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THE FOUNDATION NOVELS



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By Asimov, Isaac

THE STORY BEHIND THE “FOUNDATION”

By ISAAC ASIMOV

The date was August 1, 1941. World War II had been raging for two years. France had fallen, the Battle of Britain had been fought, and the Soviet Union had just been invaded by Nazi Germany. The bombing of Pearl Harbor was four months in the future.

But on that day, with Europe in flames, and the evil shadow of Adolf Hitler apparently falling over all the world, what was chiefly on my mind was a meeting toward which I was hastening.

I was 21 years old, a graduate student in chemistry at Columbia University, and I had been writing science fiction professionally for three years. In that time, I had sold five stories to John Campbell, editor of *Astounding*, and the fifth story, “Nightfall,” was about to appear in the September 1941 issue of the magazine. I had an appointment to see Mr. Campbell to tell him the plot of a new story I was planning to write, and the catch was that I had no plot in mind, not the trace of one.

I therefore tried a device I sometimes use. I opened a book at random and set up free association, beginning with whatever I first saw. The book I had with me was a collection of the Gilbert and Sullivan plays. I happened to open it to the picture of the Fairy Queen of Iolanthe throwing herself at the feet of Private Willis. I thought of soldiers, of military empires, of the Roman Empire - of a Galactic Empire - aha!

Why shouldn't I write of the fall of the Galactic Empire and of the return of feudalism, written from the viewpoint of someone in the secure days of the Second Galactic Empire? After all, I had read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* not once, but twice.

I was bubbling over by the time I got to Campbell's, and my enthusiasm must have been catching for Campbell blazed up as I had never seen him do. In the course of an hour we built up the notion of a vast series of connected stories that were to deal in intricate detail with the thousand-year period between the First and Second Galactic Empires. This was to be

illuminated by the science of psychohistory, which Campbell and I thrashed out between us.

On August 11, 1941, therefore, I began the story of that interregnum and called it "Foundation." In it, I described how the psychohistorian, Hari Seldon, established a pair of Foundations at opposite ends of the Universe under such circumstances as to make sure that the forces of history would bring about the second Empire after one thousand years instead of the thirty thousand that would be required otherwise.

The story was submitted on September 8 and, to make sure that Campbell really meant what he said about a series, I ended "Foundation" on a cliff-hanger. Thus, it seemed to me, he would be forced to buy a second story.

However, when I started the second story (on October 24), I found that I had outsmarted myself. I quickly wrote myself into an impasse, and the Foundation series would have died an ignominious death had I not had a conversation with Fred Pohl on November 2 (on the Brooklyn Bridge, as it happened). I don't remember what Fred actually said, but, whatever it was, it pulled me out of the hole.

"Foundation" appeared in the May 1942 issue of *Astounding* and the succeeding story, "Bridle and Saddle," in the June 1942 issue.

After that there was only the routine trouble of writing the stories. Through the remainder of the decade, John Campbell kept my nose to the grindstone and made sure he got additional Foundation stories.

"The Big and the Little" was in the August 1944 *Astounding*, "The Wedge" in the October 1944 issue, and "Dead Hand" in the April 1945 issue. (These stories were written while I was working at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia.)

On January 26, 1945, I began "The Mule," my personal favorite among the Foundation stories, and the longest yet, for it was 50,000 words. It was printed as a two-part serial (the very first serial I was ever responsible for) in the November and December 1945 issues. By the time the second part appeared I was in the army.

After I got out of the army, I wrote "Now You See It-" which appeared in the January 1948 issue. By this time, though, I had grown tired of the Foundation stories so I tried to end them by setting up, and solving, the mystery of the location of the Second Foundation. Campbell would have

none of that, however. He forced me to change the ending, and made me promise I would do one more Foundation story.

Well, Campbell was the kind of editor who could not be denied, so I wrote one more Foundation story, vowing to myself that it would be the last. I called it “-And Now You Don’t,” and it appeared as a three-part serial in the November 1949, December 1949, and January 1950 issues of *Astounding*.

By then, I was on the biochemistry faculty of Boston University School of Medicine, my first book had just been published, and I was determined to move on to new things. I had spent eight years on the Foundation, written nine stories with a total of about 220,000 words. My total earnings for the series came to \$3,641 and that seemed enough. The Foundation was over and done with, as far as I was concerned.

In 1950, however, hardcover science fiction was just coming into existence. I had no objection to earning a little more money by having the Foundation series reprinted in book form. I offered the series to Doubleday (which had already published a science-fiction novel by me, and which had contracted for another) and to Little-Brown, but both rejected it. In that year, though, a small publishing firm, Gnome Press, was beginning to be active, and it was prepared to do the Foundation series as three books.

The publisher of Gnome felt, however, that the series began too abruptly. He persuaded me to write a small Foundation story, one that would serve as an introductory section to the first book (so that the first part of the Foundation series was the last written).

In 1951, the Gnome Press edition of *Foundation* was published, containing the introduction and the first four stories of the series. In 1952, *Foundation and Empire* appeared, with the fifth and sixth stories; and in 1953, *Second Foundation* appeared, with the seventh and eighth stories. The three books together came to be called *The Foundation Trilogy*.

The mere fact of the existence of the Trilogy pleased me, but Gnome Press did not have the financial clout or the publishing knowhow to get the books distributed properly, so that few copies were sold and fewer still paid me royalties. (Nowadays, copies of first editions of those Gnome Press books sell at \$50 a copy and up-but I still get no royalties from them.)

Ace Books did put out paperback editions of *Foundation* and of *Foundation and Empire*, but they changed the titles, and used cut versions. Any money that was involved was paid to Gnome Press and I didn’t see

much of that. In the first decade of the existence of The Foundation Trilogy it may have earned something like \$1500 total.

And yet there was some foreign interest. In early 1961, Timothy Seldes, who was then my editor at Doubleday, told me that Doubleday had received a request for the Portuguese rights for the Foundation series and, since they weren't Doubleday books, he was passing them on to me. I sighed and said, "The heck with it, Tim. I don't get royalties on those books."

Seldes was horrified, and instantly set about getting the books away from Gnome Press so that Doubleday could publish them instead. He paid no attention to my loudly expressed fears that Doubleday "would lose its shirt on them." In August 1961 an agreement was reached and the Foundation books became Doubleday property. What's more, Avon Books, which had published a paperback version of *Second Foundation*, set about obtaining the rights to all three from Doubleday, and put out nice editions.

From that moment on, the Foundation books took off and began to earn increasing royalties. They have sold well and steadily, both in hardcover and softcover, for two decades so far. Increasingly, the letters I received from the readers spoke of them in high praise. They received more attention than all my other books put together.

Doubleday also published an omnibus volume, *The Foundation Trilogy*, for its Science Fiction Book Club. That omnibus volume has been continuously featured by the Book Club for over twenty years.

Matters reached a climax in 1966. The fans organizing the World Science Fiction Convention for that year (to be held in Cleveland) decided to award a Hugo for the best all-time series, where the series, to qualify, had to consist of at least three connected novels. It was the first time such a category had been set up, nor has it been repeated since. The Foundation series was nominated, and I felt that was going to have to be glory enough for me, since I was sure that Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" would win.

It didn't. The Foundation series won, and the Hugo I received for it has been sitting on my bookcase in the livingroom ever since.

In among all this litany of success, both in money and in fame, there was one annoying side-effect. Readers couldn't help but notice that the books of the Foundation series covered only three hundred-plus years of the thousand-year hiatus between Empires. That meant the Foundation series "wasn't finished." I got innumerable letters from readers who asked me to finish it, from others who demanded I finish it, and still others who

threatened dire vengeance if I didn't finish it. Worse yet, various editors at Doubleday over the years have pointed out that it might be wise to finish it.

It was flattering, of course, but irritating as well. Years had passed, then decades. Back in the 1940s, I had been in a Foundation-writing mood. Now I wasn't. Starting in the late 1950s, I had been in a more and more nonfiction-writing mood.

That didn't mean I was writing no fiction at all. In the 1960s and 1970s, in fact, I wrote two science-fiction novels and a mystery novel, to say nothing of well over a hundred short stories - but about eighty percent of what I wrote was nonfiction.

One of the most indefatigable nags in the matter of finishing the Foundation series was my good friend, the great science-fiction writer, Lester del Rey. He was constantly telling me I ought to finish the series and was just as constantly suggesting plot devices. He even told Larry Ashmead, then my editor at Doubleday, that if I refused to write more Foundation stories, he, Lester, would be willing to take on the task.

When Ashmead mentioned this to me in 1973, I began another Foundation novel out of sheer desperation. I called it "Lightning Rod" and managed to write fourteen pages before other tasks called me away. The fourteen pages were put away and additional years passed.

In January 1977, Cathleen Jordan, then my editor at Doubleday, suggested I do "an important book - a Foundation novel, perhaps." I said, "I'd rather do an autobiography," and I did - 640,000 words of it.

In January 1981, Doubleday apparently lost its temper. At least, Hugh O'Neill, then my editor there, said, "Betty Prashker wants to see you," and marched me into her office. She was then one of the senior editors, and a sweet and gentle person.

She wasted no time. "Isaac," she said, "you are going to write a novel for us and you are going to sign a contract to that effect."

"Betty," I said, "I am already working on a big science book for Doubleday and I have to revise the Biographical Encyclopedia for Doubleday and -"

"It can all wait," she said. "You are going to sign a contract to do a novel. What's more, we're going to give you a \$50,000 advance."

That was a stunner. I don't like large advances. They put me under too great an obligation. My average advance is something like \$3,000. Why not? It's all out of royalties.

I said, "That's way too much money, Betty."

"No, it isn't," she said.

"Doubleday will lose its shirt," I said.

"You keep telling us that all the time. It won't."

I said, desperately, "All right. Have the contract read that I don't get any money until I notify you in writing that I have begun the novel."

"Are you crazy?" she said. "You'll never start if that clause is in the contract. You get \$25,000 on signing the contract, and \$25,000 on delivering a completed manuscript."

"But suppose the novel is no good."

"Now you're being silly," she said, and she ended the conversation.

That night, Pat LoBrutto, the science-fiction editor at Doubleday called to express his pleasure. "And remember," he said, "that when we say 'novel' we mean 'science-fiction novel,' not anything else. And when we say 'science-fiction novel,' we mean 'Foundation novel' and not anything else."

On February 5, 1981, I signed the contract, and within the week, the Doubleday accounting system cranked out the check for \$25,000.

I moaned that I was not my own master anymore and Hugh O'Neill said, cheerfully, "That's right, and from now on, we're going to call every other week and say, 'Where's the manuscript?'" (But they didn't. They left me strictly alone, and never even asked for a progress report.)

Nearly four months passed while I took care of a vast number of things I had to do, but about the end of May, I picked up my own copy of *The Foundation Trilogy* and began reading.

I had to. For one thing, I hadn't read the Trilogy in thirty years and while I remembered the general plot, I did not remember the details. Besides, before beginning a new Foundation novel I had to immerse myself in the style and atmosphere of the series.

I read it with mounting uneasiness. I kept waiting for something to happen, and nothing ever did. All three volumes, all the nearly quarter of a million words, consisted of thoughts and of conversations. No action. No physical suspense.

What was all the fuss about, then? Why did everyone want more of that stuff? - To be sure, I couldn't help but notice that I was turning the pages eagerly, and that I was upset when I finished the book, and that I wanted more, but I was the author, for goodness' sake. You couldn't go by me.

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 almost 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 and reread them. They sounded good to me. I didn’t remember where I had been headed back then, but I had worked out what seemed to me to be a good ending now, and, starting page 15 on that day, I proceeded to work toward the new ending.

I found, to my infinite relief, that I had no trouble getting back into a “Foundation-mood,” and, fresh from my rereading, I had Foundation history at my finger-tips.

There were differences, to be sure:

1) The original stories were written for a science-fiction magazine and were from 7,000 to 50,000 words long, and no more. Consequently, each book in the trilogy had at least two stories and lacked unity. I intended to make the new book a single story.

2) I had a particularly good chance for development since Hugh said, “Let the book find its own length, Isaac. We don’t mind a long book.” So I planned on 140,000 words, which was nearly three times the length of “The Mule,” and this gave me plenty of elbow-room, and I could add all sorts of little touches.

3) The Foundation series had been written at a time when our knowledge of astronomy was primitive compared with what it is today. I could take advantage of that and at least mention black holes, for instance. I could also take advantage of electronic computers, which had not been invented until I was half through with the series.

The novel progressed steadily, and on January 17, 1982, I began final copy. I brought the manuscript to Hugh O’Neill in batches, and the poor fellow went half-crazy since he insisted on reading it in this broken fashion.

On March 25, 1982, I brought in the last bit, and the very next day got the second half of the advance.

I had kept “Lightning Rod” as my working title all the way through, but Hugh finally said, “Is there any way of putting ‘Foundation’ into the title, Isaac?” I suggested Foundations at Bay, therefore, and that may be the title that will actually be used. *

You will have noticed that I have said nothing about the plot of the new Foundation novel. Well, naturally. I would rather you buy and read the book.

And yet there is one thing I have to confess to you. I generally manage to tie up all the loose ends into one neat little bow-knot at the end of my stories, no matter how complicated the plot might be. In this case, however, I noticed that when I was all done, one glaring little item remained unresolved.

I am hoping no one else notices it because it clearly points the way to the continuation of the series.

It is even possible that I inadvertently gave this away for at the end of the novel, I wrote: “The End (for now).”

I very much fear that if the novel proves successful, Doubleday will be at my throat again, as Campbell used to be in the old days. And yet what can I do but hope that the novel is very successful indeed. What a quandary!

*Editor’s note: The novel was published in October 1982 as Foundation’s Edge.