

The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction



Edward Carmien

Simone Caroti. *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction*. McFarland, 2015. Paperback. 252pp. \$29.95. ISBN 9780786494477.

SIMONE Caroti memorializes Iain M. Banks in her dedication to *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction*. “To the Memory of Iain Menzies Banks (1954-2013). Thank you for everything, Sir.” As Banks fell ill and passed away unexpectedly, Caroti did not intend for her book to bear this inscription, but this text serves as an admirable cenotaph to Banks, taken from us with books unwritten and years un-lived. In its eight chapters (and preface, introduction, conclusion, chapter notes, bibliography and index) Caroti presents what she promises: a critical introduction to this important writer’s Culture series.

Like Caroti, I remember my first encounter with Iain M. Banks, if less clearly. Thirty years ago, as a graduate student in northwestern Ohio, I cracked open the first of the Culture novels, *Consider Phlebas* (1987). Caroti fell harder for Banks and his work than I did, for while I was immediately entranced by his take on space opera and aware something special was afoot in the field, Caroti decided upon her first reading of Banks to write a book. This is just that book.

Caroti comprehensively surveys the dual nature of Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks. Banks, who published novels without obvious SF content, added the ‘M’ when he published the first of the Culture series. By presenting Banks as an author who transgresses traditional categories, Caroti effectively introduces us to the narrow focus of her critical introduction. Here and elsewhere she demonstrates an excellent grasp of the existing work on Banks, especially that by John Clute, and on the directly related field of Utopian studies, the primary critical instrument she brings to bear on the Culture series.

“1. Beginnings” surveys Banks’ early life and speculates about his drive to write. Caroti shows the Culture series, despite not the first of Banks’ work to appear in print, were written early in his writing career. Having found success with *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Banks rewrote and refined the early Culture novels. To the outside world, Banks’ science fiction seemed a new turn for the author. Caroti shows the centrality of the Culture as a created entity, Banks’ fictional expression of worldview that so distinguishes his work from American space opera.

Caroti then addresses the individual works of the Culture series, starting with *Consider Phlebas* and how it helped redefine the space opera genre. She claims Banks “did reclaim the

moral high ground for the left, and he did demystify the garish glamour of space opera...he also rejuvenated the entire subgenre..." (44). She later acknowledges that other authors had started this process before *Consider Phlebas* saw print. Caroti describes the critical context that shaped the novel as well as the novel's impact on the sub-genre.

In publication order the rest of the Culture series receives the same thorough treatment, from *The Player of Games* in Chapter 3 to the double-header of Chapter 4: *The State of the Art* and *Use of Weapons*, linked by the utopian agent Diziet Sma, an important figure in the Culture novels and in Banks' expression of the utopian ideal. For while the people of the Culture are utopian, they have an activist branch called Contact, and a very activist group that handle Special Circumstances, or SC for short.

SC interferes. The claim is, backed by the sentient super-minds of the Culture and their statistics, that interference helps and that more good comes from their dirty deeds than would result from doing nothing. Those raised in a utopia, Banks argues throughout his Culture novels, are singularly unsuited to espionage dirty-tricks. Illustrating Diziet Sma's role as a recruiter of barbarian, non-utopian outsiders allows Caroti to observe Sma is "of the Culture, yes, but she's also a citizen of the fringe, the place where utopia meets its twin, where the morally correct choice reshapes itself after every iteration..." (104). Banks presents interference as utopian, which as one might imagine requires a singular narrative rhetoric and as it happens one of the key features of the Culture series.

Banks paused in his publication of the Culture series. The first set were rewrites of manuscripts he'd written before he broke in to the business with a "mimetic" text, *The Wasp Factory*. Prior to *Excession* (1996), addressed in Chapter 5, Banks took a six-year break in his Culture series production. It is here Caroti more fully addresses the issue of "The Culture as a Critical Utopia," the chapter's subtitle. It is here she most fully engages a critical discussion; calling some critics to task and valorizing others in how they have addressed (or failed to address) Banks and his Culture series.

Chapters 6 and 7 return to more novel-centric discussion. Caroti paints *Excession* and *Inversion* (1998) as directional mirrors, one up and out, the other down and in, and she provides what a reader has come to expect in thoroughness and critical perspective as she does so. The following chapter focuses upon *Look to Windward* (2000), a title that references the same Eliot poem as *Consider Phlebas*. This novel's publication date, subject matter, and the 9/11 attacks in the United States coincide closely enough to enable interesting commentary alongside Caroti's continuing and highly effective analysis of the series in the context of critical utopia. Titled "The Encroachment of Reality," this chapter ties to an additional layer of material, while remaining introductory in nature.

The bookending of Eliot quotes might have served Banks as signposts where the Culture

series begins and ends, but after a break of some years he produced three more novels: *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). Discussion of these final Culture novels rounds out the book's eighth chapter, with each receiving a thorough going-over that both contextualizes them and analyzes content. If a reader of the Culture series ever wondered why it never devolved into a "more of the same" exercise of mere formula, the answer is here: Banks always had literary purpose, and he did not repeat that purpose, or ask the same question twice. This made for readers always hankering for the next "M." novel frustrating waits--once of six years, once of eight--but very rewarding reads.

For the critic, new or otherwise, *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks* serves as an excellent foundation, an introduction indeed. From it one finds numerous ways to travel further into not just utopian studies, but space opera. Very few readers of Banks' Culture novels will leave without some new insight.

Simone Caroti's smoothly written, thoroughly researched and documented book serves as a monument to Banks and his Culture series. As a cenotaph it does not contain the mortal remains of Iain M. Banks, but expresses critical appreciation of his work, of the Culture, of artistic transgression that livens and renews a genre and subgenre. I recommend it both as a resource on Banks and as a model for others to follow, should they be taken, upon reading an author for the first time, with the urge to write a book.