

# The Banksoniain

## An Iain (M.) Banks Fanzine

Issue #4 / November 2004

### Editorial

Issue #4 is upon us and with it nearly a year of existence – well at least in my head. Although issue #1 was released to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of *The Wasp Factory* in February 2004, there was a proof of concept issue #0 in December 2003 to encourage others to contribute that began life about a year ago.

The focus of this issue is, of course, on the NEW book, *The Algebraist*, but also on *Consider Phlebas* – as we have reached Banks's first SF publication in our series of retrospectives. The **Media Scanner** column is directly followed by a special review of the publicity tour for *The Algebraist*; and we also have two sections on the reviews it has garnered from the print media on the back page and online on page #11. *Consider Phlebas* gets the centre spread, and also a good proportion of this issue's **Critical Banks** article.

**eBayWatch** as usual covers the most interesting of Banksian items recently offered whether they sold or not, and **Banks in Translation** looks East to Japan. **Banks Obscura** heads to an art gallery as well as detouring to the *Guinness Book of Records*, and the new Robert Rankin, whilst **Not "THE" Iain Banks** takes a rather risqué turn this issue. We also take look at the background to the well-worn phrases "Space Opera" and "Widescreen Baroque" that are frequently applied to Banks's M work.

Thanks for this issue to; Andi Evans, Barry Marsden, Chris at Second Sight, Jessica at Orbit, and, of course, Iain M. Banks himself.

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If you wish to contribute an article, even an idea for an article any suggestions, comments and corrections can be sent to:  
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### News

The second half of 2004 has been a busy time for Banks fans. The major event has been the publication of his new SF book – *The Algebraist*. This was accompanied by a three week UK tour along with radio and TV appearances, which are reported on page #2. Reviews of the book are discussed on pages #11 & #12.

*The Crow Road* television series was released on DVD by Second Sight Films on October 25<sup>th</sup>. It is reviewed on page #9.

The audio book of *Raw Spirit* has been released, details on page 10. A large print edition of this title is planned for publication in December from ISIS (ISBN: 075315305X).

No word on the US editions of *The State of the Art* from Night Shade Books which are still listed on their website for publication in September. A cover image has been posted and is a painting by the British artist Les Edwards called *Aristarchos*. Prints available from <http://www.lesedwards.com>

Front page news, as Media Scanner was already full. **The Scotsman** (28/10/04) announced the opening of voting for the Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Awards 2004. Iain was mentioned as a potential "Top Scot", but was not nominated in the Writing category. Online voting at:  
<http://www.glenfiddich.com/spirit>

### Banks's Next Books

Iain is now entering a period of writing hibernation. His next contract will be a three book deal over four or five years. First will be a mainstream one, then, to the delight of many, a Culture book and then another mainstream. At the end of October the deal had still not been signed but "is very likely".

## Media Scanner

Iain has become a semi-regular guest reviewer on the BBC digital radio channel 6Music show *Rocket Science* hosted by Mark Riley and broadcast on Saturdays between 14:00 and 17:00, and also available online. Iain pops up in the last twenty minutes of the show every four or five weeks to review three albums with Mark. A quick chat usually informs us how Iain's flying lessons are progressing and then it is on with the music, but the first news of the proposed musical version of *Espedair Street* does seem to have broken on the show.

Website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/6music>

The bid for Edinburgh to be recognised at a World City of Literature was accepted by UNESCO on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2004. Part of the bid was the production of two books by Redpath Design, one about the bid and the other called *We Cultivate Literature on a Little Oatmeal* that "takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the city's great literary heritage" by using extracts to convey "Edinburgh's wealth of literary figures, from Harry Potter to Peter Pan and from Iain Banks to Rabbin Burns."

The contents of the, *Why Edinburgh?* book can be found in PDF format on the website: <http://www.cityofliterature.com/whyedin.html> Iain's books *The Wasp Factory* and *The Crow Road* are mentioned in the text along with the fact that he has an alter ego that writes science fiction. A picture of Iain also appears in which he is shown reading to children at the Edinburgh Book Festival – not from one of his own books I hasten to add.

Iain was invited to the opening of the new Scottish parliament building but turned the opportunity down, speculating about the "joined up government" that had not passed on the fact that he had cut his passport up and sent it to the Prime Minister in protest at the second Gulf war. Nearer the day he was quoted as saying that he did not like to attend events where royals were present as it only encouraged them, and he preferred to regard himself as a citizen rather than a subject.

The day before the opening Iain appeared at he first Inverness Book Festival in a session

with Christopher Brookmyre, who the next day had to get up early to get back to Edinburgh as he was attending the opening having let slip to his mother that an invitation had arrived she would not let him turn it down. Iain has not made that mistake.

**The Daily Mail** (17/10/04) just after the publication of *The Algebraist* caught up with the August publication of the paperback edition of *Raw Spirit* with a review by Simon Shaw who praised Iain's knowledge of whisky and the suitability of his prose style to this subject and the landscape of Scotland. The review ended with a question to Banks asking why he though the book would be "enhanced by ranting about Bush and Blair and weapons of mass destruction".

**Scotland on Sunday** (24/10/04) gave Banks the opportunity to say what he would do if he ruled the world. Iain's first action would be to limit his term of office to four years and after that he produced an eclectic mixture of the amusing and serious. December would be the only month when cover versions of pop songs would be allowed, so the unoriginal could buy something for Granny. Otherwise "all tunes would have to be the composer's own". Football would be reduced to just a penalty shoot-out, saving time and bringing more luck into the game which would hopefully help the current Scottish side. Although he said he was an "enthusiastic carnivore", Iain would enforce vegetarianism to ensure the world produced enough food to go round. Weapons that "the average female can't lift with one hand" would be banned and the money saved spent on space research. As "I don't trust people without a weakness" he would, "make at least one drug compulsory", but you would get to choose your own. Finally, he would end PLCs and their limited liability, a debt is a debt, he says and "you should damn well pay".

**BBC2 Scotland** has been showing an eight part series called *Writing Scotland*. The second programme explored the making and breaking of personalities through the use of the fantasy genre and took a journey from Hogg, through Stevenson, Barrie and Gray to Banks, and specifically *The Bridge*.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/writingscotland/>

# The Algebraist

## The Publicity Tour

The publicity continued from that reported in issue #3 with a major interview published in the magazine section of the Glasgow based **Herald** newspaper (25/09/04). Iain again received an above the mast head picture teaser – along with a controversial quote. The interview ranged widely from politics to flying (Iain has a Cessna 152 based at Fife airport near Glenrothes) to the book. The quote that drew a response in the letters column of the paper was where Banks described the Prime Minister. “I think Blair is a genuine Christian nutter”. This, the correspondent complained (29/09/04), was an insult to the insane.

The official publication date was Monday 4<sup>th</sup> October which was marked by a signing at the Forbidden Planet shop on Shaftsbury Avenue in London with a queue that numbered thirty odd before Iain started signing and being replenished kept him busy for a good 45 minutes.

The first reading/signing was on the 6<sup>th</sup> at Ottakar's in Norwich and was a sell out, and the bookseller that introduced Iain said that meant there were 150 people there, and as usual for Banks it was a pretty mixed crowd.

Iain read the section of the book on the Dreadnought as it is undertaking firing tests, and then took questions. The first was why do we have to wait so long for each SF book. Iain replied that basically it was because he was lazy, but that he himself had got bored in the two year gap which was how *Raw Spirit* came about. He also mentioned that his new contract, then under negotiation, was to be for three books with an eighteen month gap between them as now he is fifty a book every year is too much.

Asked if he knew what the next book would be about Iain produced a long answer that can be summarised by the word no. He stated that in the past he has always liked to know what he would write next before he signed the contract. Now he has a wife and an agent to worry about those things, explaining that he didn't have an agent for the first seven books,

but that when he did get one his earnings went up 300% even after her 10%.

An interesting titbit came about when asked what SF he read. He said he has a “professional obligation” to read but unfortunately he is not a fast reader, and then admitted that an early idea he had for *The Algebraist* was abandoned after he mentioned it to Ken MacLeod in the pub who said it sounded like X's latest. Later he was asked which book he wished he had written and answered *Tiger! Tiger!* by Alfred Bester (a.k.a. *The Stars My Destination*) for the sheer amount of energy in the book “it must have been fun to write” he commented.

The usual questions about influences, films and spaceship names followed before Iain seemed taken aback by a question about the influence of Dan Dare on him. The reply was that he was a bit young for that and anyway had been a **Lion** man, as posh kids read the **Eagle**. Asked if he planned to travel with Virgin Galactic™ into space he said he thought it was very expensive for very little actual space time, so he probably wouldn't.

The media appearances on the tour were dominated by the BBC. **Breakfast News** (06/10/04) saw Banks on the early morning sofa with Natasha and Dermot and in his six minutes talked about his *Raw Spirit* and the story of the M, before Iain managed to get over the a decent plug for *The Algebraist*.

Asked if SF was his first love he talked about his two unpublished novels written in his teens, which took the discussion onto the autobiographical nature of his work. “Very little”, he said, adding he would not like to be a character in his SF novels – “you suffer like hell and then you die at the end”. Dermot had mentioned *The Wasp Factory* in the introduction and asked about Iain's first book deal and the thirtieth birthday deadline story was rolled out again which seemed to please Natasha who then asked if he was working on the next one yet, to which Iain replied that he was in a downtime phase at the moment.

Iain next popped up on the radio on the Janice Forsthye Show broadcast on **BBC Radio Scotland** (09/10/04). This was the morning after his Inverness Book Festival appearance

and he was not live in the studio but on the line from there and sounded slightly rough at 10:20 in the morning. They talked about the fun of live events and Iain professed to being “a fan of my fans on the whole” and was generally complimentary about SF fans “generally nice, intelligent people”, and then went how Iain works and visualises the SF in his mind as he writes. After zipping through the back story of the new book, Iain mentioned once attempting to write two books at once. He said that the stronger book gradually took over and “pushed the weaker one out of the nest”, and then got onto creativity in general.

The interview was split into two parts with a musical interlude between. Iain had asked for *Common People* by Pulp which he described as “best British new pop songs of the past twenty years”, and explained that he had been forced to listen to the version on Shatner’s *Has Been* album which he had reviewed on Mark Riley’s show the week before. He had not enjoyed it and so had particularly wanted to hear the original again. Presumably just the title had been discussed before the programme as Janice unfortunately had the Shatner version cued up and proceeded to play it. Thankfully she did cut it short and they talked briefly about music before moving onto *The Algebraist*, which included a discussion of the definition of space opera.

*Dead Air* and *Raw Spirit* got brief mentions before Iain was asked about his next book, and he said he would start thinking about the next book in the summer and start the first draft “round about this time next year”. Janice complained about Iain’s website which said he was appearing on the Janet Forsythe Show – so that was honours even after her Shatner faux pas.

Banks also appeared on the Simon Mayo Show on **BBC Radio 5Live** (14/10/04) in the weekly book panel as one of the reviewed authors. Iain was on straight after an item on Martian exploration which led into a discussion of how much science a science fiction author needs to know. They also took some time to describe the cover, which actually worked quite well on the radio, bringing back the space expert.

Iain said that the break he had taken had meant that he had come up with “too many ideas” for the new book, “it could almost have turned into a trilogy” but that he will be able to resist that temptation, as there are too many trilogies.

Donna McPhail commented, “a work of genius that made my ears bleed” who said that her imagination lacking with respect to the aliens, so Iain was made to physically describe the Dwellers “vertically oriented yo-yos covered with spider crabs.” Another panel member, Joel, didn’t like science fiction books, and didn’t particularly like this one. The third, Boyd Hilton, described it as a huge dessert, a bit sickly in the middle but ultimately a satisfying treat – a Black Forest Gateau – and also picked up on the humour. Joel responded to this by agreeing that there were Douglas Adamsian qualities to it which Iain took as high praise and for in writing. The listener reviewer enjoyed the imaginative inventions and description but commented about the lack of character development. Iain replied that, “it is difficult with aliens”.

On the signing tour Iain was happy to sign any book of his put in front of him – but has to remember which name to sign. Andi Evans who attended the Nottingham signing got his last two banks first edition signed and commented to Iain that he was inspired by *Raw Spirit* to go on a distillery tour for his summer holiday. Iain’s reply was to joke that he should be on commission from the Scottish Tourist Board.

**The Birmingham Post** has a single book bestseller list based on the sales in the Bullring branch of Borders. *The Algebraist* appeared on that list at #14 on the list published on 16<sup>th</sup> October – a respectable place for a hardback fiction book up against all the paperback and non-fiction books.

Other national based lists showed similar success. The lists in **The Independent** are split between different types of book. The ‘Hardback Fiction’ list published on October 15<sup>th</sup> had *The Algebraist* at #5, the next week it was at #2 behind Terry Pratchett’s latest *Going Postal*, and by the October 29<sup>th</sup> had slipped back down to #4.

## Banks Obscura

### National Portrait Gallery

There are vast numbers of items held by the National Portrait Gallery that are not on display. Their online directory lists 56,755 works two of which are photographic portraits of Iain Banks. However, as this catalogue currently covers less than 20% of the complete collection more Banks portraits may yet come to light.

The earlier of the two is a 1988 bromide print by Barry Marsden, and it is illustrated in the catalogue. The other is a C-type colour print by Trevor Ray Hart from April 1999 but is unfortunately not illustrated.

Barry Marsden is known for his pop and celebrity chef portraits but has also taken pictures of other writers including Martin Amis and Clive Barker, all of which are in the Gallery's collection. Barry kindly dug out his diary for April 1988 and told me met Iain at the Waldorf Hotel but thinks they walked over to Iain's publishers [Macmillan] and took the shots in the underground car park. They were for a short-lived newsprint tabloid magazine called *Fiction*. April 1988 saw *Consider Phlebas* out in paperback, but the shoot may possibly have been for an article about the hardback edition of *The Player of Games* published that August.

Trevor Ray Hart's other portraits in the gallery's collection range from Bernard Manning, through Samantha Fox to Robbie Williams, and also includes writer Martin Amis.

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### Whit Inspiration?

The 2005 *Guinness Book of Records* reports the only verified instance of a family with three generations all born on February 29<sup>th</sup> giving them the title "Most Generations Born on Leap Day". The Keoghs; Peter A. (1940); Peter E. (1964) and Bethany (1996) all celebrate their birthdays just once every four years.

Also in the vein is the Henriksen family from Norway which has three children all born on February 29<sup>th</sup> in consecutive leap years: 1960, 1964 and 1968, and so they qualify for the "Most Siblings Born on Leap Day" category.

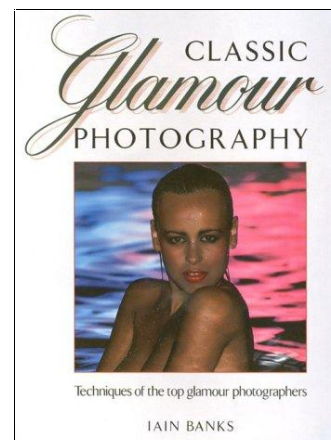
## Not "THE" Iain Banks

### The Camera Man

The year before the publication of *The Wasp Factory* saw the appearance of a book called *Classic Glamour Photography* by Iain Banks. This is not THE Iain Banks, although this has not stopped some booksellers from claiming that Iain had a previous career was as a camera journalist. The book, judged by its various covers, is, as it is sometimes subtitled, about "Techniques of the Top Glamour Photographers", who include: Patrick Lichfield, John Kelly, David Hamilton and Michael Boys.

It has been reprinted quite often over the years and also translated into French. The most recent publication in 2003 saw it updated by Duncan Evans. I have managed to contact the new author but not the original one. The first question Mr Evans asked the publisher after he was invited to rework the book was "Is this THE Iain Banks?" He soon discovered that it was not and was not particularly flattering about the prose, which he completely rewrote.

Searching Amazon or any other online bookshop for the works of Iain Banks will usually throw up this book, as well as those of the archaeologist discussed in issue #1. Every so often someone "discovers" it and will ask in one of the Banks related online forums – Is this by Iain Banks the novelist? Ken Macleod posted at least three times in alt.books.iain-banks to confirm, "it is not our Iain". David Howard in his bibliography for *Book and Magazine Collector* #148 (July 1996) felt moved to list a work as specifically being NOT by the novelist Iain Banks.



## Consider Phlebas

Banks's first published SF work was written after the second draft of *The Wasp Factory* (c. 1982/3), and therefore before any of his work had been accepted for publication. The action scenes of the previous book had been the easiest sections to write, and so Iain decided to write a completely action based work using up sequences that he might never otherwise find a home for. He also wanted to get back to SF after his dabbling in the mainstream genre to prove to himself he was a serious SF writer. It was never submitted to any publishers before being reworked in 1985/6 when Iain decided to again try to get his SF published, which it was in April 1987.

As his then publisher, Macmillan, did not publish any science fiction, Iain had planned to take it to another company and use a pseudonym – he was toying with one based on a combination of his favourite blended and malt whiskies: John B. Macallan. Macmillan were prepared to publish it, so Iain famously put the M back into his name and had the words A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL put on a cover that had a big red spaceship, drawn by Richard Hopkinson, so that people would definitely know what they were buying when they purchased it.

The title comes from part four of the T. S. Eliot poem *The Waste Land*. The title and imagery relating to the poem is extensively covered by Gary Wilkinson in his article - Poetic Licence: Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*<sup>1</sup>. Alternative titles were considered; *Wartime Incident*, *Wartime Interlude*, *The Changer's Tale*, *The Changer's War*, *A Short Engagement [in the War]*, *Minor Incident* and even *Use of Weapons*, which would have been renamed *Zakalwe's Song*<sup>2</sup>. However, Iain kept coming back to the phrase from the poem, and went on to specifically develop aspects of the plot to play up the associations.

*Consider Phlebas* is a Culture novel. Iain had been working on the Culture as a setting for novels since the 1974 when he started the first

draft of *Use of Weapons*. Before then it had just been an excuse to “draw unlikely starships”<sup>2</sup>. The first draft of *The Player of Games* was written a few years later (after *Against a Dark Background*) and in 1979 he wrote the novella *The State of the Art* before turning to the mainstream genre in order to get published. The Culture grew out of the need in *Use of Weapons* for a “political-philosophical framework that somehow morally justified what he [Zakalwe] was doing”<sup>3</sup>. The book, therefore, may be our introduction to the Culture, but for Banks it was his third major work set there, and when published had been a setting he had been developing on and off for over ten years. Iain wrote a background article that was posted to alt.fan.iain-banks by Ken MacLeod in 1994. Called *A Few Notes on the Culture*, it is available online, and ranges from the creation of the Culture right down to what the name the full name of the Culture agent, Juboal-Rabaroansa Perosteck Alseyn Balveda dam T'seif, actually signifies. It is essential reading for those who wish to understand the social, political and scientific background to Banks's utopia.

The design brief, at least in Iain's mind, for the book was to “out-Star-Wars, *Star-Wars*”<sup>3</sup>. Early in its planning Horza was going to survive and be victorious in his quest and get the girl. As it developed he decided that that was too much like a children's story and Horza, like most others had to die, although of the character deaths Iain says “writing Yalson out when her time came hurt more”<sup>2</sup>.

Iain described it at the time of publication as “old fashioned space-opera” and “a radical version of *Starship Troopers*”<sup>4</sup>. The underlying idea being that there was a “moral, intellectual high-ground in space opera that had to be reclaimed for the left”<sup>3</sup>, although he added “but it's frankly about hardware”<sup>4</sup>.

Banks's reaction against the “right-wing, dystopian SF”<sup>5</sup> that he read as a kid, produced a utopia that has nothing to do with Earth and is actually set in our 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Some

<sup>1</sup> Vector (Jan 1999). Article also available online at <http://www.quirkafleeg.freemove.co.uk/Poeticl.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Iain M Banks, personal communication 20041029

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Oliver Morton in Wired (June 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Kim Newman in Interzone #16.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Simon Ing, Cyberia Café Website (May 1996).

readers have failed to spot this (why read appendices?) and considered the Culture to be a far future development of the USA, something that alarms the author<sup>3</sup>.

Another theme is the luck that plays a major part of any war when viewed from the personal level. This is the start of the famously high body counts that Banks produces in his SF, yet all that is effectively irrelevant in the grand scheme of things as the Culture has calculated that they will still win the war with the Iridan Empire no matter what the outcome of this minor skirmish. This is reinforced by the appendices, where the total casualties of the war were put at 851.4 billion. A figure that itself is immediately put into perspective by saying that is just 0.2% of the stellar population of the galaxy.

A game of Damage literally forms part of an interlude in the book. The game is played out as another mini-war within all the larger ones, and is also important to the theme of identity that pervades much of Banks's works. Horza, in the throws of transforming himself into Kraiklyn, makes a mental connection to him as a spectator of the game. See the discussion of Sara Alegre's article on page #8.

Critical reaction to the book's publication came from many sources. A review in **The Times** (16/07/87) for this first SF work would probably not have happened but for Banks's previous three mainstream novels, and it was given more space than Asmiov's *Robot Dreams*. Tom Hutchinson thought that Banks was "trying to recreate a Golden Age all by himself" and welcomed "new blood for ancient themes".

John Clute in **Interzone** #20 (Summer 1987) in his review commented that, "what began as seemingly orthodox space opera turns into a subversion of all that's holy to the form". Clute uses the term post-scarcity society to describe the Culture, one that Banks thought a "fair summary of the principle behind it"<sup>3</sup>. Clute and Colin Greenland in **Foundation** #40 (Summer 1987) evoke the imagery of the Grail Quest into their discussions of the book, and both also suggest that some readers may have been lost in the ride along the way. Greenland's speculation on who the book was

for, "apart from Iain himself", is strikingly accurate given the genesis already outlined.

Sales went well and James Hale wrote that autumn that it had been reprinted twice, and another was being contemplated before Christmas. As well as the original hardback a limited (176) slipcased edition was produced. The original Futura paperback edition was published in April 1988 and followed by the Orbit paperback, with the Mark Salwowski cover, which is still in print.

*Consider Phlebas* has been translated into at least a dozen languages – the peoples of a contiguous landmass, from Portugal to Poland, can read their own versions, and then there are editions to be found further East in Estonia and Russia. The first German edition infamously included an advert for Moggi soup right in the middle of the narrative (on page 614). When Iain saw it he initially thought that he had been censored, but soon realised the truth, and told Macmillan to never let it happen again<sup>6</sup>. A second German edition was published, which hopefully made amends, and includes an introduction by Ken MacLeod. He mentions the Russian invasion of Afghanistan as an influence at the time of writing the book, and how the quote from the Koran hints at this.

*Consider Phlebas* is the book Iain would most like to be filmed – even allowing the makers to change the ending as long as they got the ships and the action sequences right. Unfortunately, as Banks most recently commented in Norwich, there is nothing on the horizon at the moment. On paper Iain has an "infinite effects budget"<sup>2</sup> which he generally uses to the full, which will always cause problems to potential filmmakers.

For the title of his ninth SF book, *Look to Windward*, Iain returned to the same part of *The Waste Land*, a circularity that some felt was an indication of the end of the Culture stories. That is now known to not be the case and returning to the maligned dust wrapper it did presciently state "*Consider Phlebas* is his first science fiction novel, and will be followed by many more".

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<sup>6</sup> Eastercon 1990 Guest of Honour speech printed in Matrix #88.

## Critical Banks

Sara Martin Alegre wrote an article in 2000 for a special edition of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* [The Canaries Magazine of English Studies] subtitled 'Contemporary Scottish Literature 1970-2000', that was edited by Tomás Monterrey.

Thankfully for me her article is in English. It is titled *Consider Banks: Iain (M.) Banks's The Wasp Factory and Consider Phlebas*, and attempts to act as an introductory essay to his work by examining the first novel published under each of his names, as well as to examine the "contrast between literary fiction and the so-called popular fiction genres".

Firstly, Banks's Scottishness is investigated, and the theme of individual identity running through his work is considered as a parable of "Scotland and its difficulties to assume its modern identity", whilst his SF works look at similar identity issues on a grander scale.

*The Wasp Factory* and *Consider Phlebas* are then discussed separately. Frank's discovery of his identity over the course of narrating his "appalling yet funny confessional autobiography" prompts Alegre to call *The Wasp Factory* "a remote child of *Frankenstein*". In the discussion of *Consider Phlebas* the resemblance of the plot to Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (with Kraiklyn as Long John Silver) is noted, and these two interesting comparisons could have borne further examination.

The identity of Horza, a member of the genetically altered race of shape changers, along with his threatening of the other protagonists' identities, as a subplot within *Consider Phlebas*, is important for Alegre's thesis. Horza is claimed to represent the "quintessential post-modern man in search of a stable identity". As the recovery of the Mind is the main plotline, this allows us to reflect on the nature of the Culture and the human-AI relationship within it, and it is the dominance of the AIs that Horza despises.

As Iain had published twenty books by the time of this article, the device of comparing his first from each name is a useful way into examining the themes that Banks revisits in his later works.

## Iain Banks Big Band

Keen-eyed Andi Evans reports that the latest Robert Rankin book, *Knee's Up Mother Earth*, has a mention of Iain Banks on page #338. The passage in question is when the Iain Banks Big Band plays prior to a football match featuring the Brentford Bees. Robert is known for not reading any modern fiction as he feels it may have too big an influence on his own works. Andi asked Robert how this came about and was told, "For the record, the reason I put in Iain Banks is because he is one of Sally's [Robert's partner] favourite authors, needless to say I haven't read any of his books, but I've heard that they are very good."

Your editor confirms. I heard Robert Rankin speak at an SF panel at the Lincoln Book Festival earlier this year and he did indeed claim to have last read a book of fiction in the early 1980s. The story goes that when his first book was accepted by the publisher, it was on the condition that all the bits he had copied from Spike Milligan were removed. Revisiting the book he realised that chunks of *Puckoon* had made their way into his work and from then on to avoid sub-conscious plagiarism he has not read fiction.

So what would the Iain Banks Big Band play? A medley of Frozen Gold arrangements perhaps? The proposed tribute album to the fictional Paisley band seems to have been ditched in favour of trying to get a full-blown musical off the ground. There will be more on this topic in the next issue when we cover everything to do with *Espedair Street*. Malcolm Sutherland, who adapted *The Wasp Factory* for the stage did once express an interest in an opera based on *Canal Dreams*, but given that in the meantime there has been the opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*, based on the hijacking of the cruise ship, Achille Lauro, I think its time may have passed.

Banks, himself, admits to playing the keyboards and guitar and putting down tracks on his MIDI equipment. He strenuously denies he will ever inflict these on the public. How well these would translate to a big band sound is anyone's guess. If Iain had a band would more likely to be found at Cappielow Park where Greenock Morton play.

## The Crow Road DVD

### Review

*The Crow Road* began life as an Iain Banks novel published in 1992. Brought to the small screen as a mini-series in 1996 it was a ratings hit despite going out on BBC2, and being up against both the heavily plugged *Billy Connolly's World Tour of Australia* on BBC1 and *Sharman* on ITV a detective series starring Clive Owen from the books by Mark Tilman, and also a critical hit being nominated for a number of BAFTA awards and winning three Scottish ones.

There are two extras; a writer / producer / director commentary on just the first episode, and a 1997 interview with Iain. The interview with John Brown was made for the Scottish TV programme *Arts and Parts*, and covers Iain's work in general up to *A Song of Stone* – the “new” book at the time. It does include a brief discussion of the TV adaptation that it is now packaged with.

The commentary focuses on what was changed from the source book, why it was done, what else they thought about changing and also some of the technical aspect of filming. So we get to hear about things like why Uncle Rory is a ghost, how to get Gudrun Ure up a tree and other such stories.

The two extras compliment each other as in the interview Iain talks about leaving the TV experts do their job, and in the commentary Bryan Elsely says he treasures a letter from Iain that thanks him for looking after his baby.

The blurb claims that it is the first commercial release of the “original broadcast length” and checking the BBFC data the DVD is 14 minutes 21 seconds longer. The majority of the time difference is due to the fact that on the DVD each individual episode includes the opening and closing sequences, which were edited out of the video, which runs as one long film. This means that after the first episode we also get a sort of “previously on”.

Ultimately this is the most satisfying of the unfortunately few adaptations of Banks's works. The DVD is now the only way of obtaining it as the video cassette has been deleted from the BBC's catalogue.

## Banks in Translation

### Japan

The Japanese Amazon sells Banks's books in English, but there have also a number of translations for those Japanese who do not read English.

The first of these was a 1988 edition of *The Wasp Factory* published by Shueisha and translated by Yoshio Nomura. It was another eight years until the translations of *Whit* and *Complicity* were produced. The former by Hayakawa Publishing and the latter translated by Masahiro Hirose for the intriguingly named Mysterious Press. *Whit* was translated by Susumu Takagi has a sort of Scottish-Japanese fusion cover illustrated below (left). Hayakawa in 1997 published a translation of *Feersum Endjinn* by Mamoru Masuda.



The most recently translated work was *The Player of Games* produced by Kadokawa. The translator Hisashi Asakura had his work nominated for a Sei'un award, which is voted for by the attendees at the Japanese National Science Fiction Convention. The cover by Reiji Matsumoto, Hisashi Asakura and Nozomi Ohmori shown above (right), makes you wonder if the way forward for a Banks SF film would be a Japanese animation.

### Forthcoming Translations

*Une forme de guerre* (Consider Phlebas) gets another French edition in November 2004.

*Das Kultur-Spiel* an omnibus edition of *The Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons* is due for publication in German in December.

The Russian rights to *The Algebraist* have been sold to Eksmo Publishers Ltd.

## The Unwritten Banks

### The Algebraist Audio Book

The audio book of *The Algebraist* was originally planned and listed for publication contemporaneously with the hardback as is increasingly the fashion. However, in order to get the particular reader that the publishers, Time Warner Audio Books, wanted, the date was put back to November 4<sup>th</sup>. The seven hour version is spread over six CDs, and it is only available on CD, has been abridged by John Nicholl and read by Anton Lesser.

Anton Lesser is an experienced audio book narrator as well as being an actor. He has recorded both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, as well as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and won an award – known as a “talkie” – for *Great Expectations*. On the radio he recently played the Roman detective Falco in *The Silver Pigs*, and on TV guested in the *Scarlet Pimpernel* series starring Richard E Grant. Genre fans may recognise him from his role as Lt. Charles Terrell, the WWII officer abducted by aliens and returned to Earth fifty years later, in the 1998 series *Invasion: Earth*, and he has also read *Brave New World* on the radio for the BBC. He has also played many principal roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company, and now heads a few thousand years into the future to tackle *The Algebraist*.

*The Algebraist*, Time Warner Audio Books  
ISBN: 1405500786. RRP: 14.99

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### Raw Spirit Audio Book

One online retailer has listed an audio book of *Raw Spirit* as being available since July from Clipper Audio. Narrated by Tom Cotcher it is a full twelve and a half hours edition on nine cassettes. Clipper specialise in unabridged audio books, which, given the length of this recording is what this looks like.

*Raw Spirit*, Clipper Audio  
ISBN: 184505119X. RRP: £39.95  
<http://www.edisure.com/~howes/wfhowes>

### Passport Watch

The re-election of George W. Bush and Iain's desire for regime change in the US or UK before applying for a replacement passport means no foreign trips for the near future.

## eBayWatch

Proofs of *The Algebraist* have continued to appear even after the publication of the hardback edition, but prices have dropped below the list price of the hardback, except for signed editions. The variation in auction length that eBay provides allowed canny sellers to list signed copies of the hardback before publication but timed to end after the first of Iain's signing events.

In 2001 Iain wrote the introduction to the PS Publishing edition of Ken MacLeod's *The Human Front*. A limited edition of 400 hardbacks were produced ready signed by both the authors, but one enterprising eBayer got the cover artist David Hardy to sign their copy at the recent Worldcon in Boston. Listed at \$60 this triple signed copy failed to attract a single bid.

A copy of *Overload*, the 1995 Novacon 25 souvenir book limited to 500 copies, with a couple of poems by Iain and short fiction from other guests Harry Harrison, Brian Aldiss and Bob Shaw failed to sell after being listed at £8.00. Re-listed at £5.00 is got a bid.

Another interesting oddity was a long sleeved t-shirt from what looked like the stage version of *The Wasp Factory*. It has the same wasp larvae logo and a quote on the back “I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again. It was just a stage I was going through”. 7 bids, 6 shared between two determined bidders, saw it reach £13.21.

A copy of the limited (250) slipcase edition of *Tales from the Forbidden Planet*, which contains the first publication of Iain's short story *Descendent*, sold for £40.00. This is the edition that comes with paper inserts of the autographs of all the contributors; authors, illustrators and also the editor.

**The Observer Magazine** from 13<sup>th</sup> August 1989, which contains the first appearance of the short story *Piece*, illustrated by Peter Knock. Other articles are about: Liza Minelli; Genetic Fingerprinting and collecting corpses of murder victims in Rio, sold for £7.00

One of the limited edition, of twenty, signed Mark Salwowski prints of the *Consider Phlebas* cover art sold for £46.00.

## “Space Opera”

### What’s in a phrase?

One of the phrases that most reviewers of Banks’s SF work will trot out is space opera, and they will usually put Banks into a sub category of that sub genre, widescreen baroque. Space opera like many monikers taken up with pride was originally a term of derision. It was suggested, according to Brian Stableford’s article, by William Tucker in 1941 as a term for the “hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn, spaceship yarn”, but was soon applied to “colourful action adventure stories of interplanetary or interstellar conflict”<sup>7</sup>. The entry goes to give examples, retrospectively classifying authors such as E.E. ‘Doc’ Smith, Edmond Hamilton and Ray Cummings as some of its major proponents.

Widescreen Baroque, more specifically “neo-Jacobean widescreen Baroque” was a phrase coined by Brian Aldiss to describe *The Paradox Men* by Charles Harness, in his introduction to the 1967 edition published by Four Square.

Baroque in the English speaking world is best known as an art and architectural style prevalent in the period around 1600 – 1750, and characterised by a sense of movement, energy and tension. On the Continent, especially in Spain and Italy, it was also used to describe some of the literature of that period, particularly extravagant poetry, and in music, Baroque, was essentially a new style of opera. The origins of the term are thought to come from the Spanish for an irregular pearl, and its use, particularly in music, was originally pejorative.

Taken up by many (with the neo-Jacobean dropped) the term has been applied to many writers by reviewers or even themselves. Banks’s first SF interview with Kim Newman in *Interzone #16* (1986) specifically talks about *Consider Phlebas* in this vein, and just a couple of months ago his description of *The Algebraist* as “space opera of the wide-screen baroque persuasion, full of weird aliens and arguably weirder humans” was quoted on the website **SF Crownsnest**.

<sup>7</sup> The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction, edited by Clute and Nicholls (1999), p. 1138.

## The Algebraist

### Online Reviews

The first review appeared on Amazon (UK) on 17<sup>th</sup> August where someone who had got a copy of a proof edition commented that it was the “customary disappointing non-Culture SF book from Iain M Banks”, and gave the book three stars out of five.

A few bloggers mentioned reading proof copies in July and August. One of these was Joe Gordon who reviewed the book for **The Alien Online** (<http://www.thealienonline.net>) and also has a report on the Edinburgh leg of Iain’s publicity tour on his blog *The Woolamaloo Gazette* at: <http://www.woolamaloo.org.uk>

Joe describes the book as “A triumphant return to SF for Banksie on the wings of large-scale space-opera”, one with “timpani and huge-bosomed soprano” which those “unfamiliar with the Culture novels will find this easily accessible”.

One of those who is unfamiliar with the Culture is Rick Kleffel, who admits to only buying Banks’s work after reading that Alastair Reynolds and Peter F. Hamilton cited him as an influence, saying “finally I get to see what all the fuss is about”. He praises the “huge imagination and vivid scenarios”, but focuses on the humour in the work which was something he found unexpected, particularly enjoying the “satiric swipes at the world we know within the universe he creates”. His review at:

<http://trashotron.com/agonny/reviews/2004/>

Cheryl Morgan in **Emerald City #109**, doesn’t trust Banks straight off when he says *The Algebraist* is not a Culture novel, only believing the evidence in the book itself – the clincher being the reliance on wormholes to travel due to the lack of FTL drives. One of the few reviewers to mention the underlying religion of the Mercatoria she also touched on the contemporary political commentary that can be read into the book. Overall Cheryl thought the book too long”, and although “amusing and entertaining”, had hoped for something spectacular, but instead got the “merely very good.

Website: <http://www.emcit.com>

# The Algebraist

## Print Reviews

The first print reviews to appear came from Banks's homeland. **Scotland on Sunday** (10/10/04) were first with a review from Andrea Mullaney. She commented that "the book itself is a thoroughly hefty 534 pages" but "is not a daunting read" before outline the basics of the plot and then concluding that "Banks seems like he's having fun here, and though the book doesn't match his large scope with similar depth, it's enjoyable to read".

Stablemate **The Scotsman** had a review from Andrew J Wilson (16/10/04), who divulged that in 2001 Iain told him at the Edinburgh Book Festival that *Look to Windward* may be his last SF book as he was "was worried he'd run out of ideas". On the new book Wilson thought that there was possibly one problem in that "Banks takes his time to establish the setting, slowly winding up the plot mechanism" but that in the end the reader got "the explosion of ideas and visions that the novel produces make it a very exciting, fictional firework display." The review finishes with an upbeat note for M fans "Iain M Banks no longer thinks he might run out of science fiction ideas: 'There's always going to be more,' he says."

Both these Scottish reviews mentioned Jonathan Swift and *Gulliver's Travels*. The first describing the Dwellers as a cross between the Houyhnhnms and "and a group of rather camp old academics in a gentlemen's club", and the second calling Taak "a post-modern Gulliver".

A short review appeared in the news section of **The Newcastle Journal** (19/10/04) that also publicised Banks's appearance at the Durham Book Festival. Rupert Hall described the book as typical of Banks, "a strange combination of complex, detailed and unpronounceable names". He also calls it "sci-fi at its best", but sometimes wishes Banks "would return to the high class thrillers that started his career".

Charles Murray Shaar in **The Independent** (22/10/04) got the impression that although it this not a Culture book he had a sense of "déjà vu", and commented that Banks "throws

away characters and concepts on which a lesser writer would build an entire franchise", before concluding that "*The Algebraist* is classy comfort food for addicts of Big SF, albeit prepared by a master chef: a stodgy main course, surrounded by delicious trimmings, but one ultimately composed of empty calories." Shaar referred at one point, happily erroneously, to "the late Brian Aldiss", it has been removed from their website, and a correction has been published.

A review by Alex Sarll appeared in the **Liverpool Daily Post** (22/10/04) and also in the **Birmingham Post** (23/10/04) in a slightly shortened form was fulsome in its praise. He thought that the "action and ideas never come at the expense of characterisation or plot", and "passages of exposition, they are written deftly and avoid any trace of clunkiness." Before concluding that "*The Algebraist* is a gripping read which blends majesty, humanity and relevance in a stirring reminder of just how impressive science fiction can be."

**The Guardian** (23/10/04) turned to the SF novelist Justina Robson (author of *Natural History* and *Mappa Mundi*) for their review. She describes the book as "great reading but it isn't a great novel", speculating that "his editor is on holiday". Going on to say that emotionally the book does not ignite, she concludes that, "as a boys' own adventure and a wry commentary on many contemporary issues this piece of writing delivers the full nuke."

Dave Golder the editor of **SFX** #123 (Nov 2004) gave the book four stars. Commenting that the book is "plotless and rambling" but still a compelling read due Banks's inventiveness and "playful prose". After a quick scene setting plot synopsis he returns to the issue of *The Algebraist* being a "hugely entertaining" book "full of ingenious concepts and truly alien aliens" but in the end "rather unsatisfying".

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*The Banksoniain* is available as a PDF from <http://banksoniain.netfirms.com/>

If you have any corrections, comments, suggestions or contributions then email us at: [banksoniain@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:banksoniain@yahoo.co.uk)

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