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Dweller Diaspora in Iain M. Banks' *The Algebraist*

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The twentieth century science fiction was enriched, made magnificent and took the interest of the readers to the epoch with the rise of the most imaginative, belligerent and brilliant Scottish writer Iain M. Banks who took the science fiction to a great height and created tremendous curiosity among the readers about his writing. Iain Banks's novels cover almost all parts of human life and world. Though he shows the darker side of the future world, he is hopeful about the positive fine future world. The film-makers and broadcasters also have focused their attention on his novels. *The Algebraist*, a science fiction novel by Scottish writer Iain M. Banks, first appeared in print in 2004. The novel takes place in 4034 A.D. With the assistance of other species, humans have spread across the galaxy, which is largely ruled by the Mercatoria, a complex feudal hierarchy, with a religious zeal to rid the galaxy of artificial intelligences, which were blamed for a previous war. In center-stage Iain Banks portrays the human Fassin Taak, a Slow Seer at the Court of the Nasqueron Dwellers. Taak's hunt for the Transform takes him on a dizzying journey, partly through the Dweller wormhole network itself. Banks lays out and layers his presentation of a civilized universe with consummate skill. One of the true pleasures of reading space opera is the reader's slowly unfolding understanding of the universe created by the author.

Iain M. Banks: A Versatile Luminary

Born on 16th February 1954 in Dunfermline, Fife, Iain Banks was educated at the Sterling University where he read English literature, Philosophy and Psychology. He moved to London and lived in the south of England until 1988, then returned to Fife where he lives now. Iain Banks is a very prominent British author who has good elegance for imaginative writing. He is an illustrious unique writer of both the literary or mainstream fiction and science fiction. Iain Banks has been named among the British literary luminaries in the (London) *Times*' list of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945, on 5th January 2008.

Iain Banks's *The Crow Road* was adapted successfully by BBC for the telecast into a four-part series and *Espedair Street* was produced as a BBC Radio 4-series for which Iain Banks wrote accompanying music and lyrics. He has written short stories lyrics as well. Banks studied English, philosophy and psychology at the University of Sterling. After attending the University of Sterling, Banks moved to London and lived in the south of England until 1988 when he returned to Scotland, living in Edinburgh and then Fife. Iain Banks wrote his novels in a wide range of variety such as: Mainstream fiction, Science Fiction, Short Fiction and his other Contributory Works.

Mainstream fiction:

Iain Banks writes in two different streams of literature: mainstream fiction and science fiction. He writes mainstream fiction under the name Iain Banks, and science fiction as Iain M. Banks,

including the initial of his adopted middle name Menzies. Iain Banks wrote thirteen novels in mainstream fiction. He started his career with mainstream fiction when he released his first novel *The Wasp Factory* in 1984, a gothic horror story which brought him widespread public attention and is still actively discussed to this day. And then he went on writing further novels in quick succession. These novels are *Walking on Glass* (1985), one of the best books according to Iain Banks, *The Bridge* (1986), *Espedair Street* (1987) which was adapted for BBC radio in 1998, and it was directed by Dave Bachelor, *Canal Dreams* (1989), *The Crow Road* (1992) which also was adapted for BBC TV in 1996, and was directed by Gavin Millar, *Complicity* (1993) was filmed in 2000, retitled as *Retribution* for its US DVD/ video release, *Whit* (1995), *A Song of Stone* (1997), *The Business* (1999), *Dead Air* (2002), *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* (2007), and *Stone mouth* (2012). Iain Banks wrote these novels under the name Iain Banks.

Science Fiction:

Iain Banks started his career in science fiction in 1984 with his first immensely unbeaten novel *Consider Phlebas* (1987). And then he went on writing the novels in the science fiction stream in immediate succession one after another. The novels he wrote in this category are: His science fiction is: *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Against a Dark Background* (1993), *Feersum Endjinn* (1994), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *The Algebraist* (2004), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). Iain Banks wrote all these novels under the name Iain M. Banks.

Short Fiction:

His Short fiction collections are *The State of Art* (1991) and *The Spheres* (Birmingham Science Fiction Group, 2010). *The State of Art* includes three short works set in the Culture universe. It also includes works of fiction more characteristic of Banks's writing published as Iain Banks. *The Spheres* includes 'The Spheres', excised from the original draft of *Transition*; and 'The Secret Courtyard', excised from *Matter*. His *Raw Spirit* (2003) is a travelogue of Scotland and its whisky distilleries.

Other Contributory Publications:

Iain Banks has written a number of introductions for works by other writers including:

Viriconium (1988) by M. John Harrison, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright: Book 3, Gotterdammerung* (1989) by Bryan Talbot, *The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook Three* (1990) edited by David S. Garnett, *The Human Front* (2001) by Ken MacLeod. Banks has contributed to a number of publications, including: *New Writing Scotland* (1983). A poem of Banks's called *041*, the title of which comes from the old subscriber trunk dialing code for Glasgow, *The Edinburgh Pub Guide* (1989) edited by James Bethell. Banks has also had a number of letters published in the magazine, for example, one on creationism in November 2005, *The Observer* (7 February 1999), A review of the *Tower Restaurant on the top floor at the Museum of Scotland* in the Life magazine section. *A Sense of Belonging to Scotland* (2002), edited by Andy Hall. Banks contributed a few paragraphs to this book about the "favourite places of Scottish celebrities".

Iain Banks has been a semi-regular music reviewer for Marc Riley's Rocket Science radio show on BBC Radio 6 Music. He was the subject of a *South Bank Show* television programme broadcast on 16 November 1997, subtitled *The Strange Worlds of Iain Banks*, which concentrated on his mainstream work. *The Curse of Iain Banks*, a play written by Maxton

Walker, was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe in 1999, with Banks contributing as a voice on tape. He has appeared on the BBC's political discussion television programme *Question Time*.

In 2006 Banks captained a team of writers to victory in a special series of *University Challenge* on BBC Two, beating a team of actors 185-105 (1 January 2006), and then the 'news' team 190-45 in the final (2 January 2006). He also won an edition of *Celebrity Mastermind*, taking "Malt whisky & the distilleries of Scotland" as his specialist subject on BBC One on 2 January 2006. On 21 May 2011, Banks featured on the BBC Radio 4 programme 'Saturday Live' on which he chose his 'inheritance tracks': a piece of music he had 'inherited' and one he would want to pass on.

The Algebraist

The novel *The Algebraist* centres on Fassin Taak, a researcher studying, with their kind permission, the inhabitants of a gas planet called the Nasqueron Dwellers. On their planet is a clue that could unlock the universe. Fassin is sent to find it amid a looming war. But most of the Dwellers would rather let sleeping dogs lie, and Fassin has to negotiate a minefield of interests and dangers in his search for the key that could open up a new world.

Fassin Taak, the protagonist of the novel, looking forward to a life of quiet scholarship, is astonished to be drafted into one of the Mercatoria's religio-military orders. It turns out that in a previous research expedition to the Dweller-inhabited gas-giant Nasqueron, he inadvertently uncovered a book containing information about the legendary "Dweller List" of coordinates for their own private systems of wormholes. However, the Dweller List is only a list of star systems. Portals are relatively small and can be anywhere within a system so long as it is a point of zero net gravitational attraction, such as a Lagrange point. The list is useless without a certain mathematical transform needed to give the exact location of the portals. Taak must go on a further expedition to Nasqueron in order to find the Transform.

Fassin Taak: A Slow Seer

In center-stage Banks portrays the human Fassin Taak, a Slow Seer at the Court of the Nasqueron Dwellers. The Beyonders, a large fleet of space marauders originating on the fringes of the galaxy, have cut the system of Nasqueron's star (Ulubis) off from the rest of Mercatoria civilization by destroying its portal (the only means of faster than light travel), and the local Mercatoria adherents await the delivery of a wormhole connection from a neighboring system via sub-light speed travel.

Taak's hunt for the Transform takes him on a dizzying journey, partly through the Dweller wormhole network itself. In a back story, it is revealed that he has been out of sympathy with the Mercatoria for some time, particularly over their treatment of artificial intelligences, and has in fact been a Beyonder agent. It is also revealed that the Dwellers have been harbouring artificial intelligences from Mercatoria persecution.

Taak returns from his journey with his memory partly erased. However, he is still able to piece together the secret from the remaining clues: every massive body has a region of zero net gravitational attraction at its exact center. The Dwellers have hidden wormhole portals in the cores of all their occupied planets, and the Transform was never necessary. However, it remains unclear whether the Dwellers will give the necessary cooperation in allowing other species access to their network, now that the secret is out. The novel ends with Taak, having left Ulubis and joined the Beyonders, promising "all will be free".

The Dweller Diaspora

As Iain M. Banks describes the Dwellers are:

The civilization which comprised the Dwellers of Nasqueron, with all their attendant fellow flora and fauna, itself formed but one microscopic fragment of the Dweller Diaspora, the galaxy-spanning meta-civilization (some would say post-civilization) which, as far as anyone could tell, preceded all other empires, cultures, diasporas, civilizations, federations, consocia, fellowships, unities, leagues, confederacies, affilia and organizations of like or unlike beings in general.

The Dwellers, in other words, had been around for most of the life of the galaxy. This made them at least unusual and possibly unique. It also made them, if they were approached with due deference and care, and treated with respect and patience, a precious resource. Because they had good memories and even better libraries. Or at least they had retentive memories, and very large libraries. (17-18)

The Dwellers, an advanced and ancient civilization of non-humanoids who inhabit gas giants, lead an almost anarchic existence based on kudos, and inhabit the majority of gas-giant planets in the galaxy. They are the only major species outside the control of the Mercatoria, being rumoured to possess devastating defensive weaponry. Dweller society, which tries not to get involved with "Quick" i.e. all species of sentient beings who experience life at around the speed human beings experience it, in contrast to "Slow" species such as themselves, who experience life at a much slower temporal rate. Dweller individuals live for millions of years, and the species has existed for billions of years, long before the foundation of the Mercatoria. Slow Seers like Taak are a dynasty of researchers who attempt to glean information from the Dwellers' vast but disorganized libraries of knowledge, artificially slowing their metabolisms to better communicate with them.

A tyrannical warlord, the Archimandrite Luseferous of the Starveling Cult, in loose alliance with the Beyonders, sets out to invade the Ulubis system from the Cluster Epiphany Five Disconnect, also aiming to possess the secrets of the Dweller portals. A Mercatoria counter-attack fleet hurries to defend Ulubis against the Starveling Cult ships and their Beyonder allies. However, both fleets are forced to travel at sub light speeds, leaving the inhabitants of the Ulubis system anxiously wondering which will arrive first.

The Beyonder Starveling forces arrive and easily overwhelm Ulubis's native defences. However, they discover to their dismay that the counter-attack force is arriving much sooner than predicted, and is superior. The Beyonder factions despair of locating Taak and the secret in the time available before the recapture of Ulubis, and retreat. The Starvelings under Luseferous remain. He makes a last-ditch attempt to force the Dwellers to yield up Taak, threatening them with antimatter weapons. The Dwellers respond with devastating blows on his fleet. Luseferous flees under Mercatoria pursuit.

Curious Narrative of the Novel

The central narrative follows a resourceful, sensitive and intelligent hero, Fassin Taak, on a mission to discover long-lost knowledge that will, if found, reshape the entire eco-political structure of the known universe. Fassin is a reluctant participant in an intelligence operation which goes wrong almost from the start, placing him at the mercy of the Dwellers. These are a Slow species whose lives span billions of years and they are notoriously uninterested in the

affairs of the Quick - like humans whose entire existence may rise, flourish and fall in less time than it takes a Dweller to have a nap. In a small, intimate storyline involving three of Fassin's friends, in which a woman, convinced that her ex-boyfriend is a murderer and rapist, obsesses over her conviction for many years, losing a lifetime in the process.

About *The Algebraist* A.R. Davis says in his review "Every nook and cranny of the galaxy is full of life, but this story deals mostly with a human scholar of Dwellers, the life forms that populate gas giants. His quest is to search for a possibly mythical text, The Algebraist, which is "all about mathematics, navigation as a metaphor, duty, love, longing, honour, long voyages home ... that sort of stuff." Banks' writing style is as dense and detailed as befits such a complex universe. His sentences extend to paragraphs; his lists can't stop at two or three examples but invariably explode to ten or twelve descriptors. There is sex, there is violence, there is politics, there is humor, but there is no Algebra!"

However, there are a few scatterings of mathematics in Fassin's head which are indicated when Fassin is asleep:

He fell asleep, the routines running on in front of him, and dreamed of streams of numbers, liquid algebra full of equations and meanings that started to make sense and then-just tried to study them and understand them-broke up and wriggled away, flickering to chaos "It looked like algebra." What does algebra look like? Especially an alien algebra? (389)

Banks quickly offers up some fascinating ideas and runs with them in 'The Algebraist'. The Dwellers, who experience time at a slower rate than humans and other races throughout the galaxy, are a fascinating thought experiment. Banks knows when to zoom in and knows when to pan out. He goes from microscopic to telescopic as the situation demands. Much science fiction uses the devices of mystery, carefully holding back information from the reader to keep them guessing as to the true nature of things. Banks does this so well, one suspects that he might have a fantastic mystery novel out there somewhere. The plot grips the reader in the opening and moves at a steady, entertaining clip.

But where Banks really shines is in his ability to evoke subtle, satiric swipes at the world we know within the universe he creates. Much of this is down to great characters and witty dialogue. From their description -- ancient and slow -- one might suspect that reading about the Dwellers could be a tedious business. Banks is practically antic as Fassin Taak speaks with the ancient creatures, who offer some of the best space slapstick of the 'Hitchiker's Guide'. But it's also utterly unlike the more typical broad satire readers are used to in science fiction. His humor comes out of character and dialogue, the satire out of his conceptual societal relationships and the dialogue. Readers who pick a space opera only to escape will find that being reminded of the Real World by a master of science fiction space opera can indeed be a pleasant experience.

Banks doesn't stint on the awe and wonder however, nor does he hold back from offering full-scale space battles that have yet another twist of imagination and invention. It's not the word count that's the problem, although the glut of information dilutes the emotional impact of some of the dramatic turns, but that the author's personality - cheery, optimistic, and absurd-aware - is so strong it drowns out chances for genuine pathos. Even in the face of some truly awful atrocities the reader remains aware that events are completely subject to the cozy demands of the narrative, not the other way around.

Much high-caliber espionage, imaginative intellectualizing and mega-ordinance goes off in spectacular fashion during Fassin's travails. So big, so good - Banks even takes on the opportunities to examine the humane and not so humane angles of his characters, revealing their self-deceptions, weakness and complexity. The set-pieces in this novel are exciting, visually grand and quite inventive. In an interview in 2004 Banks stated that "It probably could become a trilogy, but for now it's a standalone novel." It was nominated for a Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2005. In 2011, the novel also was short-listed for the NPR Top-100 Science Fiction, Fantasy Titles.

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