

CELEBRATING ISAAC

On October 26 I gave a talk about Isaac Asimov at West Virginia University in Morgantown. The occasion was part of a continuing lecture series called “A Celebration of Ideas,” and the WVU library and the university’s Chief of Staff Jay Cole and his marvelous student assistant Molly Simis came up with the happy idea of featuring a talk about Isaac, in large part because the library’s special collections have what probably is the largest collection of Asimov materials after that held by Boston University.

How WVU got the Asimov collection is a story in itself: a WVU alumnus, Larry Shaver, now living in Oklahoma City had been collecting Asimov books and other materials since his college days. He offered his collection to WVU, and the library had the wisdom to accept them. Later Carlos Patterson of Sacramento, California, not an alumnus, heard about the collection and added several hundred items from his Asimov collection; the WVU collection now has almost seven hundred items, including games and quizzes with Isaac’s name on them. Both donors flew in to Morgantown for the occasion.

Here are the remarks I made to an enthusiastic audience of 180 (mostly) Asimov fans in a big room at the WVU student center.

I am pleased to talk about my friend and literary model, Isaac Asimov, in this, the year he would have been ninety—or maybe ninety-one. As nearly as his parents could calculate, he was born on January 2, 1920, but that was in Petrovichi, Russia, where records and memories are unclear, and he may have been born as early as October 4. He would have been astonished at the idea of this kind of celebration; when I interviewed him for

my book about his science fiction, he said that I should be writing my own fiction.

Isaac was brought to this country at the age of three and grew up in a series of Brooklyn candy stores. That, he felt, shaped his later life. He did not regret the habits they instilled in him—with the possible exception of the social awkwardness created by never visiting anyone or having anyone visit the family, tied as they were to the unrelenting demands of the store—because they resulted in the adult, successful Isaac Asimov. And that was a very good thing to be.

He found ways to cope with the larger world, at first with wit bordering on the smart-alecky and later with what he called “gallantry to the ladies,” which consisted of suggestive remarks offered as jests, and an overall air of amazement at his own success coupled with a generous accounting of his own failings and the putdowns by his friends. In his school days, for instance, he recounted the occasion when Leigh Hunt’s “Abou Ben Adhem” was scheduled for discussion. Ben Adhem, whose name is not in the angel’s tablet as one who loves the lord, asks to be written as one who loves his fellow man, and the poem ends with “And lo! Ben Adhem’s name led all the rest.” Isaac was ready for the teacher’s question: “Why did Ben Adhem’s name lead all the rest?” “Alphabetical order, sir!” Isaac volunteered. He was sent to the principal, Isaac recounted, “but it was worth it.”

Isaac credited his transformation from annoying know-it-all to genial comrade to an incident late in World War II, when he had been inducted into the Army and sent to H-bomb tests in the Pacific. He heard a soldier telling a couple of others about how the bomb worked. He rose to assume the smart man’s burden and offer

the correct account when he asked himself who appointed him their educator, and sat down. Ironically, a few years later he assumed the smart man's burden by beginning a series of non-fiction books about almost everything that we celebrate today, that led Professor George G. Simpson of Harvard to call him "one of our natural wonders and national resources."

Before Isaac was a celebrated sage, however, he was a science fiction writer, and even in his latter days he wanted to be known as a science fiction writer. "It is uphill to science fiction; downhill to everything else," he commented. He wrote about attending a *World Book* meeting of contributors where each was introduced with an orchestral theme. To Isaac's chagrin, he was introduced with "How deep is the ocean, how high is the sky?" "No matter how various the subject matter I wrote on," he said, "I was a science fiction writer first and it is as a science fiction writer that I want to be identified."

In the introduction to *Nebula Award Stories Eight*, he wrote:

I began by writing science fiction . . . and for thirty years I've found that my training in science fiction made it possible for me to write anything. . . . I have written about 150 books as of now, and I tell you, that of all the things I write, science fiction is by far the hardest thing I do.

Isaac fell in love with science fiction in his father's candy store, which stocked newspapers and magazines. Isaac learned to read them so carefully they could be returned looking untouched—a habit that he retained until the end of his life. Among those magazines was a new kind of publication that had started when Isaac was six years old: *Amazing Stories*, then *Science Wonder Stories* and *Astounding Stories of Super Science*. Isaac had taught himself to read at the age of five, and Isaac's father always viewed his son with a sense of awe and a determination that his elder son would be a doctor. He ordered Isaac not to waste his time on such pulp magazines until Isaac pointed out the word "sci-

ence" in the magazine's title.

Isaac's father gave him a used office-sized typewriter when Isaac was fifteen, and Isaac put it to use immediately, writing letters to the science fiction magazines commenting on the stories, particularly those in *Astounding Stories*, which had recently been acquired by Street & Smith from the bankrupt Clayton magazine chain. His fascination was intensified when John W. Campbell, Jr., was named editor of the magazine in 1937 and changed the name to *Astounding Science-Fiction*. Isaac decided then to start writing science fiction stories, and, more importantly, to write them for *Astounding*.

Soon afterward Isaac discovered that the magazine was edited in Manhattan, a subway ride away, and Isaac ventured in to meet Campbell. It was the first of a series of meetings that would shape Isaac's developing mind and future. Campbell was patient and provocative about science, culture, and writing, and he was willing to talk by the hour to the inexperienced teenager, even reading the stories Isaac began bringing to him and pointing out their flaws while he rejected them. The first story Isaac published, "Marooned Off Vesta," when he was nineteen, was in *Amazing Stories* and the second as well, but he counted the real beginning of his career from the story "Trends" that he published in *Astounding* a couple of months later.

That began a remarkable collaboration of editor and author that lasted ten years. That collaboration included Isaac's robot stories, his Foundation stories, and his non-series stories, among which was, in 1942, his first story featured on the cover, "Nightfall." Although he didn't know it, this publication would establish his reputation as a major writer. The story illustrated the way in which the editor and the author worked together. Isaac had come to Campbell's office on one of his frequent visits, and Campbell quoted a sentence from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*: "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and

preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God.” And Campbell said, “What do you think would happen, Asimov, if men were to see the stars for the first time in a thousand years.” “I don’t know,” Isaac said, and Campbell replied. “I think they would go mad. I want you to write a story about that.”

The incident brings up a question about Isaac’s writing style. Style, Todorov wrote, is what stands between the reader and the text, and Isaac wanted nothing to stand in the way. One of the first scholars writing about Isaac’s work, Joe Patrouch, commented that Isaac could write poetically when he wished and cited a paragraph near the end of “Nightfall.” Isaac replied that transparency was a style, and that paragraph didn’t prove that he could write poetically, since it had been inserted by Campbell and made no logical sense in the context of the story. But he never removed the paragraph from later reprintings. He also resented readers telling him that “Nightfall” was his best story and suggesting that he write more stories like that; he felt that he had learned a good deal about writing since he was twenty-two. But when he incorporated himself, he did so under the name of “Nightfall, Inc.” Isaac had no fears of irony.

Meanwhile he had joined a fan group called the Futurians, one of many chartered by Hugo Gernsback’s *Wonder Stories*. The Futurians included Fred Pohl, Donald Wollheim, Cyril Kornbluth, Richard Wilson, James Blish, Robert Lowndes, Damon Knight, Judith Merrill, and Virginia Kidd—fans who would help shape science fiction for the next few decades as writers, editors, agents, and even publishers. Isaac continued his education into college, not always happily as he discovered that he could not get admitted to the right college (he was admitted to Columbia’s Seth Junior College and then to Columbia University rather than Columbia College), that the wonder child who had skipped several grades was not as good as some of his classmates at some subjects, and that he

disliked anatomy and dissection.

He also discovered that he could not get into medical school and decided to study chemistry toward a graduate degree, interrupted by a period of military research at the U.S. Navy Yard in Philadelphia with Robert Heinlein and L. Sprague de Camp. All this time Isaac was writing and selling stories regularly to Campbell. As a writer who had experienced financial struggles myself, I was surprised—and, to be honest, somewhat bemused—to read in Isaac’s autobiography that he had earned a total of \$7,821.75 in his first eleven years, or about \$710 a year.

Isaac earned his Ph.D. in 1948 and, after a year of post-doctoral research at Columbia, was hired as an instructor in biochemistry at the Boston University School of Medicine. That was the year he wrote his first novel, *Grow Old With Me*, which Doubleday published as *Pebble in the Sky* in 1950. The same year a fan publisher, Gnome Press, collected his first robot stories as *I, Robot* and followed that with his *Foundation* books, all eventually taken over by Doubleday. It was the beginning of a relationship with Doubleday that lasted until his death, reaching its high point with *The Caves of Steel* in 1954 and its sequel *The Naked Sun* in 1957.

Meanwhile Isaac had turned to non-fiction at Boston University, publishing his first scientific book, *Biochemistry and Human Metabolism* in 1952 and progressing to his first solo text *The Chemistry of Life*. He had been approached to write a book about science for teenagers. His career as a writer was taking off in surprising ways. He had earned \$1,695 for his writing in 1949, more than \$4,700 in 1950, \$3,625 in 1951, and an astonishing \$8,550 in 1952. The last was half again as large as his university salary, now \$5,500.

By 1957, Isaac realized that he was primarily a writer. A new dean asked him to devote more of his time to research. “My writing is my research,” he insisted, but the dean persisted, and Isaac was forced to resign everything except his title—by

that time he was a tenured associate professor—and turn to full-time writing. Unfortunately for science fiction, he decided to devote his time to non-fiction. He attributed that decision to the launching of Sputnik, the first satellite, by the Soviets and the need for a greater emphasis on scientific education, but his non-fiction was a lot easier to write, more publishers were eager for it, and they paid better. He wrote short stories with some regularity, but he did not write another science fiction novel for fifteen years.

Isaac was so prolific as a non-fiction author that it is impossible to describe even a small proportion of his production. His fiction listing covers two pages in the compilation that accompanied every autobiographical work. His anthologies—it should be admitted that Isaac delighted in the number of works he had published, and toward the end of his career he padded the list with dozens of anthologies he edited with Martin H. Greenberg, the all-time champion of anthologists—covered nearly three pages. But his non-fiction covered more than five pages.

They are best described by categories, which helps, as well, to illustrate the astonishing scope of his interests. General science—typified by his *Intelligent Man's Guide to Science*—totaled twenty-four books. Mathematics was a measly seven. Astronomy—clearly a favorite—reached sixty-eight; earth sciences, eleven; chemistry and biochemistry, sixteen; physics, twenty-two; biology, seventeen; history, nineteen; the Bible, nine; literature, ten; humor and satire—including *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man* that got Isaac an appearance on the “Tonight” show—nine; science essay collections mostly from the monthly articles he wrote for *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, forty; science fiction essay collections from the editorials he wrote for *Isaac Asimov's Magazine*, two; autobiography, three; and miscellaneous, fourteen. In all, 470 books, a record about which he was inordinately proud and one that may never be surpassed.

His science books represented a signif-

icant contribution to a general awakening of the American public to the need for greater understanding of science if the U.S. was going to maintain its leadership in the world. In 1973 he pointed out that we were living in a science fiction world, a world of spaceships, atomic energy, and computers, a world very much like the world that he and other science fiction writers had been describing a quarter-century before. It was a world typified by the first moon landing, four years before. “Science fiction writers and readers didn’t put a man on the moon all by themselves,” he told me, “but they created a climate of opinion in which the goal of putting a man on the moon became acceptable.”

In *I, Asimov* he described his prolificacy. Once he turned to writing full-time, he averaged thirteen books a year, and his books ranged over nearly every division of the Dewey decimal system. During a question-and-answer period a man asked, “If you had to choose between writing and women, Dr. Asimov, which would you choose?” And Isaac answered instantly, “Well, I can type for twelve hours without getting tired.” And Barbara Walters asked him, off camera, “What if the doctor gave you six months to live. What would you do.” “Type faster,” Isaac said.

Tackling as many topics as he did, Isaac depended upon information he could dig up. “What I contribute to my books,” he wrote in his autobiography, “are (1) ease and clarity of style, (2) sensible and logical order of presentation, and (3) apt and original metaphors, analogies, and conclusions.”

Several moments in this remarkable record of productivity stand out for me. One was when I filmed a part of my Literature of Science Fiction series with Isaac in 1973. When Isaac learned that I shared an office with Prof. Paul Kendall, a renowned Shakespearean scholar, he gave me one of his own Shakespeare books to take back with me. I wondered how Paul would respond, but clearly he was pleased.

On another occasion Isaac was invited

to be part of a panel discussing the human brain at a meeting in Washington, D.C. He responded that he didn't know anything about the human brain. The inviter came back by saying, "You must be an expert. You've just written a book about it." And Isaac said, "I'm an expert at sounding like an expert."

That was what Isaac did best: he sounded like an expert. He had a marvelous memory. In his childhood he would read all his school books the first couple of days and then never open them again. I asked him once about his memory and if he ever wondered how other people's memories worked, and he said that in a meeting of Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiasts he was reciting some lyrics and for a moment couldn't think of the next line. That was when he realized what many people, not blessed with his recall, experienced all the time. But even Isaac's memory was not infallible. He began including autobiographical notes when he took on the editing of the Hugo volumes and continued it into his own story collections. But when he wrote his enormous autobiography, to mark the milestone of his two hundredth published book, he referred to the diaries that he had been updating every day since 1938 and discovered that he had to correct some of his earlier recollections. He had published *Opus 100* with Houghton Mifflin to mark his first hundred books, and he thought it only fair to allow them to publish *Opus 200*. But Doubleday was his first and still his major publisher, so Doubleday asked him to let it publish his autobiography. He protested that he had never done anything, but Doubleday insisted. A year later he brought in a thick stack of manuscript and put it on the editor's table. When the editor didn't flinch, he went into the hall and returned with another stack just as thick. The editor said, "What would you have written, Isaac, if you had ever done anything?" Isaac could make even a life of reading and writing a fascinating account.

To his memory, he added a good knowledge of where to find the informa-

tion he needed, and he developed the ability to translate that information into narratives as readable and dramatic as fiction. He could make the difficult seem simple. In the book I wrote about him, I suggested that his fiction got its characteristic Asimovian flavor from the fact that it was written like science, and his non-fiction got its readability from the fact that it was written like fiction. His science fiction also was distinguished by its rationality. When I wrote about him in *The Road to Science Fiction*, I titled the section "The Cool, Clear Voice of Asimov." His heroes were the most rational and had the longest view, like Hari Seldon, whose psychohistorical plans were intended to shorten twenty-five thousand years of barbarism to a thousand. His villains weren't villains but rational people whose vision was too limited. And emotional responses were frustrations of the need to behave rationally.

That is why two of his personal favorites are anomalies. His favorite story was "The Last Question," which is cool and rational, but his second and third favorites were "The Bicentennial Man" and "The Ugly Little Boy," which were emotional and irrational—what I have called "Un-Asimovian"—though, of course, so effective as fiction that one was made into a film and the other has been optioned. Isaac called their creation "writing over his head," like the middle section of *The Gods Themselves*.

Another difference between Isaac's fiction and his non-fiction was that his fiction was always optimistic: solutions would be found, rationality would prevail. But Isaac's non-fiction, when it addressed the many problems that faced the world, like pollution or overpopulation or war, was pessimistic. It was a matter, he said, of dealing with the world as it is—"the world in which irrationality is predominant," and he told me, "I am trying to live a life of reason in an emotional world."

In 1970 he wrote in a letter: "I wish I could say I was optimistic about the human race. I love us all, but we are so stu-

pid and shortsighted that I wonder if we can lift our eyes to the world about us long enough not to commit suicide. I keep trying to make people do so."

But the year before he wrote: "In considering the future society, let us assume that (1) there will be no nuclear war; (2) the population will increase but not disastrously; and (3) the trend toward automation will continue." He followed that by some predictions about work becoming more administrative and managerial, which would accelerate the trend toward sexual equality; and that the increased amount of leisure would provide a great emphasis on creativity and the purveying of amusement. "I suspect," he concluded, "that in the twenty-first century, one third of the human race will be engaged . . . in supplying amusement for the other two-thirds."

Isaac's love for writing made him a difficult husband and, sometimes, a detached father. When he received copies of his forty-first book from Houghton Mifflin, he mentioned to his wife the possibility of reaching a hundred books before he died. She shook her head and said, "What good will it be if you then regret having spent your life writing books while all the essence of life passes you by?" And Isaac replied, "But for me the essence of life is writing. In fact, if I do manage to publish a hundred books, and if I then die, my last words are likely to be, 'Only a hundred!'" On another occasion his beloved daughter Robyn asked him to suppose he had to choose between her and writing. Isaac recalled he said, "Why, I would choose you, dear." And he added, "But I hesitated—and she noticed that, too."

Isaac did return to writing science fiction novels, with a novelization of *Fantastic Voyage* in 1966 and *The Gods Themselves* in 1972. He is ranked among hard science fiction writers, which means that the fiction is based on real science or on new developments in science, but he was not the hard science fiction writer that Hal Clement was, or Larry Niven; Isaac's fiction was more philosophical, based on concepts like

psychohistory or robotics or the musings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also was fond of history, and the Foundation stories are the fall of the Roman empire writ large. *The Gods Themselves*, however, showed that Isaac could do hard science fiction when he wished; it began with the challenge of writing a novella about the impossibility of plutonium-186.

In 1982, Isaac returned to his Foundation roots and wrote *Foundation's Edge*. His Doubleday editors insisted on it. Betty Prashker called him into her office and said, "Isaac, we want you to write a novel for us." Isaac protested that he didn't write novels any more, but Prashker said they were going to send him a contract with a large advance; that frightened Isaac, who always signed for a small advance that allowed him the freedom to write what he wanted rather than what the publisher wanted. That evening Doubleday editor Pat LoBrutto called to say that when Betty said "a novel," she meant "a science fiction novel," and when Doubleday said "a science fiction novel" they meant "a Foundation novel."

I can't help mentioning that *Foundation's Edge* was not only Isaac's triumph—it was his first best-seller but not the last—it was mine as well. The greatest tribute a scholar can have is when his scholarship has a positive impact on his subject, and Isaac wrote that my book, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* had made *Foundation's Edge* possible.

He wrote:

I was on the edge of deciding it was all a terrible mistake and of insisting on giving back the money when (quite by accident, I swear) I came across some sentences by science fiction writer and critic James Gunn, who in connection with the Foundation series said, "Action and romance have little to do with the success of the *Trilogy*—virtually all the action takes place offstage, and the romance is invisible—but the stories provide a detective-story fascination with the permutations and

reversals of ideas.”

Oh well, if what was needed were “permutations and reversals of ideas,” then that I could supply. Panic receded, and on June 10, 1981, I dug out the fourteen pages I had written more than eight years before. . . .

Let me conclude with my two favorite anecdotes about Isaac. Early in 1956, Isaac wrote me that he had just written a pornographic scene that the postmaster couldn’t touch. (This, of course, was more than fifty years ago when the postmaster general was still declaring books obscene and refusing to allow them to be mailed.) It wasn’t until I read *The Naked Sun* the following year that I knew what he meant. In that novel, Lije Baley, his agoraphobic detective of *The Caves of Steel*, is called to Solaria to solve an important murder case. Solaria has been settled by Spacers, who restrict their numbers to twenty thousand while the robot population has increased to twenty-five million. Solarians have become claustrophobic and neurotically afraid of personal contact, but as Lije is completing his mission and saying goodbye to Gladia, the victim’s widow, she strips off her glove and touches his cheek. It is, in the circumstances, truly pornographic.

Finally, Isaac was stubbornly attached to his name, even though he was warned that it might cause him to suffer from prejudice and his stories to be rejected. When he was five, he remembered, his mother considered changing his first name to Irving, but he wailed in protest that he would never answer to any name but Isaac. Later, because his name had already appeared in print, John Campbell never asked him to use a pseudonym, as Campbell had sometimes done with other writers. His last name was not always easy for readers to spell or remember, and when it appeared in the letter columns as Azimov (with a “z” instead of an “s”) he was quick with a correction. So it happened that when he received his much coveted Grand Master Award in 1987, I approached to inspect the award and congratulate him. His

name had been misspelled “Issac Asimov.” “Isaac,” I said, “are you going to give it back?” “Not on your life,” he replied.

Isaac had triple bypass surgery in 1983 and was hospitalized in 1990 for a kidney infection and in 1991 for heart and kidney failure. He died April 6, 1992. He had often expressed the hope of dying with his nose caught between two typewriter keys, but at the end he had lost the strength to write and that, for him, may have been almost worse. He had already written a couple of inscriptions for his epitaph. One of them said, “It’s not dying I mind. It’s having to stop writing,” and the other, “Wait, I’m not finished!”

In the epilogue to *Forward the Foundation*, his widow Janet noted that writing his last Foundation novel was hard on Isaac, “because in killing Hari Seldon he was also killing himself. . . .” The first paragraph of that novel ends “It has been said that Hari Seldon left this life as he lived it, for he died with the future he created unfolding all around him. . . .”

That could have been written about Isaac himself. ○

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Afterword: Janet Asimov revealed in an epilogue to Isaac’s posthumous autobiographical *It’s Been a Good Life* that Isaac had died of AIDS contracted from blood transfusions during open-heart surgery a decade earlier, a fact that she had been persuaded to conceal at the time of Isaac’s death.

James Gunn, emeritus professor of English at the University of Kansas, wrote *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* (which won a Hugo Award) and is the author or editor of forty other books, including *The Immortals*, *The Listeners*, *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, and the six-volume *Road to Science Fiction* anthology. He has served as president of both the Science Fiction Writers of America and the Science Fiction Research Association and he received a Damon Knight Grand Master award in 2007.

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