

## A Meeting at Stars End with Jon Blumenfeld



[Theme music with voiceover]

### **Jon Blumenfeld**

What I think is a big theme of the TV show is this concept of personhood. Who is a person? What rights do they have? What happens if you take away someone's memories? Are they incomplete as a person? Because we see, you know, the Cleons are incomplete people. We find out that their memories have been heavily edited. And of course, part of season one is this whole concept of whether they have a soul or not.

### **Joel McKinnon**

Greetings, friends, and welcome back to Seldon Crisis for a conversation with someone who knows just a thing or two about Asimov and Foundation. Having helmed a podcast that has plunged deeply into the Core Trilogy and each of the two prequels, along with blanket coverage of each of the first two seasons of the Apple TV Show. Way back when I began this podcast in April of 2021, and even earlier in the lockdown year that preceded it, I reread the Core Foundation trilogy for the first time in several decades and finally got around to reading all the prequels and sequels. A darn good way to while away a pandemic, I must say.

## Joel

I remember wanting to share the magic of these books. I introduced them to my son, and he devoured them eagerly. But it wasn't enough. I wanted to find a community of like-minded fans of this amazingly speculative world 20 millennia in our future. That's the impulse that launched the podcast, and I immediately started searching out others already in this space (no pun intended). I found one Asimov-themed podcast by some folks in a divinity school, of all things, and they did some intense coverage of the first book, never seeming to mind too much or notice Asimov's atheism.

Maybe they got spooked by that, but they never even got as far as the Mule, which was kind of disappointing to me. Then I moved on. I looked for other things. Another really good analysis came up a little bit later, an analysis of the trilogy by the Rehydrate podcast. But it was just a season along the way of covering some other excellent Sci-Fi like *The Three Body Problem* and *Dune*. I really recommend Rehydrate for anybody who hasn't listened to it. I discovered then the Asimov-themed Reddit communities like [r/Asimov](#) and for better or for worse, made some interesting friends there. Just a couple enemies maybe.

One day, though, I found a podcast called Stars End, and judging by the name, dove right in. They were focused entirely and obsessively on Foundation and nothing else. Their whole first season was a thorough analysis of the trilogy, and the hosts obviously knew Asimov and the source material through and through. Since then, Stars End has been working non-stop covering the prequels to Foundation, as well as spending full seasons on each of the two seasons of the Apple TV Show. I'd found at least a big part of that Asimov community I'd been looking for.

At last, one of the three hosts of Stars End, Jon Blumenfeld, is with me today to talk about his journey with Asimov and his love for Foundation. Welcome, Jon, to Seldon Crisis.

**Jon**

Thank you very much, Joel. And it's nice to be here as myself, as opposed to the person that we have come to call the galaxy's sexiest librarian, Homir Munn, which I had a tremendously good time portraying. Homir, on your podcast.

**Joel**

I was going to put that in the intro, but I was wondering if maybe I should let people see if they could remember if they caught that voice. But it wasn't exactly your voice.

**Jon**

I made it a little Homir's, a little he's sort of a stuffy academic. He uses a lot of big words. His language is very it's kind of the science fiction writer's image of the educated man. And he has a stutter as well, which I tried to be very careful about that. I didn't want to make it into a joke, but it's definitely part of his personality, especially when the plot turns a little bit on, the fact that he stops stuttering and becomes a lot more confident.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

And so I didn't want to leave it out, but I also wanted to keep in mind that I don't have a speech impediment, but there are people out there who do. And like I said, I didn't want it to be a source of humor.

**Joel**

I felt the same way with the Lord Dorwin voice when I did that. Dorwin really was... a yeah, and that's the thing. It was Asimov's joke, and I was just know, faithful to that.

**Jon**

Lord Dorwin in the TV show didn't have anything like that.

**Joel**

No snuff box.

**Jon**

That's my biggest - they did get the atomic ashtray.

**Joel**

Yes, eventually. So do you want to tell the listeners anything about yourself?

**Jon**

I mean, really, the only thing that's really appropriate to this is Stars End. I encourage people to listen to Stars End. You've been a guest on Stars End twice. We've been glad to have you. I'm sure we'll have you again in the future. In addition to covering the Foundation books and the prequels, we also did the robot novels, starting with The Caves of Steel and moving all the way through Robots and Empire, all of which Asimov, at the end of his life, kind of brought everything into the single universe.

**Joel**

I knew there was something much more than just the prequels you had done, and I actually listened to those, too.

## **Jon**

But we will probably start picking up on the sequels, which we have not gotten to. And there's a few other things as well that I mean, we're not going to run out of material. And the one thing that's going on right now, although I don't know when this will come out, but we are asking people to vote for the second, not really, annual Hari Awards, which we give to actors and directors in episodes of the show. It's all tongue in cheek, but if you go to StarsEndPodcast.com, there's a ballot, there's ten questions. And one of my co-hosts, Joseph Kolacinski, who's a math professor, voting theory is really his thing, and so he has a lot of kind of interesting ways to vote for things, and we'll talk about it at length if you get him know, like rank choice.

Voting is for amateurs. As far as Joseph is concerned. There's a world of voting theory beyond that interesting.

## **Joel**

Yeah, I recommend the podcast just for the website, for what Joseph does there. And also his own blog is so interesting. He really gives very thorough recaps of all the episodes of the TV show.

## **Jon**

Yeah, and Joseph's grandfather was an artist who did a lot of drawings for science fiction magazines, I guess, a lot of which are very, very difficult to find. And I don't know how much of that he's put online, but I know it's a project that he's working on, and he really illustrated a lot of these early kind of golden age or pre-golden age of science fiction magazines. So that's a great connection.

## **Joel**

I just blabbed a little bit about how I got the motivation to do a podcast. And could you tell anything about how you met your co-hosts?

## **Jon**

Yeah, it was on Twitter and not X. It wasn't X yet. It was Twitter. And we started in April 2021 as well, the same time you did, although we didn't discover each other for a little while. And what happened was, well, my journey was that I started going to Twitter for news, and the news was so terrible and so distressing and so bad for my mental health that a little piece of my Twitter exposure was Star Trek, which I'm a huge fan of. And I started subtracting journalists and adding more Star Trek people so that the balance of what I would see on the timeline was more Star Trek and less what was going on in the real world.

And eventually, I had built up quite a group of Star Trek people, some of whom are still on Twitter, but a lot of them have left now, or X. And my other co-host, Dan Fried, had seen that Apple TV had announced that there was going to be a TV show, although very, very little else, other than that there was a TV show Foundation coming out. David Goyer was going to be the showrunner, some cast members. We knew Jared Harris was going to be in it. We knew Lee Pace was going to be in it. Very little else was available, and we didn't even know when it was going to be launched.

And so Dan just sent out a Twitter message basically saying, hey, Foundation is going to be a TV show. Is there anybody who loves Foundation like I do and wants to do a podcast? And Joseph and I answered, we're all close to that. Joseph and I are very close in age. Dan is a little bit younger. But we all grew up and read I mean, Joseph and I read Foundation. Well, I read Foundation in the 70s. We all kind of read them as teenagers, as young teenagers and just fell in love with them and have maintained that love for Asimov and Foundation ever since then.

So we started doing the podcast, not knowing when the show would actually come out. And we started going through the original books, the Foundation, Foundation and Empire and Second Foundation. And we actually finished the three books, the original books with one week to spare. So we used that last week as a kind of a preview. What do we think we're going to get on the TV show? And then the show started and we covered the show. It worked out almost as if we had planned it. Although, like everything on Stars End, we did not plan it at all.

It was just completely free form. We just got lucky.

**Joel**

No, you're really organized and phased well and everything for not planning things. It seems like everything is really nicely structured.

**Jon**

Sometimes you can squeeze these things in at the last minute and it looks like you planned it, but you really didn't.

**Joel**

Yeah. So we should probably say something about that TV show. I didn't even know there was going to be a show when I started, when I thought of doing the podcast. In fact, I had written my first, like five scripts or was in the process of writing them, I think, when I first heard about the show. That could work out. That's nice. Yeah. And I think it has to some degree. Although there's also been that big tension between book lovers and the show that was especially noticeable in season one. I found. It seemed like by the time season two came along, the real show haters had kind of moved on and that's right spent their venom and there wasn't going to be much point in sputtering anymore.

And those of us who had found some accommodation with the differences found that it was possible to really enjoy it along with the books as its own kind of thing. And I've really had a great time with it this last season. I was pretty much obsessed with it. I was like thinking about nothing else from week to week and spending a lot of time listening to the podcasts that go along with the show and spending a lot of time on Reddit and on Twitter, but at the expense of something called Afraid.

### **Jon**

Well, you know, for us, because we're kind of doing an analysis as we go along, that tension between the books and the show is a constant source of material for us. We can always talk about it and it is a complicated relationship. They are constantly dancing around the idea of psychohistory, which is central to the books and we're always asking what are they doing with psycho history in the TV show? There's a few things that I kind of don't like that much. Like they throw out names of people from the book and sort of assign them randomly to various characters.

And even before I saw some of these characters, I said, I really don't want them to do that just so they can get that kind of Leo DiCaprio meme where they go, oh, I've heard that name.

### **Joel**

That's exactly what happens with me, too. It's like Limmar Ponyets. I'm like, Whoa, Limmar Ponyets. And I know too, he doesn't even show up. Yeah. And then Mallow pretends to be what follows. It is like this thing that's not Limmar Ponyets. What are they talking about? Hey, that's supposed to be Le Mar Ponyatz and you're calling him Hober Mallow.

### **Jon**

But like the people that are on know, there's Seth Sermak, who really lived hundreds of years before. There's Councillor Sutt, there's all these various.



**Joel**

Names that Counselor Sutt plus when they turn them into from villains to heroes and vice versa. Sutt in the books was really like he was Mallow's arch enemy.

**Jon**

He was although there was a previous Sutt as well. If you really, really read them closely, there's a previous Sutt either Asimov intended for them to want to be descended.

**Joel**

From, liked the name what was that board called?

**Jon**

Yeah. During the whole yeah, yeah. One of them is Sutt and then Jorain Sutt is the one who is Mallow's antagonist.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

But I think Asimov maybe just liked the name and didn't even realize he was doing that.

**Joel**

It's possible he likes those single four-letter single syllable names like so many.

**Jon**

Like, I don't love that. But also, they did try to address the topic of psychohistory. They did try to come back to it, I think. Look, I have a reputation on our podcast as being the TV show apologist. I go in and try to say, well, here's why they actually really are treating psychohistory correctly and here's where they're really and sometimes I bend myself into pretzels trying to do that because I want to give them the benefit of the doubt.

**Joel**

And sometimes they come through and you find out later that you didn't need to bend yourself into pretzels.

**Jon**

That's true.

**Joel**

They had a plan for some of these things.

**Jon**

Yes, and I think they have come through in regards to that. I think they really have done a good job; they've addressed the subject. One of the things that I always say is that if there's ambiguity in the show, the ambiguity tends to be between two theories of history. Right, there's the great man theory of history and the bottom-up theory of history. Psychohistory sort of depends on the bottom-up theory of history being right, that historical forces are going to make the great events happen regardless of the individual people, the Napoleons and the Einsteins. Like the bottom-up theory says, those people don't really matter.

They appear when they're needed. And the great man theory, which for a long time was the theory of Western history, was that history moves from

great man to great man, or woman. But of course, history being what it is, it's very often men; from great man to great man, and the events of history follow those great men. So for psychohistory, it really requires the bottom-up theory of history. And so there's this tension. Like, we see all these people whose actions really seem to matter, who really are great people, and you say, well, they can't make up their mind whether it's bottom-up or great man.

But if you really read Foundation, I believe that Asimov never really decided between these theories of history.

### **Joel**

And in some ways, you could say the bottom-up psychohistory is lost in Foundation because of the Mule, the Mule

That's exactly...

### **Jon**

And he claims he didn't do this on purpose, but he follows the Bel Riose story, which in the books is the ultimate vindication of psychohistory. No matter what Bel Riose would have done, he was going to lose. He could not have beaten the Foundation because history didn't matter what individual decisions he made, he was going to lose. And so psychohistory is absolutely cast in iron, locks everybody in, and then immediately afterwards, the Mule shows up and just blows all that out of the water through the strength of his individual abilities. And so Asimov never really settled on it.

### **Joel**

I think that's why he's so endearing to me is that he doesn't have the typical human trait of developing a thesis and getting hooked into it and defending it till he dies. Asimov almost relished undermining his own theory, his own premise.

**Jon**

Again, he says he didn't do it on purpose, but you never know how writers come up with ideas.

**Joel**

Well, here's the thing, actually yeah, go ahead.

**Jon**

Appropriate to that is that I was thinking today about this whole idea that Asimov based Foundation on the decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. And he said that specifically, and there were all the conversations with John W. Campbell, and that's always kind of bothered me because I've read The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon. And Asimov's story doesn't really follow the Empire all that much, and Gibbon really does. Gibbon doesn't really talk about what's going on outside the Empire, except for the fact that the Empire is bringing in mercenaries all the time, and that that was one of the causes.

And Gibbon also attributes and this is part of the reason why he was controversial for so long. He attributes a lot of the fall of the Roman Empire to the advent of Christianity, and Asimov does not attribute the fall of the Galactic Empire to religion.

**Joel**

Right.

**Jon**

But Gibbon did. And so there's this sort of accepted view that, oh, this is the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. And I've always thought, well, not really. I mean, maybe the basic kernel of the idea came from that.

## **Joel**

I know that Asimov loved that book, supposedly read it twice, and I think I made it through it once in college, and I was supposed to be studying for STEM, for geology, and here I'm reading history. That's a good reason why my life turned out the way it did. Anyway, that's another one of those things where I think Asimov just absolutely loved that story, but he wasn't content to just, he didn't hook into it and say, I've got to tell this story and put it in the future so everybody knows about this story. It's more like, how can I subvert the hell out of this story or write this story from a completely different direction?

And there was an interesting thing. One of my favorite podcasts is Literature and History.

## **Jon**

I love it. Absolutely.

## **Joel**

Yeah. And I was listening to one episode - this goes back at least a year. He did an episode about it was fascinating. It was about imperial Britain and the rediscovery of Roman ruins in Britain in the very early Middle Ages, and how they saw these amazing these tribal people who had come into this land, had found these relics of these amazing buildings that the Romans had built. And we're just seeing it from the outside of this feeling of, like, wow, there was this gigantic, amazing civilization that we don't know anything about, and this is all that's left of it and, who are we?

It struck me as kind of the perspective that Asimov put his story of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in is, like, how the outside would relate to an ancient empire or a fallen empire.

**Jon**

Interesting. I guess I've always thought that the basic idea was that Gibbon makes the fall of the Roman Empire seem inevitable. And Asimov was kind of asking the question, Is that the case? Are empires like the Roman Empire destined to fall because of the forces of history? And I think, in my personal opinion, I think that led him to this idea of history as a collection of forces. It's an idea that's been around. Marx famously considered history to be that way. I think he was asking that question, is it inevitable that an enormous empire is going to fall?

And then I think everything else kind of fell out from there. And keep in mind that Asimov was 21 years old when he started writing Foundation.

**Joel**

It's just amazing, inconceivable.

**Jon**

And I find that when I read his later stuff, his style never really changed. For better or worse, Asimov's voice is there in Foundation, and it is there in the stuff he wrote at the end of his life. The same voice.

**Joel**

Yeah, that's true. Wow. So about that show yeah.

**Jon**

Okay, let's talk about the show.

## **Joel**

Yeah. Going back to what I was saying originally, before I introduced you, I was thinking back to my hopes for what this community of people interested in Asimov could be part of. It was thinking about the ideas in Foundation and how they seem timeless and always relevant in that it's about a gigantic crisis for humanity and it seems like we always have one of those, but now we have like the mother of all giant crises for humanity, right? So it seems like it becomes more and more relevant. I remember early on when I heard about the show thinking maybe the show could help spark kind of like an environmental conscience.

An idea of the future is something that we need to plan for. And if we're intelligent about this and we think like a really smart guy like Seldon, we can make intelligent plans and undo the catastrophe awaiting. It's not inevitable if we can plan for it and things like that. And I kind of feel like that opportunity didn't materialize as I'd hoped in that the show has. I get the sense that Goyer's progressive and liberal and all that and cares about the environment stuff, but he really cares about entertainment and making things really fun. And in some ways, I feel like some of the big ideas lost out to the big ideas about why it's important to think this way, the way Hari Seldon was thinking lost out to the idea that now let's just have a space opera and let's have explosions.

## **Jon**

I mean, partly I think that's true and that's a point that I've made before, you know, if you're going to have a show, it's got to be a show, it's got to be entertaining. If you're not entertaining people, you're not going to last very long. And I think they've done a great job of making an entertaining show, number one.

## **Joel**

Yeah. And I don't think it would have gotten this far if he hadn't made it as entertaining as possible. So I have that tension. A lot of the purists were thinking, why can't there be a true story, a Foundation in a TV show that follows the books? Well, that would be boring as hell for most people, right.

## **Jon**

And I think correctly identified very early on, there's a lot of action that happens in the books off screen. And you can't make a TV show like that where, oh, well, by the way, the Galactic Empire fell, you have to show it. And that's where the big spectacle and the fun is like the fall of the star bridge with just a huge special effects thing. He was right about that. Some of the things that he added and I think I'm going to talk about why I think they're important for the more artistic reason as but, but like the triple Emperor and the ongoing genetic dynasty, which is no, there's nothing like that in the books.

But it's absolutely wonderful in the show. I know our mutual friend Paul Levinson said that he loves the scenes on Trantor with the Emperor. And the rest of it for a long time didn't really live up to you know, there's a lot of truth in. But first of all, the acting performances by Lee Pace and Terrence Mann, Cassian Bilton and of course, Laura Birn as Demerzel have been just absolutely off the charts fantastic. And I actually think that's the biggest strength of this show is not the special effects. It's not Asimov. It's these individual performances. I mean, I think from this season, Ben Daniels, who was Bel Riose, just was absolutely captivating.

Captivating. Just a fantastic performance. And on and on. I mean, there's so many. Isabella Laughland, who is Brother Constant? Everybody loves Brother Constant, Kulvinder Ghir, who's Poly? I mean, just on and on and on. Just tremendous performances. But I think that what this show has done is this tension between the great man theory and the bottom-up



theory. It's all there, but it's a little dry. It's a little like, well, we have to see how things play out over hundreds and hundreds of years in order to prove it. But it's there. But it doesn't suck you in.

But what I think is a big theme of the TV show is this concept of personhood. Who is a person? What rights do they have? What happens if you take away someone's memories? Are they incomplete as a person? Because we see the Cleons are incomplete people, we find out that their memories have been heavily edited. And of course, part of season one is this whole concept of whether they have a soul or not. And the answer appears to come out in the negative, whatever a soul is. And we continue that theme here and there's that theme of Demerzel, who has programming.

She's a robot, and then she's had extra programming put on top that really constrains her to do things she doesn't want to do. She doesn't have choice. And then there's all the multiple Hari's, or what is the personhood of the Hari's? And that's where you got to get I think you get brought into the personal on this show and those are the emotional and important, interesting stories for the TV show and the whole historical story, it's always there. They're always coming back to it. They're always talking about it. We are always evaluating them on it. But it's a dry, long, historical thing.

We are interested in the individuals. And the show really has been pressing on that, I think, and doing a fantastic job. And like you, I was absolutely captivated by season two and couldn't wait for the new episode. And I'm so sad that there's only ten episodes in a season because it's gone now.

**Joel**

Yeah. And will we ever see a third one?

**Jon**

Well, I think we will.

**Joel**

I think we'll see a third one.

**Jon**

I feel like there were some signs that the audience was I don't know if the audience was bigger for season two, but I think it was more dedicated, and I think they really developed an audience. And just in my own sort of anecdotal, looking around on forums and on Twitter, the enthusiasm that I saw for the show from people who I had no idea were even interested in the show was much bigger for season two than it was for season one. And that's completely anecdotal. And based on a group of how many people do I really look at on Twitter?

Dozens, maybe. So it's not scientific, but it just felt like there was more of an upswell of interest in the show.

**Joel**

Well, it's true from my perspective, too. And I know you're not a big Reddit fan, I don't think. I wasn't until Foundation, until my podcast, really. And really, the only thing I've gotten into on Reddit is Foundation and Asimov. But in the first season, it just became this horrible place that I hated. It was a love-hate. I enjoyed going there. I enjoyed posting there for a while and met some really interesting people. One of the people I met there became a guest on this podcast. I had never known of him before. He's the historian, TCA Achintya, that I had on a couple of years ago, and he still posts there and he always, anytime I see one, he's BoringHistoryFan.

So if you ever see a BoringHistoryFan, you don't go to Reddit. But if you did and you saw a BoringHistoryFan, you'd see this nice, long, really

well thought out, really pithy stuff. Okay. Anyway, the difference between season one and season two is dramatic to me on Reddit, because a part of it I think goes, I'm going to call out the moderator, LunchyPete, is his name on Reddit. He did a really good job of kind of managing the firestorm towards the end of the first season, and he created this new Foundation TV subreddit, before it was just r/Asimov, and that one became kind of hopeless because that was where most of the purists were.

But the Foundation TV one also had a lot of people like bitching and moaning and just a lot of chaos going on. He kind of separated it into two threads for the book readers and the non-book readers, and that really worked. He really had some strong moderation policies in place and it really kind of settled things down. That was all in place for season two. And season two, I think, had a really good community around it on Foundation TV. I almost never went to r/asimov. I went there a couple of times and they were just ignoring it.

Once somebody obliquely referenced it, then got chewed out by somebody like, "Don't dare bring up that awful show."

### **Jon**

It's a great show, super entertaining. Over the years, I've been very forgiving of people making franchises out of the like, for instance, the movie I, Robot. A lot of Asimov fans hated I, Robot. Thought it was just.

### **Joel**

I think I saw it or maybe I just was afraid of it because of so many people talking about how bad it was.

**Jon**

Well, not only from an Asimov perspective, I not only liked the movie. I also thought that the story was very true to Asimov even though it was not one of the I, Robot stories. It was basically addressing the Three Laws and how the robots interacted with it and what would happen when a robot decided to reinterpret The Three Laws. And I thought it was really look, you can talk about whether you think it's a good movie or not. I liked it. A lot of people didn't like it. As a movie, fine. But as far as this whole, like, betrayal of Asimov or whatever, I feel 100% the opposite.

I think they did a great job of telling us what Asimov thought about robots.

**Joel**

Yeah. If Asimov was really... if Asimov was really spinning in his grave as much as people have claimed he has over all these years, that'd be a tremendous energy source. Yeah.

**Jon**

We'd be able to power the entire country.

**Joel**

I think he's resting quite comfortably.

**Jon**

I think he's fine. I think he would have liked to have lived longer.

**Joel**

Yeah, I think he was still bitching about that. I would really love to meet Robyn Asimov sometime. I have to figure out how to reach out to her. She'd be involved with the TV series. Yeah.

**Jon**

She's an executive producer.

**Joel**

Yeah. Maybe there's a way.

**Jon**

Maybe there's a way.

**Joel**

Yeah. So season two, what made it so good and what made it so different from season one? I think part of it was season one had its own Seldon Crisis of the pandemic to deal with and the difficulties they had filming and putting a large enough cast together. That's what I remember Goyer talking about as really impacting the feel of the Anacreon stuff on Terminus because they intended to have a hell of a lot more extras. And when you look at those scenes of the Anacreonians bursting in and rushing around, it does look really silly in context.

And when you think about it, there's not nearly enough people to make that realistic. That's kind of an excuse. But other than that, I think there was a big disparity in the quality of the I don't know if I hate to say the writing, because as somebody who doesn't write screenwriting for TV or anything like that or anything really fiction writing and most of the people criticizing the writing are like that. They just say, "Bad writing, bad writing, bad writing." Anything they don't like. But I think there's a lot more that goes into it. I think the premise and the casting the premise of The Three Cleons was so brilliant and of Demerzel as a woman and just the rock solid, just amazing performance by Laura Birn.

**Jon**

Tremendous.

**Joel**

Yeah. But there was kind of a disparity in the feeling of quality between those two halves of the show at season one and they seemed separate and you felt like you fell off a little bit when you came to Terminus. It was kind of like camp or something and just something rough and not really put together very well. And then there's Trantor, where everything is just gorgeous and pristine and beautiful and powerful. That was a problem that they didn't solve in the writing or in the structure of it in season one until you get to the end a little bit.

I think they start combining things together a little bit better. And at the very end, when Seldon comes out of the vault, it feels like that steps up a little bit and you feel like it ties things up nicely. But then we get into season two and I just felt like it lost that feeling of two separate halves because.

**Jon**

The two halves start to interact with each other.

**Joel**

Yeah. And one being super impressive and the other one struggling to meet it. It was more like one whole show and having a lot of different parts and the different parts were all interacting and there was nothing that was not really Empire falling. Everything was involved with Empire falling.

**Jon**

Right.

**Joel**

So it felt like one big show.

**Jon**

Well, let me say a couple of things. One is that we felt in both seasons that they started strong. And if you remember in season one, the first episode was very kind of faithful to the framing story that Asimov had written featuring Gaal Dornick, even though Gaal was gender switched. But who cares? And then episode two, which really concentrated mostly on the journey from Trantor to Terminus, was completely covered by one sentence in the book and it was an entire episode. And those two episodes were broadcast on the same or made available or streamed on the same day, one after the other.

So you went straight from really faithful to the book to completely invented. But it kind of started off with a bang. There's the trial, there's the fall of the starbridge, there's all of that going on.

**Joel**

Fall of Starbridge was quite a bang.

**Jon**

Quite a bang. And then things kind of slowed down and we really felt if you go back and listen to us, episodes kind of three, four, five, even six, things slowed down a lot. Things got a lot less interesting. We got really worried that they were not getting it done. And then maybe when I guess when it was Cleon walks the Spiral and then Roxanne Dawson takes over as director for episodes eight and nine. And those were just full of action and everything and really brought us back in. The finale was directed by David Goyer himself and really tied up the season and we really felt like it finished really strong.

The second season kind of went the same way. The first couple of episodes really opened up very strong. A whole bunch of new storylines are introduced. A bunch of new characters like the Spacers, who we'd only seen a little bit of, you know, all of this stuff shows up. And then they spent a bunch of episodes kind of slowing down and telling those stories and filling in the gaps that they had created, but it did slow the show down a bit until kind of episode seven, which was Mark Tonderai was the director of episode seven. And then episode eight, nine, Roxann Dawson is back again.

And really, just the whole thing became very strong. Then, the final episode was kind of a wrap-up episode for the season. So, we felt like both seasons kind of follow that same pattern. I understand the reason why they slowed things down in the middle of season two because they had started so many storylines, they really had to stop and tell those stories. I'm glad they did. But the other thing that I think is noticeable is that if we look at the first season, the stories that are interesting to us, really interesting to us, are the individual personal stories like Brother Day walking the spiral and did he have a vision or did he not?

And the person he meets along the way who he helps and helps him to survive, and yet he comes out of it without having actually learned anything or changed at all. I guess we can argue about that. But that's a personal story, right? And there's a lot of, I mean, a lot of what people like about the Cleons is the personalness of their stories. And those were the ones that caught you. And I think there were fewer of those in season one than there were in season two. In season two, we get a lot of personal.

The other one I wanted to mention was Brother Dawn's story of trying to escape from the palace and his romance with the gardener and the horrific punishment that Brother Day gives to Azura. Although there's some evidence maybe he didn't, but we don't know. But that's a captivating story and it's the story of an individual.



**Joel**

I want to hear about this evidence at some point, but go ahead.

**Jon**

Okay. It's very small, but the story is a personal story, right? It's Brother Dawn rejecting he's a member of the Cleons who has genetic differences. He's left-handed, he's not supposed to be. He's colorblind. He has all of these differences and he's trying to escape. And of course, he's a rube and a victim of deception and the whole plan would never have worked anyway. But that story sucks you in. Like, what's going to happen with Brother Dawn and season two, I think had more of those individual stories. Like they framed the big events that are happening through this sort of romance between Hober Mallow and Brother Constant, or more elements of Hober Mallow's story and Poly's wrestling with his faith.

He's the head of the religion, a religion he doesn't believe is really a religion. But Hari Seldon is his god until he gets to meet his god. And there's that deleted scene that David Goyer put out the script of where he said, we saved \$1.6 million by not making this scene. But in the scene, it's Poly. Well, first of all, it's the Foundationers arriving on New Terminus, but it's Poly confronting Hari and telling him how disappointed he is with him.

**Joel**

Yeah.

## **Jon**

Hari says, "Well, I wanted you to be the new mayor. I wanted you to run the place." And Poly's like, "You know what? I'm so disillusioned. I don't want to know." It's an individual personal story. Bel Riose. What was great about the Bel Riose story, it was the love affair between Bel Riose and Glawen Curr was such a great story. And even though we put Glawen as a character who only exists in the story to be a foil for Bel, he was still a great character and it was still a great performance by the actor. And it was so sad at the end when Glawen survives and Bel doesn't, when we really thought it was the other way around.

And we see Glawen realizing that Bel hasn't survived, and it's just a really emotional moment. But again, it's these personal stories where this whole historical story is going on around us. But I think what makes the show great, and maybe this was a decision that they made, seeing the results of season one. They said, we're going to do more of those things that everybody loves. We're going to get more into the stories of Brother Day. Look at Laura Birn as Demerzel. She's a robot and she's robotic, and she's not supposed to show emotion. And so the actor has to show emotion by the twitch of a lip or an eyebrow or the motions of her touching.

## **Joel**

Her little religious salt thing... crystal.

**Jon**

But what a tremendous job that was to have to understate all of your emotions, but to show how enormous those emotions were. And her story, again, is a personal story. She has her own desires, her own life that she wants to live. But she's been programmed by Cleon. She's forced to do things she wouldn't otherwise be doing because she has to and she doesn't want to. And she's aware of the fact that she's forced. I mean, think about that in terms of that theme of personhood, a person who knows they are in control of a program, who cannot violate the tenets of that program.

You just really feel for Demerzel.

**Joel**

Yeah. One thing I loved in season two, especially, were probably moments like this in season one. But these quiet, powerful moments, probably the strongest one that comes to mind is Demerzel's liberation from her prison when she had that moment where she could have killed Cleon and been free, and she chose not to and walked into a new prison, basically.

**Jon**

That's an incredible moment.

**Joel**

And it's not a noisy moment at all. It's a very quiet, very just almost nothing happening moment. But it's such just it's a huge moment.

**Jon**

And the fact that so many of her moments were like that makes her confrontation with Sareth where she goes up to her and gets right in her face and says, "Yeah, I killed your family. I did it the way I do everything, with great efficiency." And she just like, it's so shocking because everything else that Demerzel does is so understated. And then she takes that moment to just really devastate that with that's an incredible scene as yeah.

**Joel**

Yeah. That is another one that comes to mind. Really hit me in the very first episode of season two. And it's the part with Hari in the knife, I guess, still right before when he meets Yanna or somebody who appears to be Yanna, his lifemate. And he has to figure out that this doesn't add up because of the meter of her speaking. That's such a subtle thing that you don't usually see happen in a TV show. It's like the way someone, the meter of their speaking, reveals who they are and something fundamental about them. And then she turns into Kalle and has that questioning, he's questioning what he really is and who she really is, what it is.

**Jon**

Are you the Radiant? Back to the theme of personhood.

**Joel**

Yeah, that felt very powerful to me. I watched that at least three times because I felt that particular part was just so well directed and so rich, with not very much going on. And then you hear the yahoos talking about it and, like, missing everything completely.

## **Jon**

I mean, I think, again, getting back to the actors, the way Jared Harris plays multiple different versions of Hari Seldon and has to do them all just a little bit differently from each other. And I think we saw that for Lee Pace, Terrence Mann, and Cassian Bilton in season one a lot more where they wind up playing multiple versions of themselves as time passes. There was a little bit less of that for the Cleons in season two. Although there's a noticeable moment where Lee Pace has to play the Cleon who is now Terrence Mann, meeting Enjoiner Rue in the Seraglio, or whatever they call it.

And he has to sort of switch from... because the Brother Day of season two is a little loony. He gets standing there naked and says, "Hey, I'm standing here with my manhood flapping around. Somebody get me a towel."

## **Joel**

And the wink.

## **Jon**

And there are subtle differences. Like Hari, who was in the knife is a little unhinged, really. And that never ends. And Jared Harris has to play kind of unhinged Hari. And then when he's Hari in the vault, he has to be the much more kind of calm and sedate, but also incomplete Hari because a lot of his memories have been excised. And then he has to play young Hari, although we made fun of how that happened because they gave him this ridiculous wig to wear, which was just so stupid. Which, by the way, they also did with the Louis Pirenne character, who, when he was on the ship traveling between Trantor and Terminus, he had a stupid curly wig on.

And then later on he had very short hair and that was how they showed him at different ages. And I just thought, someone needs to tell David Goyer

that there are better ways to do that. Jared Harris as student Hari was completely unconvincing. He looked like a 50-year-old man wearing a wig.

**Joel**

Yeah, he did.

**Jon**

It was terrible

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

I think it was Joseph who said that it was like if Mo Howard and Ringo Starr had a lost baby. You guys have some great cuts that you deliver.

We try. We try.

**Joel**

Moments of levity.

**Jon**

Moments of levity, yeah.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

And then there were some great moments of levity in the show this season.

**Joel**

Yeah, there were a lot of well-intended and well-executed moments of levity.

**Jon**

I mean, a lot of them revolved around Hober Mallow and Brother Constant.

**Joel**

In the first season, many of the moments of levity weren't intended.

**Jon**

But here, you know, we have actually a category for voting for best Moment of Levity. And there are things like Hober being executed by Titan's Prick where he shows up with his target on his shirt. So silly. One of my favorite ones was when the emotional parting moment between Brother Constant and Hober where he says, 'You have to go because you bring people hope.' And when she's just about to leave the ship, she says, 'Hey, don't you want to know my name?' And he says, 'Yeah, of course I do.' And she says it's Hope. And he's like, 'Really?'

"She goes, 'No, but wouldn't that be great if it was?' I laughed out loud. I really did. They got me. It was like a rick roll. They absolutely sucked me into that moment."

**Joel**

"Yeah, that was an echo of the first time, what was it? When he was guessing her name. And one of the guesses that was he thought was she claimed he got it right and it wasn't. I forgot what it was."

**Jon**

"I can't remember what it was. But that was also the time we had the Monty Python reference there, which was that she said, 'Why did you guess that?' And he said, 'I panicked.' And then he immediately guesses Burma, which is for Monty Python fans. That's a little bit of an inversion of the penguin sketch where one of the two ladies says, 'Burma' and the other one says, 'Why'd you say Burma just then?' And the first one says, 'I panicked.' And there's no way that that was a coincidence. That absolutely was put in there for the aging Monty Python fans like me who would immediately, again do the Leonardo DiCaprio. "Hey, I see what you did there. I see that."

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

I think there is a lot of reference to other science fiction going on here. There seems to be a fair amount of Dune. One of the things that I thought when I first saw the first trailer and you see the gigantic palace and the soldiers in uniform walking through, I got a very Dune feel from that. And there's also walking the spiral out in the desert, all of that. I think it repeatedly comes back to Dune.

**Joel**

That also on Oona's World with those giant mining machines. Yeah, that made me think of sandworms.

**Jon**

Sure. Or even just the giant mining machines that they used on Arrakis to mine for the spice.



**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

So, I think there's a lot of kind of tributes going on around here. A lot of little Easter eggs for those who are paying attention, those who watch the show obsessively multiple times when it comes out, which I definitely did this season. I think I watched the average episode probably four or five times...

Not quite as many for me. And I haven't rewatched anything for at least a few weeks. But I'm thinking I'm going to do a full season two rewatch just for fun at some point.

So, I always watch the episodes twice because of the podcast. So, I watch the first time and don't take any notes. And then I go through it kind of frame by frame and stop it when I want to write something down because I do a recap of every episode and those recaps have gotten longer and longer at some point. I think at the end of the season, I just said, 'You know what, if you really want to recap, just go watch the show because my recap is almost as long as the show.'

**Joel**

Well, I was thinking of doing like a recap episode of season two like we did for season one a while back. And then I thought there's other places where you can go to get really good recaps of this show. I'll just point to them.

**Jon**

Well, I try to keep things a little shorter, but I can't help it. I just love to talk. And I edit the podcast. And so what we do is we record it on Zoom and it records each track individually. So, I can see Dan's track and Joseph's track and my track and the guest's track. And it's always a little embarrassing for me when I first load them into Audacity, which is what I use to edit. And I can see how much more I talk than everybody else. You can just see me, it's just it's just.

**Joel**

You got things to say.

**Jon**

I got things to say, yeah. No, I like the sound of my own voice, my favorite sound. But it's gotten to editing is so crazy. I mean, it's gotten to the point where I can see someone saying in the pattern, in the sound pattern, and I can just go in.

**Joel**

I know what you mean. It's really fun working with sound patterns sometimes and trying to find when something is messed up and you can find some syllable that's off or something, and you just look for that other syllable, that same syllable, somewhere else, and you're like, 'Yeah, that waveform looks like it. Should I grab that one? And I'll stick it right where that is?'

**Jon**

And I've done it. I've used noise reduction once or twice to get rid of persistent background noise, but it tends to make the whole thing sound a little tinny.

**Joel**

Yeah, I've done it a couple of times too, and it was definitely better than not doing it because there was a problem that needed to be fixed.

**Jon**

So, for me, editing consists mostly of taking out as many 'ums' and 'likes' and things like that as I can and taking out blank space. And it's tedious really, but I think it improves the final product.

**Joel**

Yeah, I do it a lot more diligently on story episodes. Those ones have a higher level of professionalism, I think for me, just conversation, I figure, naturally has lots of filler words and things, so it's okay.

**Jon**

Yeah, I don't want to disturb the voice of the individual person and that might involve some noise. And so I don't just take out everything but long pauses between, you know, with an 'um' in the middle of them. I mean, I'll just take that out because nobody wants to sit there listening to that. But like Joseph and Dan and I all have our individual voices. I mean, I say the word 'interesting' way too much, but I'm not going to completely edit it down because I want to preserve the voices of the people and of our guests as well.

We tend to get a much better response to our show when we have a guest than we do when it's just the three of us.

**Joel**

Yeah, interesting. I think that's probably true for me, too. My guest episodes are the most popular.

**Jon**

We've had some good guests, obviously. We've had you a couple of times.

**Joel**

The biggest surprise for me was the episode where I read an Asimov short story, 'Reason', one of the early robot short stories, a Powell and Donovan story. Okay, the reason it was a typical kind of number of downloads for it was actually well above typical. And I wondered why at first, and then it trailed off like they always do pretty quickly. But then what was really weird is like about the 23rd day or something, I suddenly had this giant peak of people downloading this one episode and it went on for two or three days. It turned out to be one of my biggest episodes ever and it was like an hour-long solo.

**Jon**

Did you ever find out why it was mostly?

**Joel**

I never found out what led to it, but I know what led to the larger baseline of it was that Asimov was in the title, or at least that's my theory. It's the only episode I've ever had that had Asimov in the title.

**Jon**

We got a tremendous increase in listeners when the TV show was actually being aired, and that happened both seasons.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

And so we had a little bit of an audience, and then the show came on and we got a huge increase. And then at the end of the season, it fell off, but it didn't quite drop back to where it had been. And it took a little while in season two, but towards the end of season two, we got a really big increase, and I think it really coincided with people really being interested in the show and probably looking for additional material.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

And we'll see how much of that audience we preserve going forward. I'm sure it'll fall back off again somewhat.

**Joel**

Right. We're going into the desert.

**Jon**

But, you know, we're going to be doing the sequels. We're going to be doing, we've thought about doing, there's three books that were sort of commissioned by other science fiction writers in the Foundation world.

**Joel**

Bear, Brin and Bova. [Ed: Benford not Bova]

**Jon**

Yeah. So is it Bova? They look interesting. One of the stories, I think, involves robots that don't have the Three Laws and a little bit of an examination of that. And that, by the way, is how Asimov wrote himself into Foundation, because I think it was actually in one of the robot novels. It wasn't in Foundation, where there's a conversation about building robots without the Three Laws, and he refers to them as non-Asenion robots, which is a little inside joke he had with himself. Someone had misspelled or mispronounced his name, and he decided that a robot that follows the Three Laws would be called an Asenion robot."

And so someone says, "Well, if anyone had been successful in," I think it's Han Fastolfe who says this, "if anyone had been successful in building a non-Asenion robot, we would have heard about it." And because the robot stories are now in the Foundation universe, Isaac Asimov himself exists in the Foundation universe.

**Joel**

Right.

**Jon**

His little clever way.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

That's cool. There was one thing that you brought up as a topic, which was wild theories about the show that we maybe have been too afraid to actually, before I do that, I wanted to say what was the piece of evidence that maybe the Emperor didn't carry out that punishment against Azura?

**Joel**

Yeah. Please tell me.

**Jon**

It was the Bel Riose story where they had told Bel Riose that they had killed Glawen six years ago, but in fact, they didn't. And when they got him out of the prison planet, they told him, "Oh, yeah, that was just part of the punishment. We just told you we did that, but we didn't really do it." And that gives you at least a glimmer of hope that that incredibly draconian punishment of Azura, where they eliminated everyone she had ever encountered, that she'd ever had any effect on in her life. All of her family members and everyone she'd ever met, including the other people who worked in the Imperial gardens. They had killed all of them. Maybe they didn't really do that well.

**Joel**

Yeah, and if you think about it, he presented that the reason for doing that intensive purge wasn't to root out the terrorists. It was just to punish her. It was just to punish her. Yeah.

**Jon**

And she was going to be in solitary confinement after that. It didn't matter whether they really did it or not, they just had to say they did.

**Joel**

Exactly.

**Jon**

Plus, who's going to look after the Imperial headache remedies if they kill all the gardeners?

## **Joel**

One of my favorite moments of levity that you guys talked about in season one was the moment of levity that wasn't, was if there had been like a gardener in a tree somewhere, something that just fell and plummeted to the ground right after in the background.

## **Jon**

From a tree. Yeah. So here's my wild theory, and it's actually kind of based on something that we've talked about a little bit. So it's based on the idea that Hari has this great tragedy in his life, which was done to him by the Empire. Effectively, his wife is murdered by a functionary of the Empire and he continues with his work and goes to Trantor, but he's pretty upset, and even hundreds of years later when we see him, he's still very much affected by the death of Yanna. And so my wild theory is, what if everything that's going on is not about the great sweep of history, but is just Hari's revenge against the Empire?

And it would explain why we've speculated that maybe Hari was responsible for the fall of the starbridge. I mean, what I've said is if you're setting up the initial conditions of the Seldon plan, something like the starbridge falling is such an enormous event that if you haven't factored it into your plan, it's going to destroy your plan. It's too big. It leads to the genocides on Anacreon and Thespis which have a direct effect on Terminus. Like all of that has to be part of the plan. And so you postulate well, maybe Hari possibly with the collusion of Demerzel because that's another possibility, which I'm going to get to a little bit more of in a second in my wild theory.

## **Joel**

Any wild theory needs a series of parts that go together well. Need to have the string.



**Jon**

I'll tell you how Demerzel factors into this. In the books in the prequels, Hari and Demerzel have a friendship, they know each other and it's Demerzel who is trying to stimulate the creation of psychohistory. So the idea is, well, if Hari was responsible for the destruction of the starbridge and the death of a hundred million people and two genocides afterwards. That kind of makes Hari into a supervillain, and the death of Yanna then becomes his supervillain origin story. And what about Demerzel? Well, Demerzel is perfectly placed to collude with Hari. And we saw Hari hack into what was her name?

The woman who kills Yanna? [Ed: Dr. Tadj] He hacks into her files, he hacks into her gun, and he makes it so that she can't shoot him in her car, and he reprograms everything. Well, what if Hari hacked into Demerzel and on top of the Cleon programming, there's Hari programming as well, and that Demerzel, even unbeknownst to her, is actually working for Hari, and that Hari is just so furious at the Empire that this whole story is about his personal revenge against the Empire. How's that for a wild theory? Like it?

**Joel**

I like it. Yeah, it almost seems too wild... that is definitely not the Hari Seldon of the books..

**Jon**

Like Hari says at his trial, I'm not a revolutionary. And then when he shows up on Terminus in episode ten, when he comes out of the vault and one of the Termini says to him, but you said you weren't a revolutionary. He says, yeah, I might have lied about that.

**Joel**

Yeah, correct.

## **Jon**

And what better way to continue his plan after he dies? Because he was expecting to die in season one. I think he was expecting the Empire to kill him, and eventually he has to have Raych kill him, but he was expecting to die. Well, if you leave some programming behind in Demerzel, in addition to vault Hari, the hologram Hari, what better way to continue your plan than to have reprogrammed Demerzel somehow? So that's know, I was thinking about that after you brought up the subject of, like, what's a wild theory? I can't think of a wilder one.

## **Joel**

Where does Kalle fit into all this?

## **Jon**

Well, that's a really good question. And one of the things that I've noticed about this show is that there are a lot of open questions that are not answered. Season one has the destruction of the starbridge. We are pretty strongly led to believe that Anacreon and Thespis really did not, at least as civilizations did not do that on purpose. It would have been completely insane because the end result would have been exactly what happened, which was a genocide against so who who was responsible for that? And to me, a lot of signs point to Hari/Demerzel.

There is, how did Hari get a new body, a new flesh and blood body? And that brings in to after he meets Kalle in the Prime Radiant, we go to Oona's world, and there's Kalle, and we don't know if Kalle is a real person or a robot or a hologram. Kalle shakes hands with Gaal. Gaal says, "I touched. Kalle physically existed." And then Hari appears with a body. Well, that's not explained, and there's a number of things that they leave them to us which I'm a big fan of ambiguity. And then my mind starts to spin around and do we how do we do this?

How do we work this into the story? And honestly, I have no idea what's going on with Hari's new body. Is it a clone? Whatever Kalle is? Did Kalle grow a body for Hari? And Kale doesn't have the same kind of body. We know because on the Beggar, Gaal and Salvor detect one life form, not two. But when Gaal drops down, or I guess it's Salvor drops down to get in the eye of the statue, there's Kale, and I guess it's Salvor says, "Who are you?" I don't remember Salvor or Gaal. Maybe it was Gaal who got Hari.

Gaal says, "Who are you?" And Kalle just disappears. But who is Kalle? This story has not been...

### **Joel**

Gaal felt Kalle, but she doesn't know that Kalle was human, right? She could have been a robot.

### **Jon**

She could have been a robot. She doesn't seem to be a hologram. I mean, Star Trek holograms you can feel, but not apparently holograms here in Foundation.

### **Joel**

You know, you should be able to create a hologram as any attributes you want, right?

### **Jon**

I mean, they made a big deal about how when Hari's walking through the desert, he doesn't cast a shadow or cast footprints or footprints, although I think there's actually sometimes when they slipped up with that. But in that scene, he doesn't have footprints because he's a hologram, and he doesn't get tired and thirsty and sweaty because he's a hologram. Yeah, there are a few things where, if you look at them too closely, they don't seem to make too much sense.

**Joel**

Well, another thing that kind of disappeared is this problem of why Hari remember, Hari was supposed to have a terminal illness, right? I forgot what it was called. Some syndrome.

**Jon**

Yeah, I don't remember either.

**Joel**

And they haven't mentioned that he's been back as a human. I mean, it's only been a few days in his life, of his body, but now he's going into these chambers, the cryosleep. So, does this mean he only has a few of these to do and he can only come out for a few days at a time, and he's going to die of this horrible terminal disease? Or did that just somehow get eradicated?

**Jon**

Maybe they eradicated that when they gave him a new body. I don't know. I get confused with Star Trek Picard because Picard had a terminal disease as well, which I guess disappears when he becomes a robot. Spoiler alert for anybody who hasn't watched.

Right? But his human body seems to be human. The human Hari that was in every other way, it has all of Hari's memories right up until the point where he dies. And yeah, I don't know. I don't know what they're going to do with that. And you're right, it's only been a few days, and he's only going to wake up for a few days at a time over the next hundred, 52 years.

**Joel**

Is that a good way to keep terminal diseases in check? It's just to cryosleep for a few millennia or whatever?

**Jon**

Going back to Star Trek again. Didn't Dr. M'benga put his daughter in the transporter and lock her in?

**Joel**

That's right.

**Jon**

I don't know. I've never tried it myself. I'll have to let you know in 20,000 years whether that's actually a strategy or not for terminal diseases. That's always been the thing about people who have themselves frozen now and think, someone will wake me up in the future. And I just think to myself, why would someone wake you up? What's special about you that they would wake you up? I had this dinner with Marvin Minsky. He's a huge giant of science fiction science, of computer science, and he and this other friend of mine kind of bonded over this cryogenics thing.

And I just turned to my friend and said, "Jay, if they find both of you lying next to each other, you and Marvin Minsky, and they can only wake up one of them, I'm afraid it's not going to go well for you, because that's Marvin Minsky." Yeah. I don't think overall, I recognize the differences. Some of the things that they changed are some of the best parts of the show, like the emperor, the Cleons. Sometimes I wish they had adhered closer to the book. As I said, sometimes I bend over backwards into a pretzel trying to make it like, oh, yeah, psychohistory was really at work here.

They shocked me when they destroyed Terminus. I was very surprised. We all thought somehow that's going to be undone. And guess what? It is not being undone.

**Joel**

I thought that they undid the killing of all the people.

**Jon**

Yeah, I thought that was a little yeah, yeah.

**Joel**

But I think the way Goyer justified it is. He said, "Well, we did kill off six real important characters."

**Jon**

I was surprised they killed off Salvor. Yeah, that was a shock.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

I thought that the better solution and I have said this on our podcast the better solution to the problem of Terminus would have been the solution that the Second Foundation used in Second Foundation where a bunch of people sacrificed themselves to pretend that they were the whole thing. And they knew that they were going to be either sterilized or just outright killed. But they did it anyway because they believed in the cause. And I thought, well, what if Terminus knowing that the planet was probably going to be destroyed? What if they had left behind Sef Sermak and 50 or 100 other people and gotten everybody off the planet beforehand and those people sacrificed themselves to maintain the story?

It would be a little bit sadder and a lot more death, but I felt that it would be a little more realistic. I mean, when we see Terminus being destroyed, we see Poly sitting there by the vault and we see this wave coming at him.

**Joel**

Yeah. And you have to watch it again because apparently there's also, like, a flash that seems to be the indication that the vault is going out and grabbing everybody. It doesn't seem to be grabbing Poli.

**Jon**

From a storytelling standpoint. I thought that was sloppy.

**Joel**

Yeah, I did too. I kind of forgave it eventually because it bothered me while I was watching.

**Jon**

One of the things that Poli says in that unfiled scene is he's upset that Seldon sent him into absolute mortal danger, fully expecting him to be killed. And we remarked on it at the time, like, isn't Poli being sent into incredible danger? And Poli confronts him with that and says, "You sent me off to be killed. And what he says is, I was perfectly willing to go off and be killed. But you didn't tell me. You didn't ask me why not. You should have." And it's a really good moment, I think, in a cut scene that Poli is like yeah, I would have happily gone and died for the Foundation, but why didn't you give me the chance?

**Joel**

Yeah, that's such a shame. I have to put it in the show notes where people can go to read that script because it's quite a scene.

## **Jon**

It is quite a scene. And again, it points up the difference between Vault Hari and flesh and blood Hari. Is that Vault Hari seems to have a kind of an instrumental view of yeah, we you know, some people are going to die. Warden Jaeger. Who? Hari incinerates for why? One of the questions Poli asks is, "Why did you do it?" And he says it was for effect. It was because a god has to do whatever. It was completely unnecessary. But Vault Hari seems to be willing to do that. And there's this whole question of how much empathy does Hari have for people?

And maybe the reason why flesh and blood Hari was given a body was to reconnect him with his humanity. When he was a hologram, he was getting that way as he says to know there's nothing you can do about Salvor dying in the he has when he was flesh and blood Hari. He has much more empathy about here we are trying to save the galaxy and we can't even save the people we love. Which I believe is something that Gaal said to Hologram Hari when he was still a hologram. And he kind of brushes it aside.

But when he's human Hari, he feels it more. And we really see that's a big difference between Vault Hari and flesh and blood Hari is that level of empathy. There's that scene in the I think it's in the final episode where he's trying to help Gaal get over the death of Salvor and he talks about Yanna and how he knows how it feels to lose people and how it changes you and how you have to keep, you know, he used that to keep him going. And it's the first time we hear Hari really talking that emotionally about other people.

And of course, it goes back to the wild theory about the whole thing being his revenge. Just throw that in there. How he's still really upset about losing Yanna.



**Joel**

Yeah, I can imagine.

**Jon**

And the death of his child were completely unnecessary.

**Joel**

I can imagine empathy being a little difficult if your primary mode of thinking is mathematically calculating the probabilities of shifts of giant...

**Jon**

Yeah. And if you're a virtually immortal hologram, people are going to die one way or another. They're all going to die around you. And if you have to use some of those deaths to make your plan work, well, 50 or 60 years later, they were going to die anyway.

**Joel**

Well, interesting how I said that the revenge Hari idea is so different from the books. In the books, in the psychohistorian, the only place we really meet Hari while he's alive, he really dwells on this idea of avoiding the horror of the fall. Unnecessary horror and suffering is like a big part of what he seems to be having in mind.

**Jon**

Yeah. I'm not saying that my wild theory is true. I'm just saying it's a wild theory. And I'm trying to do the reverse of what I do as a podcaster where I try to make things fit into the basic idea here. I'm trying to take these events and make them fit into my wild theory. So let me just disclaim that I don't necessarily believe my wild theory. I just wanted to come up with as wild a theory as I could come up with.

**Joel**

Well, I think there's some variant of that might turn out to be true.

**Jon**

I really believe that these things, these differences between flesh and blood, Hari and hologram Hari and the development of the Cleons and their genetic differences and the memory editing and Demerzel, I really believe that is the true theme of this TV show. It's this question of what is a person, what rights does a person have? What does it mean to have your memories edited? What does it mean to be under the control of someone else's programming? And how Demerzel is obviously constrained by her programming. But a lot of people in this show are constrained one way or the other, the emperors.

Who was it that knew, they talk about how much freedom I think it's Brother Dusk who talks about not having freedom and know, what did he want? He always wanted to have a life and he never got to have it. And so they're all constrained, and Hari is constrained and Raych has to do what he does, and Gaal tries to rebel against the constraints that Hari's put on her, but she gets sucked back. And the mentalics are constrained by Tellem, who controls their minds until she finally dies. And by the way, that was another great moment of levity to me when Hari appears, seemingly having been dead and kills Tellem rather graphically with an axe.

And then he just sits down and goes, "I never really liked her."

**Joel**

Yeah, that made me laugh out loud. Yeah, it was well delivered.

## **Jon**

But to me, anyway, that whole all of those questions and that was a big theme of season one, right? When Brother Day goes to, he has those conversations with Zephyr Halima, who believes he doesn't have a soul. And there's all of those questions about what does it mean for this dynasty to be continuing? And even at the very end of season two, when Demerzel wakes up three new Cleons all at once, and they all take steps in unison, they all say, "we are Empire" in unison. "You are Demerzel." They are not free to think and say and do what they want. They are constrained by who they are. And I think that is, to me, the overarching theme of all of this, are those questions.

## **Joel**

I just want to get back real quickly to one other thing that intrigued me.

## **Jon**

I'm doing it even on your podcast. I'm talking.

Which was that no problem in the first episode of season two. That scene I was referring to earlier with Gaal and Yanna and Hari in the knife, where he goes into the... gets free of it the moment where they're discussing or she's prodding him to understand who she is. And he says, "Are you the radiant?" And she says, "Show your work." And he starts talking about how he didn't program her to be the radiant, to be a conscious being. And that one really struck me because I had just read Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora*. And in *Aurora* there's a fantastic scene as this arc ship is returning to Earth.

## **Joel**

It's a bit of a spoiler, but this arc ship is returning to Earth after a pretty much catastrophic mission to the nearest star that it could reach. And it barely has the capability. The big problem is it can't slow down fast enough coming into Earth. So it has to do this very complicated series of swing-bys of planetary bodies in our solar system to slow down enough to let a ferry off, to let the people off and come back to Earth safely. And it's like an incredibly difficult computation involved to do this, that it has the biggest computation problem that it's ever had.

And the way Robinson describes what happens is, he says it's a combination of this intensive computation for a cause out of dedication to those people on that ship and the purpose of getting them back alive that eventually turns this, it's basically like a concert of AIs on the ship that's doing all this work. It basically becomes conscious right at the last moment. Just as it reaches its final moment, it becomes alive and conscious. That's what I thought of when she was talking about that and I was thinking about maybe Hari didn't intend the Radiant to become alive, but it's driven by a purpose, a love for humanity to keep humanity from suffering.

## **Jon**

But there's that conversation between them where Gail says, "I have an interest in the future of humanity," and Hari says, "I wish you'd said you had an interest in the survival of humanity."

## **Joel**

Right.

## **Jon**

The response is, "Well, aren't the two of them the same thing?"

**Joel**

But still yeah, but maybe there's this idea that the Radiant has become a conscious being out of that process. And that's something I really hope they kind of follow up on.

**Jon**

Well, so that was one of the things that they teased, as you say, in episode one of season two, and they never came back to it, this idea of the prime Radiant having achieved somehow sentience.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

And I will say to you again the same thing that I said the first time you brought up Aurora. God only knows when is that if you're interested in that kind of story. There's a story called Destination Void by Frank Herbert, which is basically the story of a bunch of clones sent out into space to develop an artificial intelligence. And they keep sending the same group of clones out because they've identified like, we want this person with these characteristics, and we want that person and that person and that person. And they keep sending them out into space and putting them under stress to try to get them to develop an artificial intelligence.

And this is the story not to give away too much of the group that succeeds, and at the very end of the book, they succeed and then something happens. I highly recommend it.

It's a novel, if you like Frank Herbert, who loves psychedelic substances and thinking about the mind, but it's not in the Dune Universe.

It is not in the Dune Universe, no.

**Joel**

Okay. Interesting.

**Jon**

It's way closer to our history. The Dune Universe is many thousands of years in the future of our history.

**Joel**

Did he write it earlier or later, do you know?

**Jon**

"m not sure. I'm not sure when he wrote it. He did write it, at least one. I think he wrote two sequels to it. The sequels are not fantastic, but Destination Void is.

**Joel**

Okay.

**Jon**

Highly worth it. Short.

**Joel**

Add it to my monstrous queue of things that I plan to read.

Yeah, no, I know. I can recommend all I want, but yeah, no, I haven't read Aurora, and it sounds interesting to me.

You got to read it. Although I can't say that I loved every aspect of it. And when you read it, I think you'll understand what I mean. A lot of people had the same reaction. And it's not that it's bad writing. It's, like, beautifully written. It's just the concept.

**Jon**

I've read quite a bit of KSR stuff, and I don't always agree with everything he says or love. I mean, I read the whole Mars trilogy and it is really long.

**Joel**

I love the Mars trilogy.

**Jon**

Fact that I could have done a little bit less of people getting together in conferences and arguing with each other. He could have done that maybe once. He loves his conferences constantly.

**Joel**

He definitely loves his conferences. There's one in Aurora, too.

**Jon**

I've read Salt, which I thought was very good.

**Joel**

Oh, Years of Rice and Salt.

**Jon**

Years of Rice and Salt, sorry.

**Joel**

Yeah.

**Jon**

And then there was one I read about a was written fairly recently. It's about kind of a caveman who...

**Joel**

Oh, yeah.

We just sort of see his life...

Loon.

**Jon**

Yeah, okay.

**Joel**

Loon, I think that's called.

**Jon**

And I thought that was very good, actually.

**Joel**

Yeah, it was. That's another one of my favorites. He has such range that he can write something from 30,000 years ago to 30,000 years in the future.

**Jon**

I think it was when you interviewed him, or maybe it was a different interview that he did when he talked about the Mars trilogy and said, as far as colonizing Mars, if he had known then what he knew now, he would have been a lot less optimistic about the possibility of...



**Joel**

Absolutely. He said that when I interviewed him, and he says that I thought that was fascinating other times, too. Yeah, he's definitely made a turn in his perspective about the human future. The way he thinks of the human future is that we really have a colossal human emergency in the next 30 years or so. But he's not a total pessimist. He thinks that if we can get our shit together and handle this next 30 years, that things could get really rosy beyond that, because then by having handled that problem, we can basically handle anything because this is the inflection point that we have to deal with.

But humanity is humanity.

**Jon**

Yeah, I know. Can't be trusted. Yeah. I hope there's some hope for us. I mean, at the age you and I are 30 years from now, I don't know if it's going to matter to us too much.

**Joel**

Did we talk about robots enough?

**Jon**

We haven't talked about robots enough.

**Joel**

Yeah. And I was going to say how I discovered Asimov was really interesting and not quite the way most people do, I think, in that my dad was a big science fiction fan and had a home library of all sorts of science fiction books. And he had one science fiction, one fairly thick volume called *The Rest of the Robots*, which, it turns out, was the stories that weren't in *I, Robot*, that were robot stories, which is how most people are introduced to Asimov's stories, is through the robot stories in *I, Robot*. And I got to those much later after I'd read all the *Rest of the Robots*. But at the end of *The Rest of the Robots*, it had two novels, two short novels, *The Caves of Steel* and *The Naked Sun*.

**Jon**

Wow.

**Joel**

The first two of the robot series, because he hadn't written the other two yet. That book came out back in the 60s or early 70s.

**Jon**

People were always trying to get him to write more of what he'd already written, and he was always saying...

**Joel**

Yeah, I didn't get to read the last two of that series. I went back and after I finished reading all seven of the Foundation stories, I went back and I read the last two books. I still have *The Rest of the Robots* on my shelf. So I read those two novels again and then immediately went to the library and got the next two and read through those. I just loved *Robots of Dawn* and *Robots and Empire*. Definitely some cringy stuff. Anytime Asimov is writing about women and involving women in his stories, in anything like a romantic story, you're going to have some cringy moments."

**Jon**

Yes. And we have not shied away from that on *Stars End*. Yeah, we have definitely taken a cold hard look at that. We've attributed it to various things. I mean, some of it is that Asimov started writing these stories at quite a young age and growing up he went to a boys' school. He probably never met a woman for a long time until way too late in life.

**Joel**

He kind of met one. I think he was introduced to his wife-to-be and said, 'You're going to marry this woman?'"

**Jon**

But he did have, I mean, Asimov's attitude towards women. It's not like it was a product of his time. People called him out on it, and he said, 'Too bad. I'm Asimov. I get to be grabby. I like having sex and I think I'm really good at it,' and just stuff that just makes you wince. Yeah, the way characters, even in the Foundation stories, when they meet a woman, they look the woman up and down and they talk about breasts.

**Joel**

When he meets that woman on the first ... Golan Trevize. I forgot what the world is called...

**Jon**

"eah, I can't remember, but I know.

**Joel**

It's in Foundation and Earth. In the early part of Foundation and Earth, when he goes they go to that planet where the woman is in charge. She's like the president of the whole world and he basically solves the problem by bedding her and then everything's fine.

**Jon**

Well, first of all, Golan Trevize is one of the most unlikable heroes of the story you will ever meet.

**Joel**

If you can separate out those aspects of it, he's not as unlikable. I see the Asimov in him, definitely. And that makes me like him more than I would have otherwise.

**Jon**

Frankly, Hari in the prequels is pretty unlikable too in a lot of the same ways.

**Joel**

Like when I heard you guys talking about Hari in the prequels, I didn't have quite the same reaction reading the prequels. I bonded with Hari a little bit, except for anytime sex came up.

## Jon

Well, like when he arrives at Mycogen, he immediately starts demanding things in the middle of the night or whatever. I don't know. He just comes across as a little self-centered. Again, very, very much so. Yeah, but anything having to do with sex and even though Dors is there. and so like Asimov, the thing about Asimov is that he was self-aware. So Hari treats women pretty badly, but Dors is an extremely capable woman who kind of calls Hari out on it in a way. She's calling Asimov out on it. He doesn't stop doing it, but he has characters inside the story kind of looking out at the pages of the book going, 'You know what? You're a sexist, misogynist bastard.' And he just goes, 'Yeah, too bad,' like, to his own characters. One of the things about Asimov that I will always bring up is the way he interrogates himself. Like, he made the Three Laws of Robotics, and they're great, they're fantastic. And then he spent the rest of his writing career interrogating those laws. 'What if we weakened the first Law? What are the implications?' Like, all of the I, Robot stories are kind of mystery stories that turn on some tension between various aspects of the Three Laws and what is the ultimate the whole co-creation of the Zeroth Law is like, 'Well, what is the ultimate reductio ad absurdum of the laws?'"

Well, the robots are going to create a Zeroth Law that means that they have to protect all of humanity. But even that the robots look at that and go, 'That's too much.' And that's why there are no robots originally in Foundation, because the robots removed themselves. And he never stops in his career interrogating the things that he's written before. And I mean, I've seen writers who do the same thing he did, where they try to unify their various worlds that they've created. It seems to be an urge that writers get as they approach death. I don't know why, but I've never seen anybody consistently looking back and going, 'Well, what are the implications of what I said 30 years ago? Let's examine that.' We did a series of short stories, and I hate to say that I cannot remember the titles of any of them, but each one of them is an interrogation of a different

one of the Three Laws. There's an interrogation of the First Law, like in *Robots and Empire*, which leads to the creation of the Zeroeth Law. Like, 'What are the implications of having to think about humanity all the time?' And then there's another one where the story turns on who is sufficiently worthy of giving us orders as robots, and they're really interrogating the Second Law in that story."

And then there's... where is there the interrogation of the Third Law? It's there somewhere. But the point is that Asimov is just he never stops asking himself, 'What are the implications of these things?' Yes. The Three Laws are fantastic. And famously, when a reporter called him up to ask him about military robots. He just hung up on them. He said, 'I won't even talk about that.' But he never stopped asking.

**Joel**

This goes along with another thing about Asimov that I've always found fascinating is that he was his biggest fan.

**Jon**

Absolutely.

**Joel**

And not just as the writer, but as a person and everything, but as a reader. He loved his own work. He loved to read himself, and I think he loved to read himself as he was writing. He liked to read what he was writing, and he was constantly surprising himself with what he was writing. He didn't have a clear plan what he was going to write on any given day. He just started writing. And I think he was delighted with what he found.

**Jon**

Famously hated going back and editing. You look at original versions of stories that were published in some of these pulpy science fiction magazines, and then later on, he was given the opportunity to anthologize them. And you read the two versions of the story, they're basically word for word. He did not like to go back and change anything.

**Joel**

Right.

**Jon**

He did it occasionally, but he really didn't like it.

**Joel**

But what was I getting to with that? He's constantly... well, that's why I think you find so many wonderful surprises in Asimov's writing, so many twists, is that he's kind of engineering the story himself so that he'll be surprised himself by where it goes.

**Jon**

Right. And I think also that he loved detective stories and he used the background of science fiction to write a lot of detective stories. The first three robot novels are all detective stories, and of course, they are famous for having twists and turns. And he really likes, I think that's true. I think he was trying to surprise himself. But I think also the point you made about him being a fan, being his own biggest fan, I think he read his own stuff as a fan. And as fans, we're always kind of niggling away at like, well, yeah, sure, but what are the real implications of what you just said?

What do you think about that?

## **Joel**

He engaged with his fans a lot in writing, and people would send in their questions that didn't like, wait a second, what about such and such? And some authors might say, I don't want to hear that. But he was like, yeah, that makes me want to write another story about it. Yeah, I need to write.

## **Jon**

I think that's really a strength. I mean, obviously his kind of cardboard cutout characters are not a strength. And that's something that the TV show has done so much better than he did. You have characters like Bel Riose, who the first few times we see him, he doesn't even get a lot of screen time. But the depth of Bel Riose going from being this prisoner on a prison planet, his confrontation with Brother Day, and then he sees that Glawen is alive and just the range of emotions and characterizations that we see him go through. And one of the points of the story between Glawen and Bel has to do with whether Bel's time in prison has turned him into a monster or not.

And when they arrive on Siwenna and Bel kind of preempts everything by starting a huge fight in which all the natives except one wind up dead. And Glawen is really upset about that, and he's really worried that Bel has been turned into a monster. And at the end, when Bel has to take an action that's going to apparently lead to, you know, Glawen kind of says to him, I can see that you really haven't become a monster. You're still you. And it's a really important moment between them. But just the range of Ben Daniel's kind of craggy face that we see a lot of close ups of and just we don't see that much of Bel Riose, but there is so much to Bel Riose.



## **Joel**

Yeah. And I love that it really subverted my expectations, too, because I thought what they were setting up, with that initial conflict between Bel and Glawen, you know, someday you're going to commit an atrocity, blah, blah. And I thought where it was heading was that Glawen was going to betray Bel and essentially stop him from committing some major atrocity at the Empire's expense and essentially go over to the Foundation. And that's not where they went at all. And that's what I love, is like, you can have these well thought out ideas of where they're going with something and then they just totally flip it upside down on you, and I'm delighted when that happens. If everything happened the way I was expecting, it would be boring.

## **Jon**

I can't say enough about what a great job they've done in so many aspects. And David Goyer, who, you know, he's kind of a superhero guy, he's done a lot of action things with explosions, and there are explosions here. We destroy an entire planet. But he has been so thoughtful about the big topics that he wants to explore. You know, I think to me that's the best of science fiction is when you use why does science fiction even exist? What does it do that you couldn't do in a regular environment? Well, it allows you to examine things in ways that you can't do without space travel or artificial intelligences and robots.

The technology, when science fiction is at its best, is in service of being able to ask questions you wouldn't otherwise be able to ask without those things. If the technology is just there to be cool, all right, that's fun, but it doesn't do anything literary for you. I just think they've done such a great job here in so many ways. The special effects for a TV show have been, I think have been tremendous as well. David Goyer talked about Beki the Bishop's Claw and how that was actually the most expensive effect that

they had, and he said we had to really choose our places, our spots, really carefully when we were using Beki.

**Joel**

He said he was so glad when Beki died.

**Jon**

Because the other thing that I really want to see is they said that on set they had a guy in one of those green leotards with a Beki head to be a placeholder, and that eventually they're going to release the footage of that, and I think that's.

**Joel**

Got to be funny. All right, well, we've gone on for a bit.

**Jon**

I'm sorry. It's me. I just go on.

**Joel**

No, it's both of us. But I'm so happy to have had you on, long overdue. And this is definitely not your first time on Seldon Crisis. No. You have been on Seldon Crisis. It's the first time as you on Seldon Crisis, but your voice has appeared on Seldon Crisis.

**Jon**

It has.

**Joel**

This is now your fourth episode where you've been on.

**Jon**

And I hear rumors that it will appear again.

**Joel**

That is quite possible, yes. So I certainly hope that comes to pass.

**Jon**

And I hope that I manage to do another voice and it doesn't come out like Homir, because that's going to really say something about my range that everyone I do sounds like Homir Munn.

**Joel**

Yeah. Well, I could make you Bliss?

**Jon**

I do have a little bit of...

**Joel**

Or, you know, Sura Novi?

**Jon**

Sure, why not? I could be subservient. Well, I'm looking forward to that. And I really enjoyed being on and just having this conversation, and I do realize we've gone on a long way, and maybe some of this stuff isn't going to make it into the final version. I don't know...

But most of it does because I'm lazy, so I don't edit that much. I will edit the worst stuff. I'll look for that really big blip I saw earlier.

There was a big blip? Yeah. Well, thank you for inviting me on, Joel. I really appreciate it. And I'm sure that the time will come when we invite you back onto Star's End again, because we love having guests, and you're a very good guest, and we like your perspective.

**Joel**

Happy to do it at any time. It's easier being a guest than a host. You don't have any responsibilities when you're a guest, you just show up.

**Jon**

I try when we have a guest, I try to shut up a little bit and let the guest talk. I'm not sure how successful I am.

**Joel**

All right, I'm going to say goodnight, and we'll talk to you later.

**Jon**

Good night.

[Theme music plays out]