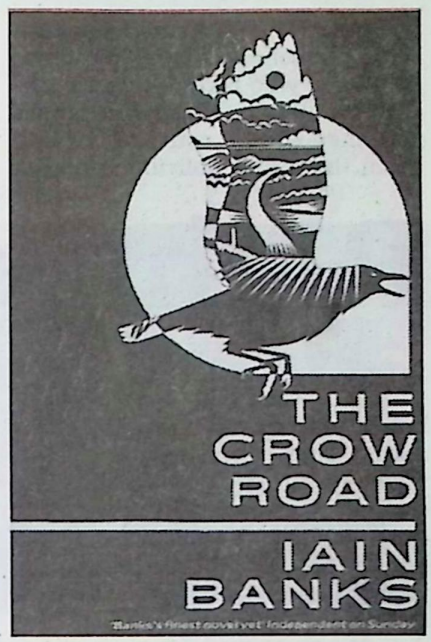
The Crow Road
by Iain Banks

Sameeha Suraiya



WITH the breath-taking Scotland as its setting, combined with a high drama, which does not appear unusual when the story is concerned with adolescents, *The Crow Road*, a Scots expression for death, will take you zooming out on one crazy roller coaster ride. Our hero is Prentice Mchoan a teen, negotiating sex, drink and death in the midst of a wealthy but eccentric Scottish family. He is also the narrator for most of the novel.

Prentice has been through life like a lot of usschool, college and now at university. He also happens to come from quite an unusual family, not just because they guard some mysterious pasts, but also because the McHoans tend to die in rather odd ways. While being told through the first-person narration, the novel also veers into various time frames, most during Prentice's lifetime. It is these sudden flashbacks that ultimately lead Prentice to a closer understanding of his family and his own life. This may seem contrived, but as you read along you realize this is rather a reflection of how our mind really works, of Prentice's struggle in piecing together enough truth about life and relationships. The flashback technique also allures the reader into a deeper insight of the characters and circumstances that Iain Banks manages to capture in such an absorbing manner.

Iain Banks, the writer of this Scottish coming-of-age novel, was born in Scotland in 1954. He has achieved success in two genres: mainstream, literary fiction and the science fiction books written under the name Iain M. Banks. His novels have attracted the attention of film-makers and broadcasters. *The Crow Road* was successfully adapted by the BBC into a four-part television series. Banks's novels usually explore gothic settings, contemporary politics, pop culture and technology. They are mainly of a rather dark and macabre nature. In *The Crow Road*, there is more mainstream humour, though the grotesquerie is still present if in more muted form; the novel begins with Prentice's grandmother 'exploding'. The novel begins with Prentice having returned to his home in Glasgow for the funeral. He is obviously quite bright, but his major character traits are that he is unobservant and stubborn, which makes him disastrous at relationships. The best example of this is how he reacts when he discovers that his brother is the new boyfriend of the girl he has worshipped silently from afar for years.

A large part of Prentice's growing up is his coming to an understanding of his parents' generation; he becomes obsessed with some papers left behind by his uncle Rory, who vanished mysteriously several years earlier. This becomes particularly important to Prentice after his father's death (a militant atheist, he is struck by lightning climbing a church tower lightning rod, defying God to prove his existence). As Prentice becomes bent on knowing what really led to his Uncle Rory's disappearance, he also begins to explore his relationship with his father, with whom he had fallen out over a debate about the nature of God. The book does not figure heavily on religion but it does shed light on some ideas that prove to be very engaging. Spiritual crisis is after all, what all sensitive adolescents have to face and struggle through. But more than that the novel explores the relationships we have, the way we are raised and the world we live in.

A story set in Scotland is never complete without depictions of the sparkling beauty of its countryside. Cairns, lochs, mountains, valleys and seas all feature here. Coupled with Banks's flowing prose, this is a novel that sweeps through some of the ancient settings of Scotland, where history remains as elusive and mysterious as the history of the Mchoans. The novel portrays characters in strange situations but nevertheless, characters who you will find surprisingly to be just like any of us, utterly true-to-life in their failings and triumphs. Teenagers getting stoned on long walks across moors, an uncle having his personal religion, a brother who earns doing stand-up comedies and a reserved father with a sad lifeall lead up to one stunning climax that will leave you out of breath. So yes, highly recommended!