

# Literary Review

## Scotland the rave

The Steep Approach  
to Garbadale

Iain Banks

(Little Brown £17.99)

THIS is Iain Banks's first "proper" novel (as opposed to the sci-fi stuff he turns out under the name of Iain M. Banks) for five years. The delay has been ascribed by the author, in one of those admiring *Independent on Sunday* profiles, to the break-up of his quarter-century marriage. Hitherto Mr B's novels have generally been rated by the critics as quite entertaining but full of undifferentiated dialogue and giving the impression that they were cobbled together in about three weeks. Regular patrons will be reassured to learn that the unprecedented half-decade incubation period has had no effect whatever on the Banks muse, and that *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* is quite entertaining, full of undifferentiated dialogue and giving the impression that it was cobbled together in about three...

As with most of Mr B's thrumming oeuvre, the new one is dense with symbolical import. It kicks off with sleek young company exec Fielding driving up to Scotland to try and prise his runaway cousin Alban from a Perthshire squat. This allows Banks a heaven-sent opportunity to indulge the Irvine Welsh side of his nature ("AI? AI? AI, ya dozy cunt, fucken wake up" etc etc), while striking one or two faintly suspect notes. "Mobile phone" in north of the border patois is "mobby", you fear, not "moby". The scent of a nice middle-class author gone slumming grows stronger when - lawks! - the Perthshire low-lifes start explaining their argot to the reader - "Meanwhile I'm helping with the table-clearing, getting a beamer (that means going red in the face, by the by, not anything else)."

Fielding and Alban, it turns out, are members of the Wopuld family,

well-heeled descendants of a canny Victorian inventor who devised a Monopoly-style board game called *Empire*, now up-graded into an immensely lucrative computer bore-fest. Sprints Corp, the US combine that owns a quarter of the shares, is now bidding for complete control and an extraordinary general meeting of the board is poised to vote. Its figurative scenery hauled creakily into place - that's right, the board game is called *Empire*, the potential purchasers are *Americans* - the novel heads off into the personal past, Alban's underage fling with lickerish cousin Sophie (voyeuristic couplings in the rhododendrons), the mystery of his mother's suicide and his current walk-out with mathematical genius and tsunami survivor Verushka.



It's at this point that the novel's sub-text starts to take root: not US imperialism or oral sex, to both of which Mr B devotes many a fervent page, but, bless us all, *popular music*. Like his Scots contemporary Ian Rankin, Banksy can't resist turning nearly everything he writes into a check-list of the groovy material emanating from his MP3. As early as page 47 Alban can be found reminiscing about a '90s business trip to Singapore, whose soundtrack was provided by the Chemical Brothers' *Block Rockin' Beats*. Three pages later Fielding prods the new Coldplay CD into his car stereo. And yet Banks's spiritual home looks to be somewhere back in the 1980s. Come page 58 there's mention of Sophie's Frankie Goes To Hollywood tee shirt. By page 65 the young lovers are discussing Talking Heads, Prefab Sprout and U2. Verushka turns out to be a Led Zeppelin fan (page 165) while in the course of a brief Reagan-era reunion in America the cousins shed elegiac tears over *This is the Sea* by The Waterboys.

And so it goes on, including an entirely gratuitous, paragraph-long survey of the contents of Verushka's iPod (Gwen Stefani, Primal Scream, The Beatles, in case you're interested). The rest of *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* is full of lectures. Alban uses the EGM as an excuse to harangue the Yanks about Iraq. There are other eye-catching disqui-

sitions about climate change and the wickedness of organised religion.

The real core of the book, on the other hand, takes in the time Alban spends flat-sharing with some *Empire*-obsessives, a cue for lots of mock-philosophy about "There was the game, and then there was the meta-game. Even without a league lasting all year long, there was always the meta-game, the game beyond the game..." All this reinforces the impression of a motivating spirit that is faintly juvenile, something conceived beneath metaphorical bedclothes after lights out with the John Peel Show playing along in the background. If old Banksy here didn't write novels for a living, you just know he'd have ended up working in a Dungeons and Dragons store.