



The Ambiguous Utopia of Iain M. Banks

Alan Jacobs

CNN: Would you like to live in the Culture?

Iain M. Banks: Good grief yes, heck, yeah, oh it's my secular heaven.... Yes, I would, absolutely. Again it comes down to wish fulfillment. I haven't done a study and taken lots of replies across a cross-section of humanity to find out what would be their personal utopia. It's mine, I thought of it, and I'm going home with it—absolutely, it's great.

The Wikipedia pages devoted to the Culture, a fictional civilization created by the Scottish writer Iain M. Banks, are fabulously extensive. The main article is about nine thousand words long, and contains links to more than thirty other pages that provide more detail on the various aspects of Banks's imaginary world. (I would not be at all surprised if Banks himself, in the writing of Culture novels, consulted Wikipedia to ensure consistency with his previous work.)

For purposes of comparison, it might be noted that the main page on Jane Austen is a little shorter and with fewer links to other Austen-related pages. Yet there are certainly far fewer readers of Iain M. Banks than of Jane Austen. How are we to account for this discrepancy?

We had best begin by doing a better job of identifying Iain M. Banks. This is one of the two names under which the fifty-five-year-old Scotsman writes, the other being Iain Banks. A subtle difference to be sure, but one which the author maintains consistently: approximately half of his twenty-plus novels are science fiction, and these are published with the middle initial; the other half are, roughly speaking, realistic novels in contemporary settings, dotted with various proportions of horror, humor, and satire, and these are published uninitialized. He has also written, lyrically, about whiskey in *Raw Spirit: In Search of the Perfect Dram* (2003).

Among his science fiction novels, seven (plus a handful of short stories) deal with the Culture. The Culture itself is not strictly speaking a world but rather a civilization within an imagined universe. Banks envisions a number of civilizations in our galaxy having the technological sophistication to cross vast tracts of space for purposes of colonization, exploitation, war—the usual imperial activities—though some are insular and xenophobic and resist contact with other peoples. (Some have even

found a way to opt out of the physical universe altogether: these are called the Sublimed.) The Culture is just one among these many civilizations.

The detail with which Banks has imagined these societies—seeing them as different paths by which evolution might produce highly intelligent life—and the care with which he has thought through their possible relations with the Culture help to build the reader's sense of a substantial fictional world. But most of Banks's world-building energies

THE CULTURE

Iain M. Banks has written six novels explicitly about the Culture, as well as one novel that *may* involve the Culture. In addition, a book of his short stories includes a handful about the Culture, plus an essay called "A Few Notes on the Culture." The editions listed below are the paperbacks most readily available in the United States; in the United Kingdom, the entire series is available from Orbit.

Novels About the Culture:

Consider Phlebas (1987)
Orbit ~ 514 pp. ~ \$12.99

Excession (1996)
Spectra ~ 512 pp. ~ \$7.99

The Player of Games (1988)
Orbit ~ 391 pp. ~ \$12.99

Look to Windward (2000)
Out of print in the U.S.

Use of Weapons (1990)
Orbit ~ 512 pp. ~ \$12.99

Matter (2008)
Orbit ~ 624 pp. ~ \$14.99

Possibly About the Culture:

Inversions (1998)
Pocket ~ 415 pp. ~ \$22.95

Short Stories:

The State of the Art (2001)
Night Shade ~ 188 pp. ~ \$14.95



have gone into designing the Culture itself: its wildly varying geographies, its language, its social order, its biotechnologically enhanced citizens. The intricacy of these designs is what furnishes all those Wikipedia pages.

World-building writers do what they do in part from sheer love of invention. But it is in the nature of world-builders to be philosophers as well. That is, the best of what Tolkien called “secondary worlds” are extended commentaries on and critiques of *this* world: they are mirrors cunningly placed so we can see the back of our universe—aspects of our being that are normally hidden from us. Every major secondary world is to some degree polemical, ideological.

The philosophy of Banks’s Culture is that of Liberalism—Liberalism writ not just large but as large as possible. The Culture is, as one commentator has written, a “liberal Utopia”; but like all Utopias, it contains its dark places and puzzles, and perhaps even the seeds of its own critique. However, it is impossible to understand either the Culture’s philosophy or its limitations without first understanding the technology that makes the Culture possible: the technology of the Minds.

Science Fiction Weekly: Excession is particularly popular [among your novels] because of its copious detail concerning the Ships and Minds of

the Culture, its great AIs: their outrageous names, their dangerous senses of humor. Is this what gods would actually be like?

Banks: *If we’re lucky.*

Minds are artificial intelligences of almost infinite scope and power, and they govern the worlds in which inhabitants of the Culture live. A few of these worlds are planets, but far more often Culture citizens live on Orbitals—vast rings, each “like a god’s bracelet,” that orbit stars and rotate in order to produce appropriate gravity—and on great interstellar ships. (Tens of millions of people may live on a ship; tens of billions on an Orbital.) The Mind of the ship or Orbital controls its every function and monitors every inhabitant to ensure contentment. The Minds are fully sentient and have their own personalities; they manifest themselves to Culture citizens through android avatars and through “terminals”: everyone has a terminal at all times, which he or she can use to ask questions, place orders, give information, relay messages, and so on. Citizens can tell the Minds to leave them alone, to cease monitoring their conversations, and it appears that the Minds do so, at least temporarily; there are no HAL 9000s in Banks’s fictional world—no Mind ever harms a person, though in one strange case in *Look to Windward* (2000), a Mind decides to destroy itself. But it only does so after ensuring that the

Orbital it governs is taken care of by its chosen successor.

It is through the work of the Minds—in their overwhelming resourcefulness and, perhaps, wisdom—that the Culture possesses its most interesting feature: it is what Banks has called a “post-scarcity” society, in which everyone has everything he or she wants. A Culture citizen can live in any environment, under any climate, in any kind of dwelling, and can wear any kind of clothes and own any imaginable objects. Sexual prowess and pleasure are ensured by genetic modification and precisely infused drugs: glands secrete at the citizens’ commands to produce whatever mood or energy is needed. The Culture has no laws, and nothing that we would call a government. All power remains in the hands of the omnipotent and omnibenevolent Minds. As Banks himself has written, “Briefly, nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited.”

In *The Player of Games* (1988), an outsider to the Culture named Hamin wonders, “Didn’t the Culture forbid *anything*?”

Gurgeh [the novel’s protagonist] attempted to explain there were no written laws, but almost no crime anyway. There was the occasional crime of passion (as Hamin chose to call it), but little else. It was difficult to get away with anything anyway, when everybody had a terminal, but there were very few motives left, too.

Suppose you murder someone, Gurgeh continues: you will then be “slap-droned,” which means that a drone—a small sentient robot, connected to the Mind—“follows you around and makes sure you never do it again.” And since the drone’s constant presence reminds people of what you’ve done, you “don’t get invited to too many parties,” which means “social death.” In the Culture “social death” is the death that really counts, since people otherwise tend to live as long as they want to.

Banks acknowledges that—among people, drones, and even Minds—there will occasionally be resistance to the Culture’s way of doing things, but he emphasizes that these cases will be extremely rare. The Culture offers every possible distraction to the troubled mind, and of course everyone’s glands secrete the proper mood at will. It’s difficult under such circumstances for rage and resentment to become habitual.

Perhaps more important even than these forces is the power of Marain. Marain is the language of the Culture, a synthetic language invented by Minds to shape the consciousness of its users in appropriate ways. In *The Player of Games* a drone notices significant changes in Gurgeh’s personality when, instead of speaking Marain, he spends almost all his time speaking the language of a less sophisticated and morally upright people, the Azad. A little later in the book Gurgeh realizes

that he is playing the favored game of that people, also called Azad—an almost unimaginably complex game of quasi-militaristic strategy, sort of like Risk in several dimensions—“as the Culture,” that is, by setting up his game board according to a model of non-hierarchical and highly distributed authority. But he begins to play this way only after he spends some time speaking Marain. (Banks has worked out some of the key features of Marain, especially its orthography, which gives people who like making Wikipedia pages still more to do.)

Language, entertainment, hormones—all of these resources are overseen by the Minds, who in general take an ironic attitude towards their own outrageous power. We see this especially in one of the most treasured features of Banks’s universe, the self-naming of the Minds that control ships—that, in a sense, *are* the ships. Every reader of Banks will have favorite ship names; here are some of mine: *Prosthetic Conscience*; *No More Mister Nice Guy*; *So Much for Subtlety*; *Of Course I Still Love You*; *Attitude Adjuster*; *Lightly Seared on the Reality Grill*; *I Blame the Parents*; *You’ll Clean That Up Before You Leave*; *Experiencing a Significant Gravitas Shortfall*.

The last is one of a series, apparently developed in response to the comment by some figure from another civilization that the Minds, given their vast responsibilities, shouldn’t be so frivolous in their self-naming. But *are*

the names so frivolous? There’s something of the iron-fist-in-the-velvet-glove about many of them. The Minds may be perfectly benevolent to the Culture’s citizens. But not everyone in the galaxy belongs to the Culture. And that’s where Contact comes in.

I’m not convinced that humanity is capable of becoming the Culture because I think people in the Culture are just too nice—altering their genetic inheritance to make themselves relatively sane and rational and not the genocidal, murdering bastards that we seem to be half the time.

—Banks to *Wired magazine* (1996)

Contact is the organization within the Culture that deals with everything and everyone that is *not* the Culture. There is a famous short story by Ursula K. Le Guin called “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” in which she imagines a perfect society whose perfection is contingent upon the suffering of a single child locked in a closet and deprived of every comfort. Contact—more specifically, the wing of Contact called Special Circumstances—is Banks’s version of that closet.

(Though Le Guin had forgotten it when she wrote her story, there is an anticipation of her conceit in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, when Ivan asks his brother Alyosha whether he would accept a world that is perfectly harmonious except for the sufferings of one innocent child.

One might also cite in this context a bitter ongoing joke in Balzac's *Père Goriot*: early in the novel the young social climber Eugène de Rastignac is asked—quite hypothetically—whether he would cause an elderly “Chinese Mandarin” to die if by that death he could purchase social success. Then, periodically and as his fortunes wax and wane, Eugène assesses the health of his imaginary Mandarin. At times the poor fellow seems to be very near his last breath.)

Consider this conversation from *Use of Weapons* (1990) between Diziet Sma, a Special Circumstances agent, and Cheradenine Zakalwe, a man who is being adopted, as it were, into the Culture. “The life here seems... idyllic,” Zakalwe says at one point. Everyone has told him that Special Circumstances is doing necessary work for the Culture; but, he says, “I get suspicious when everyone agrees about something.” What if Special Circumstances really isn't “fighting the good fight”? Sma replies,

“We think we're right; we even think we can prove it, but we can never be sure; there are always arguments against us. There is no certainty; least of all in Special Circumstances, where the rules are different.”

“I thought the rules were meant to be the same for everybody.”

“They are. But in Special Circumstances we deal in the moral

equivalent of black holes, where the normal laws—the rules of right and wrong that people imagine apply everywhere else in the universe—break down; beyond those metaphysical event horizons, there exist... special circumstances.” She smiled. “That's us. That's our territory; our domain.”

“To some people,” he said, “that might sound like just a good excuse for bad behavior.”

Sma shrugged. “And perhaps they would be right. Maybe that is all it is... But if nothing else, at least we need an excuse; think how many people need none at all.”

The liberal conscience at its self-soothing work!

In the one Culture story that refers to our planet, “The State of the Art,” Sma is among a group of Contact representatives who visit Earth in the year 1977. After a period of careful investigation, Sma argues—in the official report that constitutes most of the story—that the Culture needs to intervene to clean up the mess that human beings are making of our world. Were such an intervention to take place, Special Circumstances would spearhead it. However, one of her colleagues finds the *Star Trek* television series almost the only redeeming feature of Earth civilization and recommends that the whole planet be destroyed. Special Circumstances would handle that as well.

The role of Special Circumstances, then, is to implement the Culture Minds' decisions about how to handle other sentient beings, and those decisions are shaped overwhelmingly by a single criterion: How close is a given civilization to the values and priorities of the Culture itself? If it is intransigently opposed to those values and priorities then perhaps it had best be destroyed before it causes significant mischief—which is what happens to the Idirans, a civilization whose war with the Culture is the primary context for the first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas* (1987). Here we have a conflict in which all wings of Contact play a role because of the scale of the problem. In order to prevent this fanatically religious society from imposing its repressive ideals on other parts of the cosmos, the Culture virtually destroys the whole Idiran culture and a great deal else, including fifty-three planets and half a dozen stars.

But that is the worst-case scenario. If a civilization reached by Contact contains even a few hopeful seeds, then that world can become a candidate for *mentoring*—whether it likes it or not.

Mentoring—in this frankly, bluntly paternalistic version—is the primary theme of *Matter* (2008), the most recent Culture novel. It is not one of Banks's better efforts, largely because it is overloaded with personnel, but it is built on the wonderful conceit that the civilization being

Contacted is more or less like that of *The Lord of the Rings* or George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series: what we would call a “medieval” warrior society. The contrast between these fierce men (and sometimes fiercer women) and the urbane hyper-technologized Culture agents is a delightful one. But, while the plot hinges on the possibility that the whole world will be destroyed, if it does survive there's really no question about what will happen to the local civilization: it will become Cultured. When the Culture decides to mentor you you will be mentored quite thoroughly, even (or especially) if you're the kind of society that fans of epic fantasy nostalgically tend to long for. *So Much for Subtlety* indeed.

So it turns out that the closest analogue we have to the Culture's foreign policy is that of the United States in the recent Bush administration: just as President Bush wanted to spread the good news of American democracy to the rest of the world, and was willing to put some force behind that benevolent imperative, so too the Culture. The Culture is neo-conservatism on the greatest imaginable scale. This may seem more than a bit self-contradictory on Banks's part, given his politics: as he writes, digressively, in his book on whiskey,

I look at Dubya and just see...
a grotesquely under-qualified-
for-practically-anything daddy's
boy who's had to be greased into

every squalid position he's ever held in his miserable existence who might finally be starting to wake up to the idea that if the most powerful nation on Earth—like, ever, dude—can put somebody like him in power, all may not be well with the world.

But there's no necessary inconsistency. President Bush—doubtless Banks will love this point—is not a Mind; and the American model of democracy is not that of the Culture. The Culture, Banks seems to think, *deserves* to be expanded throughout the known universe, and the Minds can presumably be relied on to manage that expansion in the best possible way.

But “best possible” is not perfect, because the universe is not perfect—or, more to the point, even the most powerful civilizations within it are deeply flawed. And so when they come within the scope of the Culture's power, sometimes there's nothing for the Minds to say but *No More Mister Nice Guy* and *Of Course I Still Love You*. As yet another Culture ship tells us, *It's Character Forming*. Banks has yet to mention Culture ships called *It's In Your Own Best Interest* or *We're Doing This For Your Own Good* or *This Will Hurt Me More Than It Will Hurt You*, but surely they're out there.

And maybe all this is true. Sometimes paternal figures—paternal cultures, even?—really *do* take action

that subordinate figures dislike but that are for the best. Given the wisdom of the Culture's Minds, don't they, better than any of the rest of us, know what's in our own best interest? Perhaps. But Banks, for all his warm praise for the Culture, occasionally plants a seed of doubt.

Consider the Culture's relations with a civilization called the Chelgrians. (The history is told as part of the backstory to *Look to Windward*.) The Chelgrians evolved on their home world from fierce predators and still retain predatory appearance and, to some degree, personality. Their social order was an exceptionally strict caste-based one, and when Contact began clandestinely observing them, its Minds decided that this structure was a near-absolute impediment to the Chelgrians' “development”—and so Contact surreptitiously intervened to create a movement devoted to wholesale cultural reconstruction along more liberal and egalitarian lines. The results were a civil war in which billions of Chelgrians died, which in turn led the Culture to own up to its behind-the-scenes manipulations.

Why was the wisdom of the Culture's Minds not sufficient to foresee this mess? No explanation is given. Indeed, the Minds of Special Circumstances are surprised fairly often in these novels—in *The Player of Games* they seem to realize from the start that they don't have the political situation on Azad figured

out. There are only two inferences I can make here: either Banks is being careless or he is suggesting that even an intelligence capable of handling the everyday affairs of an Orbital containing thirty billion people is *still* not smart enough to figure out what sentient beings will do in response to conflict. One hopes the latter is the right inference; but if it is, it suggests that the power of the Minds is largely the power of control: they can predict and deal successfully with the behavior of those who speak their language and use their drugs, but have limited ability to manipulate others.

And there's a still more disturbing event at the end of *Look to Windward*. The most repulsive character in that book is a Chelgrian, a kind of hit man working for the Chelgrian opposition to the Culture. At the end of the book the Culture sends its own assassin—an artificial but at least partly sentient “terror weapon,” which temporarily takes the shape of a female Chelgrian and is therefore referred to as “she”—to track him down. When the assassin finds the Chelgrian she murders him, and does so in a way that is astonishingly gruesome. Banks describes this killing in vivid detail, but never offers a *reason* for the assassin to torture her victim and to stay “for a while” to observe his dead body in the ocean, as he makes a point of saying she does. There's no one else around, no one even to know how

the Chelgrian has been killed—no one to be terrorized by the terror weapon. Again, Banks could just be nodding here, and enjoying himself to a troubling degree, but he's an awfully smart writer. Could it be that there is something less than utterly benevolent in the Culture's paternalism? Could it be that in the peculiar world of Special Circumstances something has gone wrong? What happens when Minds of near-infinite power become malicious, sadistic? It doesn't bear thinking of.

Philosophically, the Culture accepts, generally, that questions such as “What is the meaning of life?” are themselves meaningless.... In summary, we make our own meanings, whether we like it or not.

—Banks, “A Few Notes on the Culture” (posted to the Usenet group *rec.arts.sf.written* in 1994)

One might protest that I have devoted too much attention to Special Circumstances and too little to the blissful lives of countless billions of Culture citizens. But this is what Banks does: Contact plays a leading role in all of the Culture novels, if for no other reason than because Contact is where the conflict is, and conflict is where the stories are. But there's more than simple expediency here. It seems Banks is encouraging us to ask the Omelas question: What price are you willing to pay, in the coin of suffering for a

few, in order to gain the permanent contentment of billions?

My impression is that Banks is straightforwardly utilitarian in these matters, and an advocate for *realpolitik*. I mentioned earlier that *Matter* contains multiple echoes of fantasy literature, and there's an especially intriguing parody of the end of *The Lord of the Rings* in the novel's epilogue. After one of the heroes sacrifices himself to save his world, Holse, his more-or-less faithful servant—a rather more sardonic and self-interested character than Sam Gamgee—returns to his home to assume a new role as local political leader. But he has been installed in his high place, which he clearly very much enjoys, by the Culture. (“I don't doubt I shall be most affectionately remembered by later generations and will probably have streets named after me, though I shall aspire to a square or two and possibly even a rail terminus.”) There's no pretense that Holse is particularly sharp or discerning, much less committed to the common good, but from the Culture's point of view he will get the job done, and the very strong suggestion is that the new Culture-dominated government will be greatly preferable to the previous one. In an ideal world we'd have something better than this paternalism, but the people of Special Circumstances—and Banks himself, it seems—understand that we don't live in the ideal world. Coming to grips with this is, as the ship name

has it, being *Lightly Seared On The Reality Grill*.

But as we turn to life *within* the Culture we learn that its residents tend to crave contact with that distinguished grill themselves—the smell of charring reminds them that they're alive. In *Look to Windward*, a Chelgrian composer named Ziller visits a Culture Orbital, where a great concert premiering his newest piece of music is being planned—and people desperately want tickets. Now in one sense this is strange, because, as we are told,

the level of accuracy and believability exhibited as a matter of course by the virtual environments available on demand to any Culture citizen had been raised to such a pitch of perfection that it had long been necessary...to introduce synthetic cues into the experience just to remind the subject that what appeared to be real really wasn't.

So any of the billions of residents of that Orbital—even those living tens of thousands of miles away from the concert venue—could experience the magnificent music just as vividly as those in the stadium itself. Nevertheless, in this culture without money, where everything one wants is available upon request, people are so desperate to get seats at the stadium that they resort to reinventing money. So says the Orbital's Mind itself through one of its avatars:

People who can't stand other people are inviting them to dinner, booking deep-space cruises together—good grief—even agreeing to go camping with them. Camping!...How wonderfully, bizarrely, romantically barbaric of them!

Why have they become so barbaric? Because, as Banks explains, “there was, for almost everybody occasionally and for some people pretty much perpetually, an almost inestimable cachet in having seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt or generally experienced something absolutely and definitely for real, with none of this contemptible virtuality stuff getting in the way.” *Contemptible* virtuality stuff.

So it turns out that, “for almost everybody occasionally and for some people pretty well perpetually,” the perfect simulation of reality does not erase the boundary between the real and the virtual but rather intensifies it, and makes the real ever more desirable. And such desire in turn re-creates scarcity in this allegedly post-scarcity society: the stadium where Ziller's composition will be premiered contains only so many seats, which means that it's quite possible to want and not get one. (The Mind rather mournfully explains to people that there will be no room to dance.) A very un-Culture experience.

The Player of Games is more subtly concerned with such experiences.

Early in the novel Gurgeh cheats in order to win a game—it seems that even the Culture hasn't figured out a way to make real the Caucus-race from *Alice in Wonderland*: “All have won and all must have prizes.” Winning is a scarce commodity, which is, generally speaking, the point of a game. Gurgeh speaks of a game he has sitting in his house: “This is foreign. [It comes from] some backwater planet discovered just a few decades ago. They play this there and they bet on it; they make it important. But what do we have to bet with?” Note the implication that betting on a game somehow makes it *important*—there's at least a hint here that the Culture struggles to make anything really important, at least according to its own self-understanding.

But perhaps its self-understanding is somewhat incomplete, or even self-deluded. Gurgeh can't make winning a game important by betting on it, but his *pride* in being a skilled player of games is what leads him to cheat—to avoid losing to an adolescent girl, hardly more than a child. Winning is scarce; being pre-eminent among game-players is scarcer still. And other experiences too: through much of the book Gurgeh is deeply attracted to a young woman who isn't sexually interested in him, and what's to be done about that? No doubt an utterly convincing simulacrum of a sexual experience with her could be arranged—but Gurgeh would know

such “contemptible virtuality stuff” for what it is, and would despise it. Perhaps, then, there’s no such thing as a society without scarcity—a society without loss or longing. As we have seen, Banks claims that in the Culture there are “very few motives left” for crime. But there are some. There always will be some.

CNN: In the Culture’s post-scarcity society, where no one needs for anything, you’re removing a lot of the struggle around everyday life. Is that not removing the point of life itself?

Banks: I think a lot of the struggle is kind of pointless and is in itself boring. The struggle for existence for most people most of the time, especially in a post-agricultural, industrial society, is a bit of a grind. People have to work very hard and awfully long hours for not a great deal of money: if you don’t, you get virtually nothing. Life’s not much fun, frankly, so I’d quite happily trade in that struggle.

What I find fascinating about the anatomy of the Culture novels is the dissonance between Banks’s straightforward statements about the Culture and certain recurrent features of the stories he writes. Banks talks about how “nice” the Culture is, and yet we see hidden cruelties and open desires for universal domination. He clearly envisions the overcoming of scarcity as the signal achievement of the civilization made by the Minds, and yet he focuses time

and again on objects of unfulfilled desire. He is aware that the very language of the Culture is a subtle but immensely powerful training in “correct” ideology.

To some extent these oddities are, like the dominance of Contact, the inevitable consequence of the decision to write *novels* about the Culture. It is not possible to come up with stories as such about people who are perfectly nice and can have everything they want instantly. But one might also say that people of whom no stories can be told are not really people in any sense recognizable to us; and the lives that they experience are not lives in any sense recognizable to us. In this sense the conceit of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is more complex than it seems at first to be: yes, it asks us what price we would be willing to pay for perfect happiness and social harmony; but it also may suggest that that one poor miserable child in the closet creates *meaning* for all the others—gives their contentment a necessary contextual frame. Maybe those residents of Omelas who do *not* walk away, who accept the necessity of the child’s suffering, are all the happier because they see the contrast between that child’s life and their own.

This is a worrisome thought: that even the happiest of lives, or *especially* the happiest of lives, depend on the existence of conflict and suffering somewhere. This is a darker view of the human condition than one which

simply affirms that contentment only comes in its truest form after struggle or suffering are overcome. But in either case, it seems we are more wrapped up in “that struggle” than Banks wants to admit; and it seems that his novels themselves acknowledge what he would prefer not to.

An early edition of another Le Guin novel, *The Dispossessed* (1974), featured the tagline “The magnificent epic of an ambiguous utopia”; those last three words eventually found their way to the title page of some later editions. This, Le Guin’s finest novel, also concerns scarcity and its management: the planet Anarres is organized as a set of anarchistic communes with no central government. All goods are shared more or less equally, which is not only the philosophical choice of the society’s founders but is practically necessary because on such a barren planet, so generally inhospitable to life, any alternative would lead to the deaths of many. You could say that the scarcity of goods is what makes Anarres work. But no environment and no social organization, it turns out, can eliminate pride, the desire for control of others, or the jealous suspicion of excellence. The largely capitalist planet Urras is more hospitable to the scientific brilliance of the story’s protagonist, Shevek—more welcoming of his innovative thought—but its rank inequalities and stratifications disgust him. Anarres is in the end preferable, though flawed. It was

built to be a utopia, but like all utopias it remains an ambiguous one.

The same is true, then, of the Culture. Banks would “trade in [the] struggle” that characterizes our lives in this our decidedly non-utopian world, but the passages from his novels that I have called attention to show that there is a trade to be made: Banks knows that not *all* struggles are boring or pointless, as do the citizens of the Culture who try to restore unpredictability and drama to their lives. Indeed, the very existence of Contact and its Special Circumstances unit expresses this need for struggle, as Banks himself has written:

The average Culture person—human or machine—knows that they are lucky to be where they are when they are. Part of their education, both initially and continually, comprises the understanding that beings less fortunate—though no less intellectually or morally worthy—than themselves have suffered and, elsewhere, are still suffering. For the Culture to continue without terminal decadence, the point needs to be made, regularly, that its easy hedonism is not some ground-state of nature, but something desirable, assiduously worked for in the past, not necessarily easily attained, and requiring appreciation and maintenance both in the present and the future.

So Banks is willing, even eager, to trade our world for the Culture—but he recognizes that trade as a wager,

the kind of wager that people can't make within the Culture itself, and he doesn't know precisely how it would turn out. (Even the best Minds, as we have seen, can't predict the future.) And he makes it perfectly clear that a society without internal struggles will need always to generate external ones. That is to say, Utopia requires enemies. This is not a comforting

thought for societies on the path to Utopia—or for those of us living in Utopia's galactic neighborhood.

*Alan Jacobs, a New Atlantis contributing editor, is a professor of English at Wheaton College. His blog *Text Patterns—on reading, writing, and technologies of knowledge—can be found at TheNewAtlantis.com.**