



THE CONCEPT OF SETTING IN SCIENCE FICTION .ROLE OF SETTING IN ASIMOV'S WORKS: CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE

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Abstract: *This article examines the setting features in two key works by Isaac Asimov “I, Robot” and “Foundation”. It explores how the setting influences character development and the development of central themes in the works, such as moral dilemmas, the ethics of artificial intelligence, problems of civilization survival, and the role of knowledge. In “I, Robot” the focus is on the relationship of humans and robots within an already existing society, while in Foundation the large-scale galactic setting serves as a backdrop for analyzing political and historical processes.*

Key words: *science fiction*

Probably the most important thing that Asimov brought to science fiction was a new understanding of robots and the potential relationship between humans and machines,” Yaszek said. Zeb Rocklin remembers the books sitting on his father’s shelf. Old-looking, thin, but still more colorful than many of the other books his dad owned, the paperback versions of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy enthralled the teen when he finally hauled them down and read them.

“It was inspiring, that you could understand the world in terms of universal theories and mathematical quantitative analysis, that the world that we actually live in could be neat and orderly and have hidden universal laws out there that were just waiting to be discovered,” said Rocklin.

As it turned out, young Rocklin — partially inspired by his favorite science fiction writer — grew up to be a scientist at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Now



he studies soft matter physics, and even uses Asimov to help teach today's students some of those hidden universal laws he pondered as a kid.

Rocklin isn't the only member of the Georgia Tech faculty who found inspiration in Asimov, who whose birth 100 years ago will be celebrated on Jan. 2 (the exact date of Asimov's birth is unclear). Among those who have stories about how Asimov's writing influenced them or the fields they study are Amanda Weiss of the School of Modern Languages; Peter Brecke of the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs; astrophysicist Ignacio Taboada; Mark Wheeler, the interim chair of the School of Psychology; and Magnus Egerstedt, the Steve W. Chaddick School Chair of the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering.

Of course, it's not just Georgia Tech scientists who have been influenced by Asimov. The faculty and students who study science fiction in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication (LMC) find equal inspiration in Asimov, a noted humanist whose work mirrors one mission of scholars in LMC: to use literature as a lens to examine the defining social, moral, and ethical issues of our technological age.

"As scholars and professors in the classroom, that's one of our goals, to use science fiction to teach our students to think about the world and how science and technology can affect it," said Lisa Yaszek, professor of science fiction studies and director of Georgia Tech's Sci Fi Lab. "At a university that's so interested in making sure we produce ethically and morally sound scientists and technologists, that seems really important, and this is a wonderful and simple way to model it for students."

Asimov, who died in 1992, was a prolific writer, authoring some 500 books during his lifetime. Many were science fiction tales, but his interests ranged from the Bible to Shakespeare, geosciences to physics, and he wrote many popular science texts that helped bring scientific thinking to millions.

His most famous works were the *Foundation* trilogy and *I, Robot*, in which he introduced his famous "Three Laws of Robotics."

On their face, the laws are meant to be rules for controlling technology. Asimov, however, used them to explore the unintended consequences of technology, and how humanity could overcome them.



“Asimov’s robot stories tend to follow a very particular structure: people program robots, robots act in ways that seem to break the laws of robotics, humans figure out what’s going on and fix the problem,” Yaszek said.

For mechanical engineering student Brooke Thompson, a fellow in the Sci Fi Lab, Asimov’s writings even resonate in how she thinks about coding.

“Although not a one-to-one analogue, I have found the process Asimov goes through to connect the logical thoughts of an apparently malfunctioning robot to be quite similar to logically connecting together what a computer is doing when some code you want to run does not output an expected result,” she said. “In a more abstract sense, Asimov’s speculations on artificial life also make for useful thought experiments for considering the very real ethical and practical complications that will accompany the continuing rapid advancement of both robotics and artificial intelligence technologies in the world.”

Asimov is credited with helping inspire countless science fiction writers and build the popularity of a genre that is now marked by enormous diversity. To learn more about these varied voices, the faculty of Georgia Tech’s Science Fiction Studies program have selected “Six Things to Read for Science Fiction Day,” also known as Isaac Asimov’s birthday. These titles explore themes familiar to Asimov’s readers, and many were written by or feature emerging or marginalized voices and characters—including the female writer who inspired Asimov himself.

“In the moment right after World War II when we were really beginning to doubt the goodness of our science and technologies, Asimov insisted that we wouldn’t necessarily always program the worst of ourselves into these things,” Yaszek said.

“Probably the most important thing that Asimov brought to science fiction was a new understanding of robots and the potential relationship between humans and machines,” Yaszek said. “He introduced us to a very different kind of robot, the friendly robot, the helper robot, the robot who will move with us into the future and help us create a new and better future.”



Not all of his stories were optimistic, of course, but still carry important reminders about the interplay of science and society. Take “Nightfall,” the story of scientists racing to collect observations about the nearing eclipse of the planet’s multiple suns, which have provided them uninterrupted daylight for more than 2,000 years.

In the end, the scientists fall prey to the madness they predicted, but less because of the darkness than the millions of stars only the planet’s religious cultists had predicted.

“It’s a fantastic story because it dwells on understanding the consequences of scientific knowledge in society, which is really what science fiction is about. It’s not about the science,” said Taboada, the astrophysicist. “It’s about the consequences on people.”

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