainstream, the biggest influence was Alasdair Gray. *The Bridge* was one long homage to Grey's *Lanark*.

John Grayshaw: What other writers was Banks friends with?

His closest friendship was, of course, with Ken MacLeod. They had been at school together; MacLeod was the first reader of practically all of Banks's work, especially *Use of Weapons*, and it was Banks who finally persuaded MacLeod to be serious about his own writing.

The science fiction scene in Britain has always been a pretty small and close world, so Banks would have known practically every other sf writer then active in the country.

He was also a close friend of a number of other Scottish writers, notably the crime writer Ian Rankin.

John Grayshaw: I read that before writing "The Wasp Factory" that Banks had been trying to get science fiction novels published for 10 years? Can you tell us more about this period of his life and his struggles? How many books did he write before he got published?

The Wasp Factory was published on Banks's 30th birthday, but he had been determined to be a writer since his early teens. He said somewhere that he had written over a million words of fiction before he got into print. That may be an exaggeration, Banks was prone to exaggeration, but possibly not by much.

In his early teens he wrote, in longhand, an Alistair Maclean-type thriller called *Top of Poseidon*. When he counted the words afterwards he found it was too short to be a novel, so he re-used the plot for a spy novel called *The Hungarian Lift-Jet*. After this, while still at school, he wrote an over-long satirical novel called *The Tashkent Rambler* that eventually reached half-a-million words and that seems to have been no more than an excuse to squeeze the greatest number of puns into each page. Nevertheless, he felt good enough about it to start sending it out to publishers and collecting rejections. When he went to university he started but did not finish a science fiction novel, then he wrote the first draft of what would become *Use of Weapons*, though he could not solve the inherent structural problem that the climax of the novel came in the middle. After university he returned to the novel he'd abandoned, and that became *Against a Dark Background*. Then he wrote *The State of the Art* and a number of short stories that all got rejected. Next came *The Player of Games*, then he decided science fiction wasn't for him and wrote *The Wasp Factory*. Then, between finishing *The Wasp Factory* and it being accepted by Macmillan, he wrote *Consider Phlebas*.

Banks often said that the real reason he managed to sell *The Wasp Factory* was that it was the first book where he wrote a second draft.

Once he was a publishing success, of course, most of these books came out, though in the reverse order of how they were written, and all were extensively revised.

John Grayshaw: Any news on upcoming TV or Movie deals for any of Banks works?

So far, there has been a film of *Complicity*, television dramatisations of *The Crow Road* and *Stonemouth*, and an opera of *The Wasp Factory*. And as far as I can tell, apart from a couple of radio dramas, that's it. There have been persistent rumours that a film of "A Gift from the Culture" is in development, but the rumours have been around for years and nothing has appeared so far. And again, Amazon are supposedly developing *Consider Phlebas* for television, but nothing further has been heard in the last year. Who knows?

John Grayshaw: What is your favorite Banks novel? And why?

Of his science fiction, my favourite is *Look to Windward*, which seems to me the most coherent, the best structured, and the most humane of his Culture novels. I also believe it is the book he intended to close off the Culture sequence, because it brings so many threads to an excellent conclusion. The three later Culture novels are all expansions of ideas that had appeared in books before *Look to Windward*.

Of his mainstream fiction, I honestly can't decide between *The Crow Road* or *The Bridge*. They are two incredibly different books, but each is so compelling and so satisfying.

John Grayshaw: Did Banks have a personal favorite of his sci-fi books? And a favorite of his non-sci-fi books?

I don't think so. If he did, I'm not aware of him saying so.

John Grayshaw: What were Banks's hobbies?

He wrote and played music. He had incredibly sophisticated music composition software on his computer. He also liked to travel, to drive in fast cars, and to drink whisky (or at least he did until he wrote *Raw Spirit*, after which he seems to have switched to sherry).

John Grayshaw: Did Banks have a particular writing routine he stuck with?

I've seen a couple of versions of this routine, so it is probably something that evolved over time. But in broad terms he seems to have spent the autumn plotting the next novel; around Christmas he would start writing and it would take around three months to write the book. Then he would take six months off, during the last month or so of which he would start to work out ideas for the next book.

He seems to have been a very disciplined writer. During the three months he was actually putting words on the page he would be at the keyboard throughout most of the day, every day. Even on the day he was informed of his cancer he had his laptop with him at the hospital and wrote his words for the day.

John Grayshaw: Was Banks working on anything when he died? Have all his unfinished works/shelved works been published?

Top of Poseidon, The Hungarian Lift Jet and The Tashkent Rambler were all unpublishable and no longer exist, nor does *O*, the novel he wrote immediately after *Walking on Glass* and that he then cannibalized for *The Bridge*. He had talked with Ken MacLeod about Ken finishing the last Culture novel he was working on, but his death came earlier than expected and he left nothing substantial for Ken to work on. So far as I can see, therefore, there is nothing else to come.

John Grayshaw: I read in a 2015 interview with Ken MacLeod that Banks had talked to him about another Culture novel about a character who had stored some of his memories in ammunition. But MacLeod said Banks never even got to an outline? Do you have more information about this?

As I said above, he hadn't even got an idea fully worked out. I'm not sure it had got as far as an outline.

John Grayshaw: What is Bank's legacy?

He changed the nature of space opera. Anyone trying to write a space opera now without the intelligent ships, the AIs and so forth, the result invariably seems old-fashioned.

He also provided a healthy dose of humour.

And critically, there are now, by my count, five or six books about Banks, including my own. He is starting to crop up in courses about science fiction, and about modern literature more generally. That suggests his work will be read and studied for years to come.