



# Transition

*Iain M. Banks*

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## **Transition** Iain M. Banks

There is a world that hangs suspended between triumph and catastrophe, between the dismantling of the Wall and the fall of the Twin Towers, frozen in the shadow of suicide terrorism and global financial collapse. Such a world requires a firm hand and a guiding light. But does it need the Concern: an all-powerful organization with a malevolent presiding genius, pervasive influence and numberless invisible operatives in possession of extraordinary powers?

Among those operatives are Temudjin Oh, of mysterious Mongolian origins, an un-killable assassin who journeys between the peaks of Nepal, a version of Victorian London and the dark palaces of Venice under snow; Adrian Cubbish, a restlessly greedy City trader; and a nameless, faceless state-sponsored torturer known only as the Philosopher, who moves between time zones with sinister ease. Then there are those who question the Concern: the bandit queen Mrs. Mulverhill, roaming the worlds recruiting rebels to her side; and Patient 8262, under sedation and feigning madness in a forgotten hospital ward, in hiding from a dirty past.

There is a world that needs help; but whether it needs the Concern is a different matter.

## **Transition Details**

Date : Published September 1st 2009 by Orbit

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Author : Iain M. Banks

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## From Reader Review Transition for online ebook

### J M Leitch says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It is one of Banks's best, in my opinion. It's an original story, has great characters, the plot was revealed in a very clever way and Banks's humour came through strong.

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### Ian says

Is it considered an artificial padding of my GR shelves to add the audiobooks I've "read"? I loved the shit out of Transition, the actual book; you can read my review here. I loved the audiobook every bit as much. Peter Kenny is easily my favorite narrator. He does voices and accents amazingly well. (Okay, so he doesn't do an American accent very well, but kicks butt with all the European accents.) His sense of timing is wonderful, as is his *situational awareness* for lack of a better term ... I mean, he just *feels* his way through the book brilliantly.

I mostly recommend this audiobook for people who have read the hardcopy and want to read it again. The book is sufficiently complex that it may be difficult to follow on audio if that's your first time through. But it's definatley the kind of book that needs two or three reads to catch everything, so the audiobook is a perfect thing for your daily commute if you've read the book already.

I used the Audible iPhone app, which I find works quite well; it's how I listen to 90% of my audiobooks. Definately worth using an Audible credit for this one.

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### David says

I had difficulty following this book. The story went so slowly--it seemed like the prologue lasted maybe a quarter of the book before anything substantial happened. Some of the plot was sickening. I felt nothing for any of the characters.

I heartily recommend this book for sadists and masochists.

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### Elaine says

Wow. Right where does one start with a book like this? Transition is only the second Iain Banks book I have read (The Wasp Factory being the other) and I'm happy and terrified to say this messed with mind in just the same way.

So what's it all about? Well having read it, it's still quite difficult to explain. The plot is based on a rather complicated multiverse theory wherein (if I've got it remotely right) there are as many versions of Earth as we choose to imagine. The story unfolds through many different narrators including a self-serving city trader, a state contracted torturer who refers to himself as 'the philosopher', and a world hopping assassin.

Following so far?

The sections of the book told from the point of view of 'The Philosopher', generally made me retch and I mean that most literally. Banks is an author that has the power to make me physically react to what's on the page.

Then we have the sections of book told from Adrian's point of view (the self-serving city trader). These made me laugh, a lot, and normally out loud on the bus.

I was confused, amused, repulsed, but always enthralled by this book.

Full review here

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### **Tom Lloyd says**

I've not actually finished this, but currently I'm unsure whether I will. I'm halfway and taking a break from it - most likely I'll come back to it, but I'm not certain.

Why? Because most of it is Banksy talking at me. He's not telling me a story, he's telling me about elements within a story and i'm struggling to care. there's little interaction with people and relatively little action. Individual pieces are interesting, but while the connections are clear there's not yet been much to make me care about how it fits together - more of an impression that it's actually not going to end up as anything hugely interesting/surprising.

I've had a problem with a number of his more recent books. there's no doubt the man can write really well, but he's getting more long winded and less about letting a story unfold for the reader. And it's really bugging me, because with all that I love about many of his novels, he seems to have forgotten what made them so good. His style's changing as he gets older and it's just not working for me. I do want to finish it to see if it all comes together in the end, but I'm not holding out a whole lot of hope.

Edit - I've now finished it after a month or two away. It's an Iain Banks and I dislike walking away from one of his, given his undoubted skill as a writer and coupled with the fact it's a multi-strand novel that was clearly building to bring those all together. And was it all worth it?

No, not really. I read the rest pretty easily, the style either eased up or I was just more used to it, but the denouement was incredibly flat - 'hero' gets an ass-load of convenient powers which means he escapes at the end, nothing's really explained, little enough can be derived and all the questions about a conspiracy are glossed over to the point where I felt fairly cheated of an ending. So sod it, I'm going to be far more picky about Banksy books in future - usually from the blurb I can tell whether or not I'm likely to enjoy it and he's used up any good will built up from books like Player of Games, Excession, Song of Stone, Whit, Crow Road etc. Transition, Matter, The Business, Inversions - there's a load of his books that have been significant disappointments. I don't care if I don't full get a novel - Feersum Enjinn and Use of Weapons certainly aren't easy, but I could see the quality still. Now it's just echoes of a writer's skill.

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## Pearl says

3.5 stars

Just finished this and i have *waaaay* too many unanswered questions, still confused about some bits and i have a sneaky suspicion that i *didn't quite like* this book. Sure, it was never boring and it was true Banks' form but....i don't know.

Anyway, googling for the book's discussions on the epilogue or spoilery reviews so that my brain can relax and not go bonkers over some of the remaining questions i've got, has been fruitless. I mean there's this link but i'm sure it's also just added to my confusion and left my head swimming, oh well.

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## Sam Woodward says

This book 'transitions' the split between Iain Banks' non-sci-fi output & Iain M. Banks' vast space operas, presenting a sci-fi tale with a contemporary setting.

It is based on the premise that a virtually infinite number of parallel dimensions do indeed exist. The inhabitants of one of them have discovered that by ingesting a drug called Septus, they can transport their consciousness into the bodies of unsuspecting people in other dimensions & thus meddle with the socio-political development of other Earths. They have therefore formed The Concern - an organisation designed to strictly control the use of 'transitioning' & ensure it is used to benefit other worlds. But since The Concern's High Council plays its cards suffocatingly close to its chest, can they actually be trusted? Or could some of its members have agendas of their own? And how can anyone decide what constitutes the greater good anyway? These are questions one of The Concern's assassins has to find answers to when he becomes a piece in a deadly game between his employers & an enigmatic renegade.

The Concern echoes the interfering, egalitarian Culture of Banks' sci-fi novels but as its members are all merely human, The Concern is murkier & harder to trust. The idea of parallel worlds has been used before, notably in *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* but never with Banks creative flair & ability to analyse the deeper implications in an entertaining & thought-provoking manner. Yet despite the virtually infinite variety this backdrop provides, the plot is a relatively straightforward one.

Quite appropriately, given the books' subject-matter, the narrative consists of separate threads from different characters' points of view. Banks has really gone to town with this approach, starting with 3-4 such perspectives but later adding more. This is a style which ordinarily results in the reader racing through sections relating to characters/plotlines they like & glumly wading through the rest but in *Transition*, I found each thread to be equally captivating & enjoyed working out how the disparate pieces fitted together in the overall picture.

I have found that many of Banks' novels (such as *The Business*) consist of a story which can be summed up in 100 pages, fleshed out with 300 or so pages of florid descriptions & background details. *Transition*, however, never meanders far from the main plot. It's an expertly-crafted, entertaining & thought-provoking read, which remains gripping throughout. In my view, it's one of his best.

In short, the transition from prologue to epilogue was a thoroughly enjoyable one.

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## **Jesse Wolfe 5199 says**

I've read a lot of Iain Banks books in the last couple years, and this is the first one that wasn't amazing. This books is not only less than amazing, it is, actually, terrible.

The characters are all obvious stereotypes. There are extended monologues where these characters explain their identity directly to you, the reader - and then most of those characters are just dropped from the storyline.

The plot ranges from nebulous to pointless. No character seems to have any particular motivations, so the story lurches along towards a climax for its own sake.

Everyone has sex with everyone else, for no apparent reason.

The science fiction elements of the story are half-baked and unconvincing. It is hard to believe that the same author who created the Culture series and "The Algebraist" would have left such gaping inconsistencies in the descriptions of the use of any technology, but there it is.

Rather than resolving mysteries, the story arc just piles on more and more deus ex machina.

The book even seems to have some sort of political message about 9/11 hysteria, but despite all the tactless "Christian Terrorist" scenes and descriptions of torture, there didn't seem to be any \*particular\* point to the whole thing - which makes it feel like those elements were thrown in just for the tabloid value.

This books is so unlike any other book by the author that I've seen, I cannot help but assume that this text was actually an early draft of a better novel, stolen from his files and published without his permission.

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## **Jonfaith says**

Transition takes an Inception-y hopscotch across concepts like Torture, Greed and Faith before pogo-ing itself back to the base of Borges' Aleph. There were a pair of action sequences which didn't contribute much but otherwise the novel was a philosophical rumination beyond the looking glass. Transition is a curious approach and an enjoyable means to idle away an afternoon.

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## **A. Dawes says**

Iain Banks is a writer with a rare understanding of identity. Much like his predecessor, PK Dick, Banks is masterful at changing his prose to suit each individual character. He succeeds again here with Transition, yet despite the wonderful unreliable opening and exceptional voice, Banks isn't at his best in terms of the actual story here.

Transition is an ambitious work that attempts to explore a vast array of themes - capitalism, solipsism, existentialism, terrorism, religious extremism, Islamophobia - without allowing adequate time for any of them. Banks' characters are also so strong in Transition that for a non-genre reader they probably border on caricatures. Adrian, the tough-talking drug dealer/business man is given plenty of ranting space, yet his role in the narrative is oblique at best. It's especially minor when compared to the space he's been given.

Without giving it all away, there are interfering elite secret groups wielding great influence, and there is body possession, whereby identities are inhabited for short periods of time.

And structurally, it all comes to a premature and rushed ending.

Don't give up on Banks though. Sci-Fi fans should try his Culture series, and for other readers *The Wasp Factory* and *Old Crow Road* are both superb.

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## **Elf M. says**

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## **David Hebblethwaite says**

When I first got my copy of *Transition*, I took a quick glance at the beginning, and grinned at what I found. The epigraph reads, 'Transition – based on a false story'; and the opening sentence is one of the most endearingly cheeky I've ever come across: 'Apparently I am what is known as an Unreliable Narrator, though of course if you believe everything you're told you deserve whatever you get.' That's the start of an Iain Banks book, and no mistake.

Well, now I've read the whole thing, and am I still grinning? No, unfortunately — not because *Transition* is a bad novel (it isn't), rather because it promises much but doesn't manage to come together to deliver on that promise.

Unbeknownst to most people, there is a multiplicity of realities out there, each with its own Earth. A few people, known as transitionaries, are able to move their consciousness between realities, temporarily taking over other people's bodies in the process; most of them work for the Concern, a vast organisation whose (apparently self-appointed) task is to intervene secretly in the realities to ensure that good things happen and bad things don't — this might mean (for example) saving the life of someone who will go on to make an important discovery, but it can also mean 'eliding' undesirables if necessary.

The structure of the novel mirrors the idea of 'flitting' between worlds, as it moves back and forth between the stories of a roster of protagonists (some narrated in first-person, others in third-). But perhaps the main protagonist is Temudjin Oh, one of the Concern's assassins, who must decide whom he trusts: Madame d'Ortolan, the current leader of the Concern's Council, who's given him orders to 'elide' several prominent Council members who are (allegedly) threatening the Concern's stability; or Mrs Mulverhill, the renegade transitionary (and Oh's former lover) who maintains that Madame d'Ortolan has her own hidden agenda, and is the real threat. Other narrators include Adrian Cubbish, a City trader from our Earth taken on by Mrs Mulverhill; and the mysterious Patient 8262, who has hidden himself away from his pursuers on some obscure world — he remembers being a transitionary, but has been here so long that he's having doubts.

As you'll have gathered, *Transition* is a complex edifice; but Banks is eminently capable of holding it together. He marshals the different plot strands and characters skilfully, such that we become disoriented but never hopelessly lost; and his control of voice is great in particular. There are secrets to be revealed, of course; but the effect is more jigsaw pieces joining together than layers of onion peeling away; more is told and less implied than perhaps one would like, but Banks never stalls in his telling.

Now for the 'buts'. As the pages recede, one starts to think that Banks is cutting it a bit fine with the resolution. Too fine, it proves: a character named in the prologue but not properly introduced until 60 pages before the end provides a deus ex machina, shortly after the plot has become a fairly straightforward chase. Not a great way to wrap up a novel.

There are some passages which consider ethics — is what the Concern does worth it? do their methods make them any better than the people they work against? — but I find them ultimately quite superficial; I don't see these concerns worked through in the text itself. However, I think it's quite clear what judgement Banks makes, what with the morality-tale way certain characters get their comeuppances.

There's a larger-than-life quality, too, to the characterisation. The Concern seems fond of elaborate balls and fancy dress, and Mulverhill and d'Ortolan in particular feel more like figures in a parade than 'real' individuals. The other Concern characters are relatively more rounded, but not a great deal more; and even Adrian Cubbish is pretty much a stock 'unsympathetic City boy'. I am quite willing to believe that Banks intended this effect; but I don't think it encourages serious consideration of the issues underpinning his narrative.

I've spent more time talking about the negative aspects of *Transition* than the positive; yet the positive aspects probably occupy the greater part of the text — it's the nature of the negatives that makes them such an issue. But, bearing these objections in mind, you'll find Banks's novel interesting and engaging for the most part.

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## Terence says

### Rating: 2.5-3 stars

*Transition* isn't Iain Banks at his best but it's still pretty good. The SF premise of the novel is that alternate Earths are constantly branching off, and that there are a small number of people who are capable (with the aid of a drug) to move between those alternates – transition. An organization, usually called the Concern (or l'Expedience in some worlds), controls the transition drug, and it has come under the baleful influence of Madame d'Ortolan, who is bent on destroying anyone who opposes her. Opposed to her is Mrs. Mulverhill, who's established a shadow organization dedicated to wresting control from d'Ortolan.

The novel is told from the point of view of several characters:

Mdm. d'Ortolan and Mrs. Mulverhill, already mentioned. Temudjin Oh, an agent of the Concern; Patient 8262, inmate of an asylum; Adrian, a slick, Wall Street type from our own Earth; and the Philosopher, a torturer.

There are two books here – the first one is a relatively tame SF novel about alternate worlds; and the other is an indictment of modern capitalism, torture, and the national-security state, among other things. He's integrated them better in earlier works (particularly *The Culture* novels), and, in fact, the SF elements were window dressing rather than integral to the story. Nor were there any memorable characters. Mrs. Mulverhill and the Philosopher were the most interesting but Temudjin degenerated in the end to an unstoppable deus ex machina.

I'll recommend it to already-Iain-Banks fans but it's not where you'd want to start, either with his SF or his



mainstream works.

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## Mike Franklin says

I loved this book – it's probably now one of my favourite Banks books – though I suspect that just two or three years ago I would have been much more ambivalent; possibly even disliked it. I am glad I have recently read my first couple of Iain Banks 'mainstream' books, as opposed to Iain M Banks science fiction, as this book seemed to have a foot in each camp. The main story premise is firmly science fiction but the style of writing is much closer to his pretty weird mainstream writing; I saw a lot of parallels with *Walking on Glass* both in content and style. That style being much more ambiguous than most of his SF work with more of a hidden subtext and requiring a little more effort from the reader; something I like a lot.

As to that subtext, it is very much a book about transitions or boundaries, beyond the obvious transitions between alternative worlds/universes that is its main subject. I noticed many such themes throughout the book.

He talks about solipsism, which seems to be something of a recurring theme in his work, and in particular looks at the boundary between solipsism and belief in yourself; having the courage of your convictions and not crossing that boundary. Madame d'Ortolan is presented as someone who has crossed that boundary, with the belief that all the infinite worlds are there to serve her purpose, whereas Mrs Mulverhill must stay on the other side of the boundary with the belief that she is right to oppose Madame d'Ortolan, without justifying that belief simply because it is she who believes it.

There are other similar boundaries explored in the book. There is the distinction between terrorists and counter-terrorists. When the methods employed by counter-terrorists include torture, does that mean they've stepped over the line to become terrorists themselves? Banks almost forces us to consider that question by deliberately only addressing this issue in worlds where the terrorists are the *Christian* Terrorists. In particular we meet the first policeman to apply torture, thereby saving many lives, who then insisted on his own prosecution and imprisonment because he had broken the law. He is viewed by the new modern police (complete with their torturers) as a hero and he condemns those same police for thinking that way. As far as he is concerned the police have stepped over that boundary.

Another transition is Adrian's transformation from coke dealer to 'respectable' hedge fund dealer. How big a difference is there between the two? Banks doesn't seem to think there's very much! The *Patient 8262* thread examines the boundary between sane belief in an apparently insane reality and insane belief in an apparently impossible reality; another theme Banks seems to like visiting. I'm sure there are more examples that I have missed.

The basic premise of this book – the idea that people can flit across the multiple universes by taking over the bodies of people in that universe – is frankly so unlikely that it borders on the ridiculous and requires a significant suspension of disbelief. But that is okay; the ability to do this has always been one of the great strengths of science fiction; any science fiction book with time travel, faster than light travel, etc. falls into this area. However science fiction permits this sort of premise, allowing the author to then examine the implications and consequences, whether they be social, environmental, political, military, etc. Books that do this well rapidly become favourites for me and Banks' transition is an outstanding example of this type of book.

Added later: One final thought – an omission in my view – was that, though briefly touched on a couple of times, there was no discussion of the morality of taking over the bodies of innocent ‘civilians,’ sometimes for extended periods of time, and sometimes leaving them to the consequences of their having ‘murdered’ somebody whilst they weren’t in control. I felt that this was an area the book could and should have addressed.

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## Scott says

Have you read any Iain Banks? If you have, you know how great he can be - read this book, and enjoy. If you haven't, I wouldn't start with *Transition*. This novel isn't *The Bridge* with its frenzy of invention and strangeness, nor is it *Excession* or *The Player of Games* with their big scale mind-blowing Sci-Fi. *Transition* sits somewhere in between Banks' literary work and his SF, and in my opinion is middle-range in the rankings of his novels.

Anyway, comparisons aside, *Transition* is a still good read. It's pacey. It's engaging. It's fun, and it's imaginative. I enjoyed almost every page and was once again left marveling at Banks' storytelling skills.

The central concept of *Transition* is that a vast organisation called The Concern is working to influence the course of history across an infinite multiverse of Earths with agents who can shift between realities via the use of a drug called Septus. If you ignore the implausibility of the transit method (and I soon looked past it) this makes for a great setup- inter-dimensional assassins flitting through myriad realities, saving a life here, taking one there, nudging research in a more beneficial direction in one reality, shutting a dangerous scientific program down in another, all in the name of peace and prosperity.

The story primarily centers on one of the agents- Temujin Oh, a gifted inter-dimensional traveller with a knack for the dark arts of espionage. Oh works for one of the more ruthless members of The Concern's leadership, a woman named Madame D'Ortolan, who has big, ruthless plans for the direction of the concern and no scruples whatsoever in the methods employed to make her dreams concrete.

From this setup a number of narratives emerge, told from the perspectives of their protagonists- Oh himself, a patient in a hospital who appears to be in hiding from an unknown enemy, an on-the-up cocaine dealer cum hedge fund trader named Adrian and a torturer known as 'The Philosopher'.

We follow Temujin through many different worlds and watch as he is contacted by his old lover - a rebel concern agent named Mrs. Mulverhill - who reveals an alleged conspiracy at the heart of the Concern and attempts to turn him against his employer. The patient lies in his bed, wondering whether any of his fantastic memories of visiting multiple worlds are true, while the Philosopher explores his memories of his past, the events that made him a torturer and how he came to work for The Concern. Meanwhile Adrian, on our Earth, works his way up through English society into wealth and power and has his own encounters with the world-hopping agents of Temujin's employer.

Each of these narratives is interesting and compelling (I really loved Adrian's drug-dealer turned money-shyster arc), and the story flows really well, although it shifts pace abruptly near the end where one of the characters effectively becomes an unstoppable superbeing. Furthermore, the Philosopher's story could probably have been excised from the novel without making much difference to the book, and occasionally felt like an excuse to describe methods of torture.

Overall though, Banks once again makes reading his work effortless- the pages and chapters flow so smoothly, so engagingly, pulling the reader along at pace. It's all just so easy to enjoy. I was so engrossed with this book that I lost track of time and became a social hermit, ignoring my friends, my partner and my cat as I raced to find out what was in store for Adrian and Temujin.

Even a lesser example of Bank's work, and I think Transition falls into this category, is still an engaging, thrilling and memorable ride. My only regret in reading it is that I now have one less Iain Banks book to look forward to.

3.5 stars.

Trigger warning for RWNJ's- Banks of gets a few digs in at our messed up way of running the world - capitalist economies like ours are known to Concern agents as 'Greedist' Earths – and makes the occasional progressive political points that regular readers of his novels will be familiar with.

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## **Gordon says**

Billed as a "return to form" (although apart from the more recent The Steep Approach to Garbadale I haven't really had any issues, especially the Iain M Banks sci-fi as opposed to the Iain Banks thrillers (which tend to be weaker). (Ok, goodreads and the US indexing system doesn't highlight this discrepancy so go view it at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iain\\_Banks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iain_Banks)).

This is meant to be The Bridge-like and also to straddle his genres.

It starts well but then establishes itself as a fairly standard mega-parallel-verse-with-assassins story using Banks' multiple-first person characterizations. It soon flattens out and then degenerates into a confused, plot-lost, random sex scene, deus ex..., get-out-of-jail-free story with very little satisfactory conclusion. Even the exit 'gotcha' was less telling than the Sympathy for the Devil exit of Fallen (ok, an old average movie reference mixed with a book like this doesn't really make that much sense, but it's what leapt to mind).

I also think I spotted a couple of inconsistencies with the whole shifting thing, but would need to re-read it to be sure, and it may be that Banks was just trying to be really clever and I missed it. But it's not going to be high on my re-read list, whereas several other Banks are: The Algebraist, Look to Windward and Feersum Endjinn.

Disappointing, but even so it still averages out well above a bad book and is a jolly little read with some interesting insight into the minds of assassins, torturers, drug dealers and random mostly unsavoury characters.

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## **Robert says**

Banks has a number of themes that appear repeatedly across his now quite large output of fiction and they ALL get stuffed into this one. That makes for quite a rich book but some of it is just so unsubtle that it's irritating - take Adrian, the 100% cliché drug/financial dealer whose role is very minor as compared to the space he's given. Adrian is given that much space so that Banks can have another go at Capitalism, without

any subtlety involved and giving a girl in a bar a walk-on part as Banks' mouthpiece for what is wrong with modern business; Public Limited Companies, apparently. All of this was done much better in *The Business*.

We have another take on Interventionism, as if the Culture novels hadn't discussed it to death by the end of *Excession* (the fourth one).

Solipsism rears its head again, intertwined with, "What is Reality?" Look in *Against a Dark Background* and *The Bridge* for earlier occurrences.

Religion/terrorism/Islamophobia/the state of Britain these days, over-reliance on swearing, too much sex, yep, all the trademarks are here.

What has been absent lately but makes a very welcome return here, is an imaginative, well told, coherent, compelling story, although it does open really badly, with Banks being far too clever for his own good. He needs some new philosophical/political ideas to examine in his books, though.

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## **Ian says**

### IAN'S NEW AND IMPROVED REVIEW OF *TRANSITION*.

Immediately below is my original review, written 2/27/10. Farther down is my update and addendum, written 3/1/10 after I'd given this book a lot more thought.

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Apparently, every contemporary sci-fi author is now required to weigh in on the Multiverse. Perhaps it will soon be as indispensable to a sci-fi author's repertoire as a layup is to a basketball player's. The best Multiverse novel to date, in my opinion, is Ian McDonald's *Brasyl*, an elegant, richly written work on par with Ian McDonald's best. Over the last couple of years, though, I've been having a love affair with Iain Banks' works, and I was eager to see Banks' take on the Multiverse concept.

For most of the book, *Transition* was living up to my expectations. The character development was as good as I've seen from Banks and the plot was crafted with his usual clever eye for detail and puzzle-construction. For 350 pages I watched rich, deep characters evolve and take their places in an interlocking web of conspiracy, romance, politics, and philosophy. The prose was Banks' typical blend of smooth rationality, stream of consciousness, poetry, and humor. (Like I said, I've been having a love affair with Banks' work; his books just do it for me.) Best of all, *Transition* unfolded in a decidedly non-linear fashion! I *love* non-linear writing.

Then Banks crammed 150 pages worth of material into the last 50 pages. He made leaps over wide logical gaps with only the most tenuous lines of reasoning. He took a comfortable and deliberately-paced story, and sped it up until it sounded like somebody put a 33rpm vinyl on a 45rpm turntable. Banks built key plot points at the book's climax upon thin, flimsy foundations. In the last 50 pages, Banks put all his creative energy into being witty and clever and exciting, but at the expense of writing a solid and believable ending to a potentially brilliant work of science fiction.

*Transition* was 350 pages of five-star masterpiece-level material followed by 50 pages of two-star dither. How utterly disappointing.

I still think *Transition* is worth your time. Those first 350 pages contain some of the most interesting, creative, and well-written fiction I've seen. You might not be as disappointed as I was with the last 50 pages, and even if you are, it will still have been worth the read. Why? Well, here's a few things I loved about the book:

The non-linear tale: Like I said, I love me some non-linear storytelling, and nobody does it better than Iain Banks. Banks can jump you around in time and space like nobody's business. His talent for revealing, unraveling, and peeling back the layers of fact and emotion is both captivating and effective. His non-linear style drives the plot, makes key connections, and lets you into the hearts and minds of his characters, and all the while he clearly has fun with it.

No good and evil, just humans: no character in *Transition* strays too far toward the good "hero" end of the spectrum, and neither do they stray too far toward the evil "villain" end. They are humans, with human concerns, human practicalities, human strengths and human weaknesses. Some are certainly "better" people than others, to be sure, but all are identifiable.

An original take on the Multiverse concept: I had been looking forward to Banks writing a Multiverse novel because I love his imagination and creativity. In that respect, *Transition* did not disappoint. I totally dug how he painted the Multiverse and humans' place in it. I love the way people jump from one reality to another, in an efficient manner but not without consequences.

Creative scenery: a mainstay of Banks' Culture novels is the imaginative settings in which they are set. Banks has a vivid and fun imagination (he also has a rather disturbing imagination) and it shows in the physical scenery in which his characters operate.

Just enough crazy: Banks must be crazy--I mean actually mentally ill--because he seems to know too much about it, and his writing can make me feel like I've lost a few marbles myself.

*Transition* really could have been Iain Banks' masterpiece if only he had put some more energy into setting up and laying out a more complete and satisfying ending. It's as though the energy he put into the first 350 pages simply wore him out and he had nothing left for the ending. It's really too bad the way the reader is left with such a bad taste after reading a book with such a great beginning and tremendous potential. But don't take my word for it; see what you think for yourself!

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#### UPDATE AND ADDENDUM:

I loved the late 80's and early 90's. The clothes, the music ... the cars were serious crap, but I was always in to 60's-era muscle cars anyway ... and let's not forget the artwork! Okay, the artwork was pretty much crap, too, but I was quite fond of those computer-generated colorful fields of visual gibberish, which contained a hidden picture that you could only see by focusing your eyes at some point beyond the picture itself. Remember those? There would be a pirate ship hidden in a field of blue wavy things, or a barn would pop out of a field of green flowery shapes. The point of this art (should I put "art" in quotes here?) was that the intended object of your attention was always there, but was hidden under a layer of distraction. You just had to focus your eyes beyond, or perhaps through, the field of gibberish.

The analogy between that rad 80's artwork and *Transition* is neither complete nor perfect--for one thing, I don't think the surface layer of *Transition* is gibberish at all--but the analogy works for my purposes. The true picture Banks painted in *Transition* is not the storyline you read on the surface, but something

underneath.

In fact I was fully prepared for people who read my original review to accuse me of not having focused my eyes properly, of having seen "dither" in the last 50 pages because I couldn't take my focus off the surface. My response would have been to say that I actually had focused beyond the surface and seen Banks' real picture but that my criticism of the last 50 pages still stands. The last 50 pages was still paced too fast, still crammed in too much info, and still was not set up as well as it could have been.

Well I've given the book a great deal more thought over the last couple of days, including reading some commentaries by people clearly much smarter than I am, and, upon further reflection, I have the following to add:

- 1) My criticism of the last 50 pages *still* stands, though it no longer bothers me very much given the additional insights I've gained into the book as a whole. Thus, my rating goes from 4 stars to 5.
- 2) I still believe I was (properly) focusing beyond the surface storyline and seeing a hidden picture underneath, though now I realize I was only seeing one of several related hidden pictures.
- 3) *Transition*, as it turns out, is like a piece of 80's computer artwork that has two or three pictures layered under the visual gibberish and you have to re-focus your eyes further beyond the surface to see each layer. I was seeing beyond the surface to the first hidden layer, but not to the second or third.
- 4) The second and third layers of hidden artwork are where the real treasure lies. This is why my criticism of the last 50 pages is no longer such a big deal; in essence, my criticism applies to the surface storyline but not to the gems hidden underneath.
- 5) Banks' anti-capitalist rhetoric actually has a place within a larger and deeper point in *Transition* (in other books it comes across as the point itself, which is too preachy, often even for those who agree with it).
- 6) Banks ties together some potential philosophical and cosmological implications of the Multiverse in ways I never could have thought of.
- 7) Who would have thought an author could get so much material from the concept of solipsism?

So there you go. I now see *Transition* as fulfilling much more of my expectations. I acknowledge the possibility that I so badly *wanted* the book to fulfill my expectations that I have simply hunted for reasons to give it a five-star rating. Maybe the second and third-layered "hidden" pictures I now think I see are figments of my imagination. Maybe I'm trying too hard to make mysteries out of nothing just so I can justify my love of Banks and my expectations for his newest genre-busting novel. Or, perhaps, *Transition* is really that good.

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## **Manny says**

This entertaining SF thriller combines the premises of two of my favorite SF classics. In Asimov's *The End of Eternity*, an all-powerful group called the Eternals use time-travel to control the course of human history. Whenever something bad is about to happen, they engineer a carefully timed intervention to steer us away from it. Typically, these interventions are as inconspicuous as possible. Pohl's underrated *A Plague of Pythons* explores another, rather nastier idea. Suppose a device were invented which let you take over

someone else's body at will. How would people use it, and what would happen to society?

Banks fuses these two themes and sets them within a nicely realized version of the quantum multiverse. Every possible quantum reality exists, and there is a drug which allows you to move between the different alternate worlds; as in the Pohl novel, you do this by directing your consciousness into another person's body. The organization who control the drug use it, so they say, to make the various worlds into better places. But, as in the Asimov book, it becomes increasingly clear that things are not what they are supposed to be.

Both the original novels are about power and the abuse of power, and Banks follows in their footsteps. He's sometimes a little too explicit and preachy, and I was oddly reminded of George Bernard Shaw: you're in the middle of a dramatic piece of sex or violence (there's plenty of both), and it's suddenly put on hold for a page-long moral disquisition. But, as with Shaw, I was generally willing to forgive him. The plot, though perhaps overly complicated, is gripping, and the writing is of the high quality Banks fans have come to expect. Also, Mrs Mulverhill is hawt.

As sometimes happens with Banks, there is a mild aftertaste of paranoia. I'm not sure I would have awarded it four stars if I'd read it a month ago, but it was one of those cases where the timing was spot-on perfect. I noticed it in a bookshop near the Piazza San Marco on Sunday, and after discovering that a large part of the novel was set in Venice found that I was simply unable to put it down; I finished it earlier this evening on the train back to Geneva, where I'm now writing this review.

Whatever made us go into the bookshop and then guided me to that particular book? I can't quite reconstruct the sequence of events, but if agents of the Concern somehow nudged me into doing it I have no idea what their motives were. I'll let you know if there are more odd coincidences.

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## **zxvasdf says**

Imagine a single moment. Rippling from that core moment (let's use the honeycomb pattern) are the very same moments, only with very minute variations, and these changes increase the further from that original moment. Now every of these moments are also core moments with their own bloom expanding in all directions and so forth. That's infinity. And there are people transitioning, entering lives and bodies to cause changes that benefit the unknowable wants of the Concern, the organization facilitating transitions.

Transition... is Banks leaping headfirst into the concepts first developed by Michael Moorcock with his Eternal Champion collection. In the Moorcock stories, especially those of Jerry Cornelius, our characters find themselves in lives and times that aren't clearly realized to the reader.

In Transition, Banks exploits this to develop the Concern, a less benevolent entity than the Culture, a Banks staple. At the risk of digressing, I propose that the Concern is set firmly within the universe of the Culture, or, rather, the Culture is embedded within the infinity of the Concern.

Banks manipulates infinity, causing the reader to realize there are infinite stratas, that there are smaller and larger infinities, and that it's a huge and hard thing to wrap your mind around. And it all leads up to a revelation. In a way, Banks has taken the best conceit of many monumental sf novels: the spice as a drug from Dune, a man's damning drive for redemption from The Stars My Destination; the weirdness of

Moorcock's second ether as well as Dancers at the End of Time; well, I might be overreaching here, but yeah.

I can't help but wonder about transitions. You leave your body, your life, never to return. It's a different reality from leaving your country to move to another place. Material possessions are lowered in value and importance. You cultivate skills and mental agility, and turn to tricks to survive in unexpected situations, which can be the norm in transitioning, especially when leaping into unfamiliar cultures. It's something I would try, and would it be without guilt that I am abandoning my life? I mean, it's infinity. All stories are already told, and we only need to step in and play our role.

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