

INSIGHTS

BOOKS *et al.*

SCIENCE FICTION

Asimov at 100

From epic space operas to rules for robots, the prolific author's literary legacy endures

By James Gunn

Gertrude Blugerman once asked of her husband, Isaac Asimov, “What will you say at the end of your life if you have written one hundred books but have missed living?” “Only one hundred?” he replied. Asimov wrote of this incident in *Opus 100*, his hundredth book, published in 1969. He would write or edit more than 500 books in his lifetime.

Asimov was brought to the United States at the age of 3 from Petrovichi, a small town in the still relatively new Soviet Union. His birthday—2 January 1920—was one settled on by his parents. (Records in Petrovichi were unreliable, and he may have been born as early as November 1919.) The family settled in Brooklyn, New York, where his father opened a candy store that also sold newspapers and magazines. It was an enterprise in which all members of the family participated. Perhaps not surprisingly, Isaac was drawn to the magazines, particularly the colorful science fiction publications.

Asimov was a gifted student with a capacious memory who moved easily through grade school and high school. In the first of his autobiographies (he published two comprehensive volumes and, later, two supplemental tomes), he recounted how he would acquire his textbooks for the semester, read them on his walk home, and never open them again. When I interviewed him for the book I wrote about his life and work (*I*), I asked if he ever forgot anything, and he said that once he had been reciting the second verse of the U.S. national anthem and, for a moment, could not think of how it started.

Asimov attended Seth Low Junior College, a branch of Columbia University in Brooklyn, graduating in 1939 from Columbia when Seth Low closed in 1938. He majored in chemistry after discovering in his freshman year that to major in zoology, one would be required to dissect cats.

This pensive android appeared on the cover of Asimov's 1990 collection *Robot Visions*.

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The year 1939 was also when Asimov's first science fiction story was published in the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*. The sale of his stories paid for his college expenses, including the master's degree he would later earn in chemistry. (He was rejected twice for medical school but would go on to earn his doctorate, again in chemistry.)

In 1942, Asimov began research as a chemist at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Meanwhile, he continued to sell stories but considered himself a third-rate writer until his novelette "Nightfall" received a cover story in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1941. The following year, the first story of his *Foundation* series was published. During this period, he began the first of his robot stories, which were published together in 1950 as *I, Robot*.

In September 1945, Asimov was drafted into the U.S. Army and served for 6 months before being honorably discharged. He returned to Columbia, where he earned his doctoral degree in 1948 before accepting his first (and only) academic appointment at Boston University.

Science fiction received a boost from World War II. The number of magazines publishing it increased in the aftermath of the war, and book publishers soon followed. The subsequent Space Age and concerns evoked by Sputnik also led to publishing opportunities in the realm of science popularization. Asimov's engagement with the latter genre began with a 1953 biology text coauthored with two other faculty members. This would be the beginning of a series for which the earnings—together with those of his science fiction and other writing—soon exceeded his university salary.

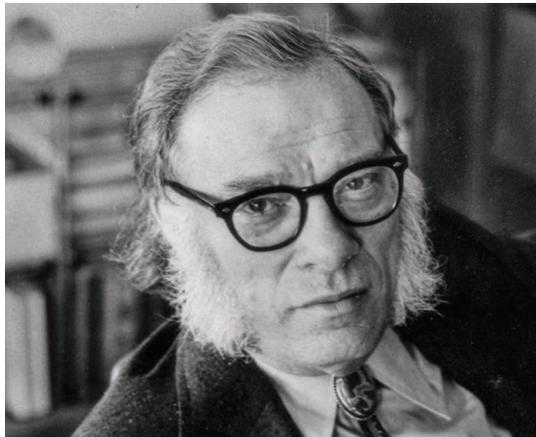
When Asimov was reprimanded for failing to conduct any research, he replied that he considered his writing his research. Shortly afterward, he was terminated. He had previously been promoted to the rank of associate professor with tenure, and after a 2-year battle it was determined that he would be allowed to stay on. He chose instead to leave to focus on his writing.

By the time I filmed him for my literature of science fiction film series in 1972, Asimov was living in a high-rise off of Central Park and was in the middle of divorcing his first wife. "Science fiction writers and readers didn't put a man on the moon," he reflected during our interview, "but they created a climate of opinion in which the goal of putting a man on the moon became acceptable."

Asimov had, by this time, already published his hundredth book—the previously

mentioned *Opus 100*—and was, it turned out, only just getting started. Soon his books, written on topics ranging from the Bible to the human body, began appearing as often as monthly, leading Harvard paleontologist George C. Simpson to call him "one of our natural wonders and national resources" (1).

Asimov was a popular public speaker and a regular participant in science fiction conventions, where, despite having earned a formidable reputation as one of the "big three" science fiction authors of the era, he remained approachable. He participated in a variety of social organizations, including Mensa; the Humanist Society (of which he was named the honorary president); the Baker Street Irregulars, a society dedicated to the appreciation of Sherlock Holmes; and the Trap-Door Spiders, a luncheon group that served as the inspiration for the fictional Black Widowers club in a series of mystery stories and novels he wrote.



Asimov brought drama and narrative to his nonfiction science writing and often grounded his fiction in real scientific principles.

Kurt Vonnegut is reported to have once asked Asimov how it felt to be the man who knows everything, to which Asimov is said to have replied that he only knew how it felt to have the reputation of omniscience. On another occasion, an editor reportedly encouraged Asimov to write an autobiography. "But I've never done anything," he protested. He returned a year later with a thick manuscript. When the editor failed to protest its length, Asimov left and returned with another manuscript, just as thick. "What would you have written if you had done anything?" the editor is said to have replied.

Although he claimed no false modesty—"nor true modesty either" (2)—he insisted on acknowledging the role of others in his success. He credited editor John W. Campbell with the invention of the three laws of robotics and with introducing him to the Ralph Waldo Emerson quotation that inspired Asimov to write "Nightfall": "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 which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile." And in an article in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (3), Asimov credited my words with helping him overcome his fears about writing a sequel to the *Foundation* trilogy. The resulting series (4) brought the *Foundation* trilogy and his robot novels together into a single future history and became his first bestseller.

A case can be made that, like H. G. Wells, Asimov came along at the right time. (Wells once commented that he made his writing debut in the 1890s, when the public was looking for new writers.) But Asimov also had a restless and productive mind. His early experience of reading, and then writing, science fiction gave his popular science

writing a rare narrative model, while his fiction similarly benefited from his scientific training.

Some of Asimov's critics complained that his writing lacked style. He responded by asserting that he had a style: clarity. But it also was true that he was able to adopt new methods, particularly in his later works.

Asimov's fiction was based on the presumption that humanity would solve its problems by thinking coolly and logically. In his nonfiction writing, he often grappled with the messier realities of human nature. There are no records of how many minds he influenced with the latter, but his ability to communicate difficult scientific ideas in simple language has not been equaled since.

Asimov once told a friend that if he had a hang-up, it was his desire to write, saying that he wanted to die with his nose stuck between two typewriter keys. It did not happen that way. His second wife and widow, Janet, confirmed after his death that Asimov had contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion during open-heart surgery a decade before. He had been persuaded by his doctors to keep this information confidential, because of concerns that it would deter people from undergoing necessary surgery. He died from complications of the disease in 1992 at the age of 72. But his legacy, and his books, remain. ■

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