

The Foundation Trilogy Short Guide

The Foundation Trilogy by Isaac Asimov

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Overview

The Foundation Trilogy consists of three books of stories—Foundation, Foundation and Empire, and Second Foundation—that form a history of the future. The events in the trilogy are loosely based on the fall of the Roman Empire, but the trilogy is also about the nature of history itself. The books have a strong narrative line, one that is familiar to many readers but presented in a fictional form. In Asimov's work, the Roman Empire becomes the Galactic Empire, and a sophisticated new science known as psychohistory allows people to predict future events. Within this framework, the trilogy explores such issues as the accurate determining of historical trends, the conflict between determinism and free will, and the ability of one person or group of people to control history.

About the Author

Isaac Asimov was born in the Soviet Union, in Petrovichi, on January 2, 1920. When he was three, his family emigrated and settled in Brooklyn, where they operated a series of candy stores. An early and voracious reader, Asimov advanced rapidly through the public school system and completed junior high school at age eleven and high school at fifteen. During this period he discovered science fiction and became an ardent fan as well as an aspiring writer. His first story came out when he was eighteen and others followed steadily. "Nightfall," the most frequently anthologized science-fiction story ever, was published when Asimov was twenty-one.

At Columbia University, Asimov began to drift away from medical studies in favor of chemistry. (His distaste for zoology intensified when one assignment required him to capture, chloroform, and dissect a stray cat—something that Asimov says he still regrets having done.) He graduated at nineteen, was turned down by various medical schools, and with relief, turned to graduate work in chemistry. His graduate studies were interrupted by three years at the Philadelphia navy yard, followed by nearly nine months in the army. He received his doctorate from Columbia in 1948 and became an instructor at the Boston University School of Medicine.

He remained at Boston University, rising to the rank of associate professor, until he left in 1958 to pursue a full-time writing career.

Asimov has written a two-volume autobiography, *In Memory Yet Green* (1979) and *In Joy Still Felt* (1980). He has also written about his early interest in science fiction in the introductions to separate stories in his anthology *Before the Golden Age* (1974).

Setting

The Foundation Trilogy is one of the first series in science fiction to be set within a historical framework of future events, a concept used by many later writers, including Larry Niven, James Blish, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Each story is set in a different period of Galactic Empire history during which the Foundation faces and solves some crisis that threatens civilization. Each story's plot centers on solving a problem by a combination of deductive reasoning and knowledge of the historical process. This plot focus enables Asimov to introduce a greater intellectual content into the space opera format of pulp magazine science fiction. Before the publication of The Foundation Trilogy, many sciencefiction works had used galactic empires or federations simply as a backdrop for stories of heroic adventure. In the trilogy, Asimov excludes sex and violence almost entirely, concentrating on intellectual activity and using each story's political setting as a major plot element.

Social Sensitivity

Some critics have seen *The Foundation Trilogy* as an endorsement of historical determinism, a popular concept in the 1930s that viewed individuals as caught in the grip of forces beyond their control.

Yet the trilogy's outlook is more reflective of the scientific optimism also prevalent in the 1930s; the work portrays a universe where economic disorder or the rise of barbarian warlords can be corrected with the application of reason, science, and technology. The Foundation, established on the planet Terminus, is an island of scientific knowledge in a crumbling Galactic Empire. Its ability to triumph over warlords, bureaucrats, powerful mutants, and even its own irrationality expresses the hope that reason can triumph over impossible odds.

Literary Qualities

The Foundation Trilogy draws upon the space opera tradition developed in the science-fiction pulps of the 1930s. Outstanding examples include E. E. Smith's Skylark series beginning with *Skylark of Space* (1928), Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space* (1934), and John W. Campbell's *The Mightiest Machine* (1934). These are primarily adventure stories set in a distant future that boasts galaxy-spanning empires or federations, spaceships that travel faster than the speed of light, and massive space battles fought with atomic weaponry. Asimov transformed this tradition by toning down the wildly adventurous plots and adding an intellectual dimension.

Asimov's original idea for The Foundation Trilogy was to retell Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788) as science fiction.

Just as Gibbon, a man of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, introduced a skeptical, rationalistic approach to history, so Asimov championed the cause of Enlightenment values in science fiction. Even his lucid, unemotional prose recalls the neoclassical prose of the eighteenth century.

The stories of The Foundation Trilogy form a coherent whole. Few characters appear in more than one or two stories, yet a character's actions in an earlier story often influence events in later stories. Hari Seldon appears as a holographic image in the later stories to explain various aspects of his Plan.

Bayta Darell, the heroine of "The Mule," is the grandmother of and inspiration for Arcadia Darell in "Search by the Foundation." Institutions such as the Mayors or the Traders, created to overcome a threat to the Foundation in one story, become obstacles to overcoming threats in other stories. The transformation of characters into historical figures through the course of the series allows Asimov to show the full implications of their actions from a broader perspective.

Asimov reinforces this sense of history by including quotations from the 116th edition of the "Encyclopedia Galactica" throughout the trilogy to provide background information on characters, institutions, and events. This technique links the individual dramas of the stories to a larger whole.



Themes and Characters

The trilogy revolves around the concept of psychohistory, a science that enables people to accurately predict the future. Its originator, psychologist Hari Seldon, uses psychohistory to predict the fall of the Galactic Empire and then establishes the Foundation (a planet of physical scientists) and the Second Foundation (a group of psychologists).

The purpose of the Foundations is to truncate the amount of time that humankind will spend in the dark age that will inevitably follow the fall of the Galactic Empire.

The ability to predict the future through psychohistory is the key to the Foundation's success against its barbaric neighbors, but the ability is found less in scientific specialists than in common-sense, empirical thinkers such as traders and politicians. Psychohistory predicts only the actions of masses of people and deals only in probabilities, so that individual choice still exists. Nor can psychohistory predict the rise of the Mule, a mutant with great mental powers. Asimov believes in the value of scientific progress based on free inquiry—hence no scientific discovery, however useful, is the final answer. The Foundation always has new problems to solve, and frequently the solution to a previous problem impedes the solution of the current problem.

The Foundation Trilogy has no single protagonist, and no character appears directly in more than a few stories. Hari Seldon is probably the most important character, even though he appears directly in only one story. That story, "The Psychohistorians," is important because it sets up the entire series in depicting the origin of the Foundation.

Moreover, Seldon's holographic image occasionally appears in other stories.

Seldon represents the scientific planner, the mathematical genius who can predict and manipulate future history.

He exemplifies the power of science and reason to analyze and control nature (in this case human nature) for the benefit of humankind, one of the most important themes in Asimov's writing.

Two important female characters appear in the trilogy, Bayta Darell and her granddaughter Arcadia (Arkady). These intelligent and heroic women contribute much to the triumph of Seldon's Plan.

Such female characters were rare in the serial science fiction of the 1940s. Perhaps the most interesting character in the trilogy is the Mule, a mutant with the power to restructure human emotions.

The Seldon Plan has failed to predict the appearance of the Mule, who can be defeated only by the mental power of the Second Foundation. Asimov provides little information about the Mule, not even his true name. He remains a mysterious figure who, for all his



power and ruthlessness, is a somewhat pathetic being, a short ugly man who is outwitted by Bayta Darell because he never bothers to control her emotions. She is the only person to naturally feel any affection for him, and he cherishes her spontaneous affection too much to induce it artificially. The Mule represents the unforeseen element in any scientific system, no matter how advanced. Though ultimately defeated, the Mule possesses the danger and attractiveness of the unknown.

Topics for Discussion

1. How does Hari Seldon manipulate people in order to establish the Foundation? Is he justified in doing so?
2. Why are no psychologists allowed on Terminus?
3. In "The Mayors," Mayor Hardin of Terminus invents a religion to make the barbarians accept atomic energy. Describe the religion. What kind of comment do you think Asimov is making about the relationship of religion and science?
4. Why didn't the Seldon Plan predict the Mule? What does the Mule symbolize?
5. How do the Mayors and the Traders—institutions created to solve problems facing the Foundation—end up impeding attempts to solve later problems?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a paper describing the Seldon Plan and comment on what you think are the Plan's strong points and weak points.
2. Several critics, such as Maxine Moore in her essay "Asimov, Calvin, and Moses" (in *Voices for the Future*, edited by Thomas D. Clareson, 1976), have pointed out the biblical parallels in *The Foundation Trilogy*. See how many biblical parallels you can find, and write a paper describing them. What purpose do they serve?
3. Research the fall of the Roman Empire, and write a paper discussing how Asimov draws on this event in the plot of his trilogy.
4. Determinism is a philosophy that asserts that every event is inevitable and that free will is nonexistent in humankind. How does Asimov address the issue of determinism versus free will in *The Foundation Trilogy*?
5. *The Foundation Trilogy* has proved to be a remarkably popular and enduring science-fiction series. Write a paper discussing the possible reasons for the trilogy's popularity.

For Further Reference

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Gunn, James. *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. An important critical study of Asimov's fiction.

Olander, Joseph D., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. *Isaac Asimov*. New York: Taplinger, Edinburgh, and Harris, 1977. A collection of critical essays by various writers.

Patrouch, Joseph F., Jr. *The Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov*. New York: Doubleday, 1974. A valuable analysis of Asimov's science fiction, with special attention to literary techniques.

Related Titles

Three of Asimov's other books—*Pebble in the Sky*, *The Stars, Like Dust*, and *The Currents of Space*—are set in the universe of *The Foundation Trilogy* but at a much earlier time, when the Galactic Empire is at its height. *Pebble in the Sky* is a great favorite with science-fiction readers, but these works have little of the stature of *The Foundation Trilogy*.

Foundation's Edge is a direct sequel to the trilogy and the first novel-length treatment of the Foundation. Asimov expands the scope of the Foundation stories to include not only the Galactic Empire and the Seldon Plan but Earth as well. The novel also includes references to Asimov's Robot stories and to his novel *The End of Eternity*, linking much of his principal fiction together. A later novel, *Robots and Empire*, tells the story of the founding of the Galactic Empire. *Foundation's Edge* was well received and won a Hugo Award from the World Science Fiction Convention for best novel. *Robots' and Empire* received a mixed response, with some reviewers feeling that its value lay in its place in Asimov's writing rather than as a work in its own right.



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