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Book Review: *Iain M. Banks*

Janice M. Bogstad

Kincaid, Paul. *Iain M. Banks*. U of Illinois P, 2017. ISBN 978-0252082504.

Kincaid's comprehensive study*, Iain M. Banks*, unlike other recent critical works such as Simone Caroti's *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction* (2018) or the essay collection *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks* (2018), explores the thesis that there is little foundational difference, in either underlying worldview or socio-political conception, between Banks's works often considered in the critical literature as different types of fictional construct and, so, rarely compared. Mainstream works published under "Iain Banks" deal on the surface with contemporary political and social issues. SF published under "Iain M. Banks" are set in the far future and played out on an intergalactic scale. Kincaid pursues an integrated critical evaluation of both types of fiction in a rough chronological order, based on the publication dates of Banks's titles. With this chronological approach, Kincaid can better centralise Banks's entire writing project, showing similarities of technique, thematic, and structural explorations. He considers the psychological writings of R. D. Laing, the influence of a Scottish literary renaissance of the 1980s, the re-visioning of space opera, and the exploration of the human spiritual dimension. One area Kincaid could have explored in more depth was Banks's skill in creating central female characters. Gender identity and female characterisation are mentioned at various points in Kincaid's narrative but could easily have received more attention in a foundational work such as this.

The science fiction of Banks dominates Kincaid's discussions. After Chapter One, a biographical overview of Banks, Kincaid focuses on his three earliest published works of fiction: *The Wasp Factor* (1984), *Walking on Glass* (1985), and *The Bridge* (1986). Kincaid notes a critical response to *The Wasp Factory* that reappears, if mildly altered in form, on an ongoing basis, that critics either loved or hated the novel. "There was no middle ground. The book was either brilliant or

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loathsome. But this very divided reaction indicated that something very different had appeared on the literary scene something for which the critics were not prepared" (14).

In every other chapter, Kincaid integrates discussions between mainstream and SF works – for example, adding the mainstream novel *Canal Dreams* to Chapter 2, *Whit* to Chapter 3, and *Dead Air* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* to Chapter 4. It is well-known that Banks and his close friend and associate, Ken McCleod, were attempting to write and publish SF before *The Wasp Factory* (1984) was published. The series of works set in the far future of The Culture, an intergalactic utopian society that debuted with the publication of *Consider Phlebas* (1987), receives the most attention in this work. Culture novels which quickly followed *Consider Phlebas* included *Use of Weapons, State of the Art,* and *Player of Games*. Chapter 2 addresses these novels. Banks also published four SF novels not set in the Culture universe: *Against A Dark Background* (1993), *Feersum Endjinn* (1994), discussed in Chapter 3, and *The Algebraist* (2004) and *Transition* (2009), discussed in Chapter 4.

In integrating the conceptual anchors between Banks's mainstream fiction, the 10 Culture novels, and other SF works, Kincaid pursues several themes found in Banks. Perhaps the most integrative one is the concept of the divided self and identity formation, which Kincaid links to the writings of Scottish psychologist R. D. Laing (*The Divided Self*, 1960). This conceptual body of work is sufficiently informative to be applicable as critical analyses for most of Banks's work and is introduced in the first chapter with the discussion of *The Wasp Factory*, *The Bridge,* and *Walking on Glass*. Kincaid returns to Banks's knowledge of and interest in Laing's work at many points in the next four chapters.

Kincaid's second overarching thematic pursuit is Banks's relationship to what has been identified as the Scottish Renaissance of the 1980s (although the official Scottish Renaissance is usually discussed in terms of the 1950s and Hugh MacDiarmid). Kincaid identifies, rather, the influence Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) on Banks's *The Bridge* (Kincaid 20). Kincaid's detailed discussion of the first writers and the framework of the Scottish Renaissance itself, which seemingly grew out of a general feeling of national helplessness in 1980s Scotland, are of special interest. Kincaid's ability to link some aspects of the Scottish Renaissance to Banks's SF productions is as equally useful as his enumerations of the Renaissance's influence on the 16 mainstream novels and the 13 culture novels completed during Banks's life – the last mainstream novel, *Quarry* (2013), being published soon after his death.

Also deserving of mention are Kincaid's discussions of Banks's close friend, Ken McLeod, and the revival and reformulation of the space opera, especially regarding the Culture and SF novels. Chapter One first mentions their interest in space opera in reference to Banks's first SF/Culture novel*, Consider Phlebus*, but Kincaid further investigates this influence in Chapter 5, an overview of Banks's impact on other writers. Traditional space opera usually concerns a central hero whose actions contribute to some grand, intergalactic scheme to save the university or humankind. Banks and McCleod take the focus off a singular hero and the genre's usual conservative politics to follow instead adventures of peripheral characters functioning within the grand scheme of things, such as the Idiran War, which hundreds of years after its end is still influencing the trajectory of the Culture. Kincaid notes, in discussing ironies in *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), a novel about a race named the Gzilt who plan to Sublime in the very near future, while "the culture,

though pretending to be peaceful, has actually been in a major war, the Idiran War, that a thousand years later continues to haunt it" (134). A number of subsequent authors acknowledge Banks's influence, such as Stephen Baxter, Paul J. McAuley, and China Miéville, though the "natural inheritor of Bank's mantle is probably Alastair Reynolds" (150). Space opera is important here because, in creating the Culture, Banks had wrested the subgenre away from traditional roots – for example, *Star Trek* (150).

The spiritual dimension to human culture also figures in many of Banks's novels, mainstream and SF alike. In discussing spirituality and religion for the mainstream novel *Whit* (1995), Kincaid argues that Banks's position as not anti-god but anti-religion (141). *Whit* takes place in contemporary Scotland. But this judgement on Banks's view of the human spiritual dimension applies equally to explorations in *Surface Detail,* one of the two Culture and two non-Culture novels in Banks's later career (Chapter 4). While *Whit* does not address the Culture at all, much less the potential for an entire race to reach an elevated spiritual dimension, it does explore many reasons for religion as an organised force in human culture, even when taken to what otherwise appear as absurd rituals.

Kincaid's discussion also returns to his earlier speculations on the Culture in Banks's fictional vision; the Culture as a whole civilisation(s) cannot quite decide to reach the next level of existence, called Subliming, a concept Banks introduces to explain the vestiges of ancient, no longer extant, cultures essential to the background of works such as *Excession* (1996). The Culture seems to reference the Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva who stays on the earth to guide others in the right direction. Kincaid seems to expect at some point that Banks should have progressed the Culture to the point of Subliming, having introduced the concept as early as the fifth work set in the Culture universe, *Excession* (1996). To Kincaid, this lack of spiritual progress over the hundreds of years of the Culture detracts from the artistry of Banks's last novels, *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). Kincaid notes about *Matter*, for example, that "this sense that the Culture is no longer the focus of the novel … is even more apparent in the next Iain M. Banks novel" (124). The next novel would be *Surface Detail*. It can be difficult to separate one's expectations from the author's own literary project, but this is one of Kincaid's criticisms with which I disagree. In my estimation, these last works expand Banks's spiritual vision and typify an ever-developing set of approaches to the wealth of spiritual questions about humanity's responsibility to each other found in Banks's earliest fiction, but certainly in his first Culture novels. They expand a central unifying observation that Banks never intended even his Culture novels to add up to a single vision or the Culture to represent a finished utopian construct.

Gender identity and Banks's skill with female characters figure in discussions of both mainstream and SF but are usually peripheral to Kincaid's analysis. In fact, the word "female" appears only seven times in Kincaid's book, a lacuna which does not reproduce the importance of gender and female characters in Banks. Kincaid first addresses gender confusion in *The Wasp Factory* through a protagonist who believes himself to have been castrated, but is actually biologically female, but Kincaid does not explore the implications much further, instead centralising Frank's use of individual ritual as his form of identity formation. In Chapter Two Kincaid picks up briefly on female characters but only by focusing on rape. "What may be the most significant about *Canal Dreams*, however, apart from being the first time Banks had used a female protagonist … is that it used rape as a trigger for action" (Kincaid 35).

But he then criticises rape as it recurs throughout Banks's corpus, coming back to it in Chapter 5. Kincaid mitigates critiques of rape in five Banks novels by saying, "Banks's female characters are at least as likely to be strong, competent, and effective as any his male characters" (145).

Kincaid's short *Iain M. Banks* is admirable in the scope and depth of its explorations of Banks's many writerly projects. He notes in Chapter 5: "What I have tried to do in this book is suggest how varied Banks's work is, how many different approaches he took in exploring the key themes and ideas in his novels, and how many different approaches there are for the reader in unearthing, analyzing, and enjoying those themes" (152). Kincaid's work should at least be read as a companion to Banks's fiction. For Culture enthusiasts, it can be enhanced with a reading of Simone Caroti's book. Notable also is the Banks bibliography provided by Kincaid, and his bibliography of critical works that typically rounds off any successful critical work.

Biography: Dr. Janice M. Bogstad is a professor in the McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, where she's served in various capacities since 1990, currently as Head of Technical Services & Collection Management. She teaches classes in English, Honors, and Women's Studies on SFF, Tolkien, and gender theory. She has published reviews, articles in reference books, and essays on Children's Literature, SFF, and English literature, as well as essays in collections on fantastic fiction. Bogstad has also co-edited *Picturing Tolkien* with Philip E. Kaveny (2011).