

## ALiEN (Alternative Lives in Experimental Narratives)

### [“Portal to the Fantastic”](#)

#### Style Guide

The following style guide is designed for those wishing to contribute to the “Portal to the Fantastic” online project. In order to ensure that all contributions are uploaded speedily and accurately, it would be greatly appreciated if contributors could adhere to the format outlined below. No specific programme is required: we merely ask that you submit your paper using the headings and structure provided. A sample contribution has been attached at the end of this guide. All contributions go through an editing process and the editors retain the right to make changes where necessary.

#### **Overview**

This should contain a short description, or blurb, of the novel in question, including the dates of publication and the principle storylines.

#### **About the Author**

A brief history of the author should be included here (in full prose), including important publications and an overview of the critical reception. A bibliography of primary works should also include the creative reception (films, radio plays, musical settings, exhibitions, museums and museum-type venues, events, and the like).

#### **Main Characters**

All main characters should be listed with a description of their role within the novel and their relationships to the other characters.

#### **Setting**

A short description of where the principal events of the novel occur.

#### **Summary**

A complete summary of the major and minor plots and storylines should be included within this section.

#### **Special Categories**

These will vary from text to text but they should come within the general themes of the ALiEN project. The categories employed in the individual entries form an online index and are listed in alphabetical order on the Portal.

Human Body: *life creation – childhood – maturation – ageing – death – life extension – gender – behaviour – beauty – fantastic body transformations – body manipulations- bioengineering – nanotechnology – mental implications*

Time: *time experience – time travel – after-death experience*

Space: *world creation – spatial exploration – travel – co-existence of different worlds*

Society: *demography – social institutions – education – religion – class – migration – transport*

Disasters: *natural – environmental – nuclear*

### **Critical Commentary**

This involves an analysis of the text in question, focusing particularly on the critical reception, on the importance of the work, on formal-aesthetic and cultural aspects as well as on the special thematic categories listed above. A general word count is between 700 to 1000 words. Please ensure that full references are given for any critical sources used, whilst avoiding 'non-academic' sources such as Wikipedia and blog sites.

Submissions should be sent to [alien@sbg.ac.at](mailto:alien@sbg.ac.at).

## Sample Contribution

Please find below a sample submitted and published on the ALiEN Project website. Contributors may wish to use the report below as a template for their own submission.

### Iain Banks: *The Wasp Factory* (1984)

Contributed by Markus Oppolzer

***The Wasp Factory* is a bizarre, unsettling, and highly original gothic novel that has at its heart a quest for identity under the most outrageous circumstances. Abandoned by his mother and left to his own devices by his father, Francis Cauldhame grows up on a remote Scottish peninsula without any official registration. He styles himself as the ruler of the island and adheres to a self-invented warrior cult. The return of his deranged half-brother Eric triggers a series of events that finally reveal the secret hidden in his father's locked laboratory.**

#### *Author*

Iain Menzies Banks was born in Fife, Scotland, on 16 February 1954. From 1972 to 1975 he attended Stirling University and graduated with a degree in English, Philosophy and Psychology. He made his literary debut with the controversial novel *The Wasp Factory* (1984). Since then he has enjoyed great public and critical acclaim as a prolific author of both fiction and science fiction (under the name of Iain M. Banks). Banks is a declared Scottish nationalist.

#### *Selected Publications*

##### Novels

*The Wasp Factory* (1984); *Walking on Glass* (1985); *The Bridge* (1986); *Consider Phlebas* (1987); *Espedair Street* (1987); *The Player of Games* (1988); *Canal Dreams* (1989); *The Use of Weapons* (1990); *The Crow Road* (1992); *Against a Dark Background* (1993); *Complicity* (1993); *Feersum Endjinn* (1994); *Whit* (1995); *Excession* (1996); *A Song of Stone* (1997); *Inversions* (1998); *The Business* (1999); *Look to Windward* (2000); *Dead Air* (2002); *The Algebraist* (2004); *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* (2007); *Matter* (2008)

##### Short Stories

*The State of the Art* (1989)

##### Non-Fiction

*Raw Spirit: In Search of the Perfect Dram* (2003)

#### *Creative Reception*

##### Theatre

- The Glasgow Citizens Theatre, first production 1992 adapted and directed by Malcolm Sutherland
- Northern Stage tour 1996 (director: Richard Gregory)
- West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds (director: Malcolm Sutherland). Opened 24 April, 1997
- Bagley's Warehouse, London
- The Rotterdam based Ro Theater staged productions of *De Wespenfabriek* around The Netherlands and also in Germany in 2000
- <http://www.waspfactorytour.co.uk/> This is the latest tour of Malcolm Sutherland's stage adaption of *The Wasp Factory* which is scheduled to run from April till June 2008

### Radio

The Wasp Factory: a 1997 Radio 4 adaptation by Craig Warner (abridged); read by Joe McFadden; ten 15- minute parts between 24 March and 4 April; directed by Alex Burrett

### Audiobooks

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/free-iain-banks-audiobook-download-for-every-reader--part-1-804650.html>

[http://www.audible.co.uk/aduk/site/product.jsp?BV\\_UseBVCookie=Yes&productID=BK\\_TWUK\\_000149UK](http://www.audible.co.uk/aduk/site/product.jsp?BV_UseBVCookie=Yes&productID=BK_TWUK_000149UK) 6-hour audiobook read by Peter Kenny; produced by audible.co.uk and distributed by *The Independent* as a free daily download in several parts (2-11 April 2008)

### *Main Characters*

**Frank (Francis, Frances) Cauldhame:** 16-year-old central character and half-educated first person narrator; leads an unregistered life (no birth certificate, no NHS number etc.) as the self-declared lord of his native peninsula; obsessed with rituals and control; adheres to a mythological cult of masculinity in compensation for his alleged castration as a three-year-old by a dog; turns out to be a girl by the end of the book

**Eric Cauldhame:** Frank's deranged half-brother; 20 years old; went insane after a traumatic experience as a medical student; locked away in a madhouse from which he has just escaped

**Angus Cauldhame:** their father; eccentric medical doctor and weird scientist; subjects his daughter Frances to a hormone therapy to turn her into a boy (maybe as a reaction against everything feminine following the departure of his wife)

**Agnes Cauldhame:** Frank's domineering mother; left the family to its own devices; appears only once in a flashback

**Jamie:** the 'dwarf'; Frank's 'best friend' and drinking companion

**Blyth Cauldhame** (cousin), **Paul Cauldhame** (younger brother), **Esmerelda Stove** (relative): Frank's three murder victims

### *Setting*

*The Wasp Factory* is set in 1981 and contains substantial flashbacks to the 1970s. The main location is a remote unnamed Scottish peninsula near the fictitious town of Porteneil. Its only regular inhabitants are Francis Cauldhame and his father. Francis has turned the island into his private little kingdom where all locations have a special relevance to his cult.

### *Summary*

Frank has been warned by the Wasp Factory – a killing machine for wasps and his personal oracle – that something bad is going to happen. When his insane half-brother Eric escapes from the asylum, he finally knows what the Factory meant by its prediction of a fire. Frank fears that Eric might return to the island and repeat his sick behaviour of burning dogs and trying to feed worms to the local village children. While Frank walks around the island to check on his sacrifice poles, weapons caches, various hide-outs and other facilities, his family history is presented in a series of flashbacks. We learn about the means (a snake, a large kite, and a bomb) by which he killed three of his relatives and the dubious reasons for each of the murders. It is further revealed that Frank was castrated by Old Saul, the family dog, at the tender age of three. During these days of preparation for Eric's arrival Frank receives sporadic phone calls from his brother, who indeed plans to return home. After four days of waiting he

finds evidence of his brother's presence in the area, notably when he discovers an almost dead, burnt dog.

After returning home Frank begins to observe the island from the attic of the house. His father, who has somehow learnt about Eric's imminent arrival, leaves for town. He rings up Frank in a drunken state and tries to talk him into leaving the house for his own security. Returning home, still fairly drunk, Angus eventually falls asleep on his bed. Having spotted no sign of his brother, Frank awakes after a few hours' sleep and comes down from the loft to find his father's keys to the study unattended in his jacket. Seizing the opportunity, Frank finally enters his father's secret laboratory and is confronted with a specimen jar containing a small set of male genitals. When he finds male hormones and tampons in the study he becomes enraged, suspecting his father of being a female transvestite.

Checking the genitals of his drunken father, Frank discovers, much to his surprise, that his father is not a female transvestite but a real man. Before he can further reflect on this matter, Eric signals his much anticipated arrival by setting fire to a whole herd of sheep and driving it towards the house. In the ensuing chaos Eric gets hold of an axe and attempts to break into the basement of the house where a large amount of explosives is stored.

Eric manages to break through the door but then fails in his attempt to light the cordite. He runs off into the night again, leaving behind a trail of chaos. After some temporary repairs to the basement door Frank returns inside to be told the truth about why his father has male hormones and tampons locked in his study. Frank learns that he is not Francis, a boy, but actually Frances, a girl.

Waking up the next morning and still confused by all the revelations of the previous night, Frances discovers her brother Eric still asleep out on the island and begins to meditate on her past life and the motivations behind her actions. The novel ends on this surprisingly quiet and optimistic note.

### *Interest Areas*

#### **Gender**

Frances's dissatisfaction with her weak and castrated 'male' body and her overcompensation in terms of a warrior cult are the central elements of *The Wasp Factory*. Like Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), it plays with the disassociation of sex as a biological disposition and the cultural construction of gender identity. Frances is reprogrammed and tricked into believing that she is a boy. She adamantly believes in her own castration, but it is the hormones that ensure that she is entrapped in a male body. The three murders may not actually be an inexplicable phase she went through but triggered by an overdose of steroids (inadvertently) administered by her father. Gender identity, consciousness, and volition are presented as volatile concepts that are dependent on a number of biological and cultural factors.

#### **Body Transformations**

Despite his medical background, Angus Cauldhame's transformation of his daughter into a man borders on the fantastic, not least due to the outrageous nature of his experiment. We are led to believe that hormones suffice to reprogram a human being in terms of his or her identity. The novel, however, centres on the incompleteness of the transformation, the perpetual tension and incompatibility between the female essence or hardware and the male display or software.

*The Wasp Factory* is an interesting take on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), especially in the context of the relationship between creator and creature. In both cases a mad scientist produces an unnatural being that exists outside society and is left to his own devices. Both become serial killers and raise the question of responsibility: is monstrosity a physical or a moral category? Who is the monster: the creator or the creature?

#### **Maturation**

The concept of maturation has a number of interesting facets in *The Wasp Factory*. In biological terms Frances's maturation into a woman is arrested, as hormones keep her body from developing female physical attributes. At the same time, she has created a cult of her own that allows her to give meaning to her masculine identity and, at the same time, compensate for the acknowledged impossibility of ever becoming a 'real' man. Seen from the outside, her unregistered existence on the fringe of civilized society prevents any form of social integration. All her self-created rites are doomed to become

meaningless if their social function is assumed to be incorporation into human society. Only her liberating self-recognition as a woman at the very end of the novel introduces hope and perspective into an otherwise paralyzing existence.

### **Power**

The novel raises the important question of who controls the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of our being. The extremes of total control and total neglect are shown to be equally detrimental. Angus Cauldhame abuses his duties as a father by both meticulously manipulating the physical existence of his son/daughter and perverting his education by conscious misinformation or neglect. The highly intelligent Francis is at a loss to place either his father's unreliable teachings or television's "medialized" trash into any sensible framework. His own solution is to take total control over the island and those creatures that are even weaker than himself: without hesitation he kills three children and a number of small animals to demonstrate his own superiority. His religion or cult is as misguided as his father's reclusive scientific research as both operate outside civilized society.

### *Critical Commentary*

Iain Banks's debut novel *The Wasp Factory* (1984) provoked emotional rather than carefully meditated responses among contemporary reviewers. Most critics either openly acknowledged their fascination with the text or, in most cases, struggled to give their loathing some professional veneer. The Abacus edition of *The Wasp Factory* sports three pages of such reactions ranging from "unparalleled depravity" (*The Irish Times*), "ghoulish frivolity" (*TLS*), and "rubbish" (*The Times*) to "minor masterpiece" (*Punch*), "a truly remarkable novel" (*Daily Telegraph*), and "literary debut of the year" (*Cosmopolitan*). To put it simply: readers either love the book or hate it. Andrew Gimson of *The Times* even suspected that maybe "it is all a joke, meant to fool literary London" which, at a first glance, is not as far-fetched as it seems. Certain aspects of the novel, such as the main character's fight with a giant buck or the final arrival of Eric driving a flock of burning sheep towards the house, are almost too absurd to be taken seriously. The killer rabbit seems to be an allusion to a similar specimen in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), for which Banks worked as an extra. Yet, considering the main character's preoccupation with his compensatory cult of masculinity, it comes as no surprise that presumably harmless creatures, such as the Cauldhames' late dog Old Soul or the average rabbit are presented as formidable foes to emphasize Francis's desired status as a fearless warrior.

Despite a widespread acknowledgement of the novel as a prime example of (post)modern gothic writing, most critics have shied away from treating a book too seriously which so openly celebrates its surreal nature. However, this should not keep one from appreciating its importance in the context of the gothic tradition, unreliable narration, gender studies, identity construction, an anthropological interest in rituals and coming of age, the clash of world views, such as science and religion, or 80s culture, especially "medialized" violence and Thatcherism.

Victor Sage has traced back the novel's generic roots to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), highlighting the questions of monstrosity and artificial creation, whereas Thom Nairn sees a continuity in Scottish gothic fiction from James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) via Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) to *The Wasp Factory* in terms of split personalities as mirrors. In any case, the novel is paradigmatically gothic in its depiction of a main character leading a liminal existence on the fringe of civilized society. Like many of his predecessors, Francis Cauldhame is plagued by his inability to integrate himself meaningfully into society which, in his particular case, is clearly due to the failure of his parents and a completely unsuitable upbringing. His life is characterized by borders, boredom, and arrested development. However, he feels a strong need to rationalize his situation and give meaning to an otherwise pointless existence. The first-person narration serves as the medium of choice for such an undertaking which, in this case, is closely linked to questions of gender and identity construction. Naturally, the self-exploration and justification of such a disturbed individual make the readers highly suspicious and produce a fine example of unreliable narration.

Like most gothic novels, *The Wasp Factory* is a domestic drama whose characters are all related, the keepers of shocking secrets, and the source of evil in their fictitious world. Thus victims of circumstances easily become villains and raise important questions of moral responsibility. Angus Cauldhame's willingness to subject everything to science is as misguided as Francis's blind adherence

to his cult of masculinity. In a world that is falling apart, characters are grasping at straws to imbue their existence with meaning. Since its publication in 1984, the book has remained a modern gothic classic.

### *Critical Bibliography*

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- Sage, Victor. "The Politics of Petrification: Culture, Religion, History in the Fiction of Iain Banks and John Banville". In Victor Sage and Allan-Lloyd Smith, ed. *Modern Gothic: A Reader*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996. 20-37.
- Schoene-Harwood, Berthold. "Dams Burst: Devolving Gender in Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*". *ARIEL* 30:1 (1999): 131-48.

### *Links*

<http://www.iain-banks.net/> (official website of Iain Banks)

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth12> (British Council website)

<http://banksoniain.netfirms.com/> (Iain Banks fanzine)

<http://www.iainbanksfaq.haddonstuff.co.uk/> (FAQ)

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