

## Foundation and History with TCA Achintya



[Opening theme music with voiceover.]

### TCA Achintya

"I think what's important to remember about the Mule is that he is, socially speaking, a disruptor. He's a sharp, unanticipated shock to the system who basically throws it all off the rails. The Mule is also, I think, comparable to historical phenomena, not just people. The best example I have is the Black Death."

[Theme music plays out.]

### Joel

Welcome back to Seldon Crisis for the twentieth and final episode of 2021. I hope you're all enjoying your happy holidays so far and have stayed as healthy as you can in these trying times. We've got a lot of good stuff coming up on the podcast in the new year, including the beginning of season three as we dive into the third volume of Asimov's epic with "Second Foundation, The Search by the Mule," In just a couple of weeks. Today, we have another special guest, a historian of the British Empire with a deep fascination and appreciation of Asimov and Foundation by the name of TCA Achintya.

His focus is on the history of law and legal practice at a global scale in the 18th and 19th centuries, and his doctoral work looks very specifically at the lives of lawyers in the 19th century British Empire. But more broadly, he works on ideas of power and life at an imperial scale. Welcome Achintya to Seldon Crisis!

### **Achintya**

Hi. Glad to be here. Not sure I can really top that introduction. So hello again.

### **Joel**

I first encountered you on the r/Asimov subreddit a while back, and I was immediately struck by your passion for the books and your penetrating analysis of some of the core topics Asimov brought up. Can you tell me how you discovered his works and what they mean to you?

### **Achintya**

So I can't really tell you from where I remember Asimov. I've been reading him since I was a child. I think what I do remember, my earliest memories of his work are the Susan Calvin robot stories, the short stories he'd write, I think from I Robot, possibly the first one. But for me, Foundation's always been particularly special because of the way it sort of engages with questions of human history and sweeps of human culture. I think it's from that book that I always sort of concluded that Asimov really is a historian at one level, and he grapples with a lot of the conundrums that historians engage with., so his work really does speak to everybody who's sort of interested in humanity from a historical perspective.

## **Joel**

I think that's one of the main reasons that I resonated with him, too. As soon as I started reading him, that sense of deep time, forwards and backwards. I read his histories of the Old and New Testaments not too long ago and just loved his no nonsense approach to explaining what was going on in the Near East at the time they were written and how some actual events did correlate with the stories to varying degrees. I could always trust Asimov to have a very rational approach to something like that but also have the sheer passion to attempt it, the audacity. So do you have any favorite Asimov novels besides Foundation that have inspired you, other Sci-Fi writers you like?

## **Achintya**

So there's The Ugly Little Boy, and then there's Nightfall. I know neither of them are really originally novels. They were short stories, but then they got expanded into novels and they've always appealed because of the way Asimov steps outside of his comfort zone with those stories. He's really writing about things that I don't think he ever visits again with some of his other work, which, I mean, he's often got tropes if you think about, for instance, his supercomputer stories. And they really grapple with these questions of the human experience that makes them really great reads and they make you question your personal assumptions about how the world works, which is an important part of my research.

It's like trying to sort of question what you're doing at every stage in terms of other authors. Michael Crichton's been a huge favorite of mine, especially the Jurassic Park novels and his whole thing of chaos theory and science and how to understand society and scientific endeavor.

**Joel**

The Ugly Little Boy, I don't know if you know, Asimov claimed that that was his favorite short story?

**Achintya**

I didn't know that. Yeah, but it is his most moving. There's a level of I think Asimov struggles a little with human connection at times. And I think Ugly Little Boy is his best human story.

**Joel**

Opposite sex, I think.

**Achintya**

But ugly little boy is very good humanistically. They're very real people in that story in a way that Susan Calvin never really comes across as, admittedly she's not meant to. She is, you know, the whole point of her being robotic herself. But a lot of his characters sort of feel like tropes, whereas Ugly Little Boy is just something else.

**Joel**

I was thinking about how Michael Chrichton talks about chaos theory and how life will find a way and that kind of thing in Jurassic Park. And you reminded me of that because I've been thinking about chaos theory lately and how it applies to something, a core piece of the premise in Foundation, which is psychohistory. So I'm kind of curious what you think of the likelihood of something like psychohistory being developed because I've heard some people say that ideas like chaos theory that hadn't been around when Asimov was writing would tend to undermine any possibility of making accurate, mathematically based predictions of future history. So you have any thoughts on that?

## **Achintya**

Yeah, so I'm not much of a scientist. But the thing is, Asimovs always struggled with psychohistory himself as a concept. Almost as soon as he started writing it. He realized that the fundamental irrationality of the human experience makes it very difficult to predict things and makes humanity very difficult to sort of control for. He starts with this presumption of what if we could reduce humanity down to atoms? But then very quickly on. He sort of has to put these rules in place to deal with the fact that how to deal with human irrationality. Humans, by very nature of the fact that we aren't scientific phenomena, we react irrationally.

So he has to come up with these rules of humanity, can't know about it. He has to create the entire Second Foundation with superpowers so that humanity can be mind controlled at one level. So I'm not sure if psychohistory is really feasible as a concept. A lot of scientific concepts with quantum mechanics have sort of showed the limits of our predictive ability. There's a limit to what mathematics can do for us. And at some level point there are just too many variables to account for. And I think humanity is by definition too many variables.

## **Joel**

I kind of think the same. But I'm also aware that we only so far have a few billion humans to work with. And if we were in the situation of having quintillions, then maybe that would change the way it could work and maybe you could develop more precise patterns for prediction. But there's probably still a lot of things that would torpedo it in practice. So let's bring it back to your specialty. What specific points in human history do you think Asimov drew from in creating?

## **Achintya**

You know, there's always the obvious answer, which a lot of people have pointed out, which is the Roman Empire. But Asimov's Empire draws a lot on not only the Romans, but it's always felt like it's drawn also on its Byzantine successors. And we do know Asimov is fascinated with that period, given that the primary actors he's got resonate more with the Byzantine Empire. I'm forgetting the names at the moment. Belisarius is Bel Riose's inspiration. But it's always felt to me that the Foundation draws on empires in general. Maybe it's just because of my work, but a lot of Asimov's work seems inspired by the British Empire and a lot of other world empires.

And with the Foundation and this weird mix of religion and science and trade out of Terminus, I also can't help but feel that Asimov is drawing a lot on the United States and its whole neoliberal empire. There's some fairly sharp critiques of the twentieth century world hidden away in the Foundation novels, especially when it relates to the Foundation's own burgeoning commercial empire.

## **Joel**

That makes me ask you what critiques do you have in mind? Are there any that stand out?

## **Achintya**

So for, you know, this whole problem of the merchant princes. Asimov sets up the merchant princes as a historical phenomena, but then he sort of goes on to say know they're going to eventually reach the limits of their ability to shape events and they can very quickly create what are effectively oligarchies. During the novel of *The Mule*, Terminus has effectively been captured by oligarchies of capitalist oligarchies and the Mayors have become almost dynastic. I think the Mayor at the time is Indbur II with the implication that there's multiple Mayors of the same dynasty. It's a fairly anti capitalist critique, if you think about it, how pure capitalism will lead to oligarchies and monopolistic anti competitive practices.

And it's this sort of in the 19-, if you think of it, in the sixties and seventies it's a sort of a critique of the US free trade at all costs model, which was a point of practically propaganda at the era, particularly in the context of the anti-Soviet world that American politics was often geared towards.

## **Joel**

There's a particular part at the end of *The General* that really intrigued me, and that's in the very last exchange between Lathan Devers and Senett Forell who was the trader who was descended from Hober Mallow. And they're talking about how the economy is... What is it - Lathan Divers is standing up for what, he seems to be standing up for the plutocrats. And it seems out of character in a way. Like, you would think he'd be like the one fighting for the ordinary guy. And it turns out that he ended up being very cryptically referred to later on in *The Mule* as having died in the slave mines along with Toran's grandfather, whoever that was.

And it's one of those things Asimov just throws in there. And there's a whole novel behind it that he never wrote. But I always wondered what was going on there in Lathan Devers mind, what he was really thinking

when he wrote that part or when he said that story, or what Asimov was thinking through Lathan Devers. So, anyway, that brings me right up to The Mule. And The Mule is just one of the most fascinating characters for me in the whole epic. And I wonder what inspirations Asimov might have had for The Mule and why since he was so historically oriented. So do you have any historical analogies to The Mule that you would think of?

### **Achintya**

Yeah, I've got a few. So I think what's important to remember about The Mule is that he is, socially speaking, a disruptor. He's a sharp, unanticipated shock to the system who basically throws it all off the rails. And in terms of history, there's people who are analogous to him, Alexander the Great or, you know, those people who sort of fundamentally shaped the world in such a way that the world they leave behind is unrecognizable from what they had. You know, the shock of their disruptions echoes for generations. And not just generations, sometimes millennia. But The Mule is also, I think, comparable to historical phenomena, not just people.

The best example I have is the Black Death. It's a completely unforeseen disruption to society and to the very Foundations of society that comes out of nowhere. And what's interesting about Asimov and all of this is you know he's very squeamish about dealing with death in his story. The Mule is a huge harbinger of change, and he sort of shies away from a lot of these implications. And so, in a funny way, you're left with a story which is remarkably anesthetized. That may be the wrong term, but sort of very clean in terms of the impact of the story.

And yet his later novels sort of imply that, talk about just how deep seated that change was. I always thought the Mule is also really interesting in how Asimov shies away from not making him a religious figure. You'd sort of think about the way the Mule engenders these feelings of deep love and sort of devotionism and that's often been tied to religious cults and



religions. But Asimov seems to be very clear in wanting to make him purely political and economic and focusing on him as a conqueror rather than the implications of him converting minds. But in some ways, the reason I'm mentioning it is because the Mule also is very close to religious sort of leaders and the impact religious leaders can sometimes have on society.

If you think of someone like, say, Martin Luther and the amount of change he causes within Christianity and for Asimov it's just interesting that he was often very involved with religion and yet it's always been interesting to me that he just refuses to sort of see the Mule in religious terms.

### **Joel**

Yeah, I'm taken by that squeamishness comment because I'm thinking I found the Mule almost endearing as a character and here he is, a universe conquering demon in a way just totally disrupting things. And you would think there must be large genocides happening and tremendous human casualties and things on the planets he conquers. But you don't hear any description of those details. So I think that helps you to feel like he's okay, maybe he's conquering the whole galaxy but he's not that bad. Especially with the head fake with Magnifico thrown in there because the whole time you're kind of really feeling for Magnifico until you find out who he really is.

So that's an intriguing aspect of Asimov's writing. I'm wondering if some of that squeamishness in regard to the Mule was intended so you could gravitate towards seeing him as kind of a likable figure in some sense. Yeah, maybe it goes against it, too because you don't feel the horror as much when you don't feel like you don't see any of the evidence of it being horrible sometimes. I felt like when they had that lunchroom discussion in the beginning of, right in the middle of *The Mule* after the fall of Terminus and back on Haven the Mule was closing in and everybody was getting

more and more depressed and more and more upset and anxious and everything.

And there was that one character, Hella, who was the cynical one, saying I think it'd be kind of cool if the Mule took over and everything. And I'm thinking, that's not a bad argument. And Pritcher makes the same argument. Just if you think about it, the Mule's doing what Seldon wanted to do. He's kind of putting things together in a good way, and it's kind of a hard argument to fight against because you don't see those human casualties that come with it-

### **Achintya**

Especially since the Foundation does seem to have human casualties, like, a lot. There's references to wars and destroyed ships and conflicts, and you sort of yeah, I mean, maybe it does...

The Mule finds a way to do it cleanly and neatly and everything's just not a big deal. Of course, he is a totalitarian dictator, but he's almost like he strikes me as kind of like one of these enlightened conquerors, like Cyrus the Great or something, that the people who he's conquered are kind of in a miserable, semi-barbaric state, and he elevates their civilization and makes things better for most of the people. Or you could say the same about Alexander to some degree, and maybe Julius Caesar with the Gauls and things like that, bringing civilization to the remote parts. So, anyway, that's a great - we could talk about the Mule for an hour, I'm sure. I'm curious what you think about Asimov's future history and whether you think it's reasonable at all, and if not, why.

You know, the problem with history is that looking back makes it always difficult to be certain about looking ahead in broad strokes. I think Asimov's future history is quite reasonable. I'd say the parts that I find most unbelievable is how calm his whole humanity tends to be, you know. He tells a story of turmoil and political upheaval, but his galaxy is remarkably

tranquil when you consider how chaotic and violent humanity tends to be. I've always found it a little hard to believe that a civilization spread across thousands of planets wasn't engaged in almost constant conflict. Even at the height of the empire.

Large parts of the imperial domain would have presumably been bubbling constantly with insurgencies, revolts, interplanetary conflicts. And he does allude to it a little when he talks about how much the military is sort of spent on and how it's a major part of the empire's expense. But even in the depths of his imperial collapse, which, admittedly, he sort of skips over in many ways, you still get the impression of life going on in a way that makes it a little hard for me to you know, having said that, that's my only real critique. But in general, I'd say Asimov's future history is incredibly viable in terms of the sort of detail with which he sets things up.

And it's an empire which is fundamentally pretty believable to me. It's always been one of the most sort of believable aspects of Sci-Fi contrasted to something like, say, Star Wars. And I'm just like, yeah, no, I don't see how something like Star Wars works, as fun as it is. But Asimov has always been very believable from, like, a social point of view.

## **Joel**

Well, he was basing it on real empires that had existed. So you can see why it followed the same kind of patterns that the Roman Empire and the British Empire had. A lot of the details. But I read something the other day on a video comment thread exploring the question of whether or not a galactic empire would be possible, and assuming that you still have the limit of... you know Asimov got around it by saying there's, you know FTL, faster than light travel, but if you did have the limit of the speed of light for travel and for communication, one of the comment was made that this communication problem would be just a showstopper.

And my last guest, Steven Webb, pointed this out as well, that if Anacreon were situated roughly as far away from Trantor as our star system is to our galactic center, it would take roughly 50,000 years for a message to go one way between the two. So if you got a back and forth about some problem brewing on the periphery and had several messages back and forth, you're talking about 50,000 years or so each time and you're talking half a millennium before you can even get started on resolving the problem.

So that seems like it would be difficult. So I was thinking about how you study the British Empire and in the height of the British Empire there were also long times for communication and for travel to remote parts they controlled. So on a much smaller reduced scale there's kind of a similar problem. So how did they deal with it, those kind of problems?

### **Achintya**

So this is actually something a lot of historians would probably get very excited about because this reduction of the conundrum of distance is actually one of the motivating problems empires have been dealing with since empires have pretty much existed. The British Empire wasn't the first to grapple with it and a lot of empires actually came up with very innovative solutions. So the Mongol Empire, for instance, had this system called the Yam Network, which in many ways is the precursor to modern postal systems. And the British had this problem as well. It often took months and later weeks to travel from one end of the empire to the other.

And a lot of the technological innovation that we've seen through the 19th and 20th century has been tied to the idea of reducing distances, of tying the world together closer. So the evolution for instance, of the steamship was ultimately about trying to sail faster and faster to get from point A to point B faster. The telegraph is developed to allow for faster communication. That whole problem of how are you send help reducing

that from weeks of a courier carrying letter to days or even hours? And the telegraph network is one of the first great trans imperial global projects.

It's a physical infrastructure project that spans the globe and it would go on to become the basis of the modern world in many ways because that's what the Internet is based on to this day. A lot of the undersea cables for the Internet follow the routes laid down for the transcontinental telegraph cables. So this question of distance and space and the reduction of the world is at the core of how empires understood themselves and their mission. And you can't write a history of science without exploring the ways empires have tried to grapple with this question of reducing gaps, Asimov, of course, has to deal with it somewhat unscientifically.

He's got his convenient faster than light skip around, which is the way his ships jump from point A to point B, but he still tries to sort of keep it realistic so that travel is still nonetheless, not instantaneous. You still have to travel a certain distance out. All science fiction will always have to take some element of fiction. You can't be purely scientific, otherwise it'd just be just presentism. But in a way, he deals with it fairly, fairly intelligently. I know a lot of scientists would say that can't really be possible faster than light travel can't exist.

And I'm not a scientist, I'm not going to challenge quantum physics, but I will say three hundred years ago, if you'd shown someone a mobile phone, they wouldn't have believed it was possible. There was just no way science could have predicted the creation of something like the mobile phone or the fact that we're sitting at opposite ends of the country and talking to each other in real time. There was no way Americans from even the 18th century would have thought that was possible. So there's no sort of the conundrums of reducing space haven't vanished. We may have colonies on the moon in a few years for all we know, and God knows how that will go in terms of establishing instantaneous connection with them.

## Joel

Yeah. Your point about invention sparking innovation with the Internet? Well, with the telegraph first and the railways. It makes me think like if we had this situation where humans were establishing colonies in different star systems, even if that took many centuries to develop. It's in the nature of humanity for somebody to want to control the situation and somebody's going to rise to a point of power where they're going to say, well, those people are far away, but I still want them under control. I want to establish my control over this situation. So there's going to be a lot of drivers for innovation there.

Maybe that's where faster than light communications and travel will come in. Finding a way to clamp down on insurrections on the periphery, who knows? So you'll recall that in the first story and *Foundation and Empire*, *The General*, Asimov explored the question of how much history is driven by extraordinary individuals. That is the great man theory of history versus the idea that sociological forces bring such individuals to prominence inevitably. Do you have any thoughts on how this idea has been explored pertaining to our history and to Asimov's treatment of similar ideas in *Foundation*.

## **Achintya**

So there is the original great man theory in the 19th century that postulated that human history was fundamentally influenced by, "heroes," who were innately blessed with qualities of leadership and influence. Now, almost from the date was argued, it was fairly controversial, mostly because of this idea of some people being innately suited for leadership. The deeper debate that that theory sparked and that sort of consumed historians. And the one that Asimov himself grapples with is whether human society is fundamentally shaped by the actions of individuals or great historical sociological forces. The conceit of humanity that Asimov seemingly argues against with psychohistory is that human history is shaped more by great sociological sweeps and inertia, and individuals can't really affect that.

And if anything, individuals who seem to shape history are actually actors or convenient actors taking advantage of great historical forces that happen to be converging. So right time, right place, rather than anything they're doing themselves. And so the psychohistorical argument is that they actually have very little agency in shaping outcomes. But I've always considered, and this is the debate Asimov is dealing with, the reason I call it a debate is the more I think Asimov wrote Foundation, the more he realized there was something paradoxical about this claim. If you look at the early novels, even though it seems that historical necessity is the real protagonist, it can still be argued that had it not been for the agency of specific people, Seldon's psychohistorical predictions would have failed.

Asimov then leans into this paradox more with Foundation and Empire. The first story has always read like the apotheosis of psychohistory. All the human characters have zero agency. They are predestined to a remarkable degree. And then you get this next story, which sort of takes that lesson and sort of almost like throws it out of the window. All the weight of historical necessity is swept aside by a single human endowed with unique,

arguably innate skills. And then you get the Second Foundation, where psychohistory is almost a meme at this point. It's a convenient tool for humans in the form of Foundation years and Second Foundation years.

And the Second Foundation years are revealed to be the real masters of human destiny. And they have a lot of agency. They're not acting purely by weight of predictions alone. They have control. They get to choose. So which is it? Do individuals have agency over human history? Do collectives of individuals within humanity do it? Or is it all at the feet of impersonal sweeps? I'm not sure Asimov ever really had a clear answer. It's a philosophical conundrum, and he can't resolve it. And I suppose that's good philosophy. At the end of the day, philosophy never really does have clear answers.

And he continues to sort of explore it in different ways with his later novels. But he doesn't sort of tell the reader that this is a clean answer to your philosophical, to the paradox he's dealing with. And that's why I think it's so good to revisit, because it's not just a story. He's also then dealing with a fundamentally philosophical question which you sort of try and think about in different ways.



## **Joel**

Yeah. When you get into the sequels, especially when you get into Foundation and Earth, a lot of readers are, if you look on the r/asimov subreddit, are not great fans of that because there's not clean answers. Because a lot of what's going on in there is the constant back and forth with Trevis and Bliss. They're always bickering back and forth about things and it kind of almost gets tiresome. But I think it's Asimov trying to figure that out and like, having an internal discussion and trying to resolve it himself and struggling with it, not being able to figure out what is the best ultimate human, you know, should we go with, you know, the eco-communism thing of Gaia and Galaxia? Or do we have another perfectly run empire beyond what we had in the past? And he has a hard time. So I think I like that. I like that I'm seeing kind of the internal workings of him figuring, working on really difficult problems, and there's kind of a sense of it makes sense and it's appropriate that he has difficulty coming to an answer. It shows me that it's real to him. It's a real problem that he's working on, not just a story.

## **Achintya**

I agree. It's a little narratively clunky, particularly because this is a guy who's so used to writing stories with dozens of characters at various points, reducing them all down to three people in a ship doesn't do justice, doesn't do wonders for his story in terms of making it interesting. But Foundation and Earth in some ways really was pure philosophy in a way that Foundation's Edge really wasn't. Foundation's Edge was an adventure novel. It annoyed me. Foundation and Earth, he goes off on the deep end philosophically, and we know that he never could figure out what to do next.

So he just went to the other end of the spectrum with his Prelude to Foundation. But, yeah, it's a lot that he's trying to grapple with. And in that sense, it's always been my favorite book to revisit because those

conversations, once you get past the fact that they're not doing a lot narratively, are great fun to sort know, say, oh, yeah, that's an interesting point.

## **Joel**

I love the exploration, too, and coming back to the things if you read the robot novels, especially, and your memories of Solaria and Aurora actually coming back to those places so much later, beyond those times that were described when he originally wrote about them, it was just amazing. Let's talk about the show for just a moment. The Apple TV show. What did you think of it? Did you think it worked?

## **Achintya**

I will say this. The Apple TV show, since we've been talking great men a little it's an interesting thing to sort of bring it up at this point. I like the show. I know it's caused no shortage of outrage, particularly for its enormous deviations from the canon of Asimov's novels. I'm going to now say this, I'm just quickly going to add this seems to be a running trope with Internet fandoms. I just watched the second season of The Witcher and fan reaction is not happy. They're like changes to the books. How can you change anything from the books?

But for me, I thought the show did a very interesting job of trying to explore the philosophy of the world of Foundation through the medium of fiction. And I think the shows tried to sort of live up to that reasonably well. They've engaged with musings of their own through the prism of Asimov's story. So they're dealing with questions of agency and subjectivity and ideas of identity and belonging in human history. And these are questions that I think are consistent with what Asimov would have liked to explore. So I think the favorite elements of the show for me have been the way they grapple with the idea of Seldon himself being an unreliable narrator and actor.

It's a concept Asimov explored in the Foundation novels, but sort of really late in his story. This idea that potentially Seldon is not necessarily the same person you know him as. And I can appreciate that the show is trying to live up to those ideals or philosophy. I think the plotting could use some work. There's definitely some elements of it which have been sort of plodding, but they've done some really good things and they're trying to put their own musings of religion and what does it mean to be human, which is very true to Asimov, even if it's not part of the Foundation story.

The whole question of, for instance, of the Bicentennial Man is this whole question of what is humanity - you know xeno's paradox? No. Sorry. The Theseus' Ship paradox. I'm mixing up my Greek philosophy. But you can see them grappling with similar questions with their three, their Cleonic Dynasty and whatnot philosophically, it's been interesting, even if it's not a narrow adaption of Asimov's books.

## **Joel**

Yeah, well, I've talked about it on the podcast, how I really enjoyed it despite inevitable flaws in the story development that always come with trying to bring a project like this to life in a new and richer medium. You know, when Asimov was writing it, he didn't have to worry about what things looked like. And obviously Apple made a very strong effort to, or I should say Goyer, the showrunner, made a great effort to really bring it to life and create these rich environments and things. And that's one of the things that just blows me away and why I just love watching it.

And I really enjoy that as a musician, I really enjoy the soundtrack and you feel it. But one of the best aspects of Asimov's storytelling to me is surprises and reveals, like the Mule. And there are more and more of them as it goes on. Big things you just were not expecting and suddenly they hit you like a ton of bricks. And looking at the show before it started, I was thinking, well, I really kind of hope they don't do it predictably exactly like

everything that's been spelled out in the books, because that's not going to be any fun.

That's not going to have the same fun that you get from like, oh, I wasn't expecting that. And that certainly happened in the last couple of episodes, especially towards the end. And despite me trying to predict in advance what was going to happen, I was wrong and they got me. So that worked for me. So I'm going to move on to my next question, and this is one of my favorite topics, my own podcast. How did you come across it and do you have any favorite episodes so far?

### **Achintya**

So I have to give credit to Reddit. There was someone there who sort of said, this is a great podcast. You sound like someone who's interested in Asimov. This is you have to read this. I think I had said something on a comment which somebody else tagged you as well and said, this podcast has said something very similar. Have you seen it? And that's how I thought it was auto introduced to you off your episodes. I'd say so far my favorite has been the one where you talk about Bel Riose. Hang on, what's it called? The dead hand and the living will.

I'll be honest, I'm not very good at listening to podcasts. I've been reading your transcripts. I'm not sure if that is the right way to approach podcasts, but The Dead Hand at The Living Will is, I think, it's a great essay because you've done this fantastic thing about deconstructing the problems Bel Riose is facing as you sort of deconstruct the great man theory. I loved it, particularly because I read that podcast and I just had to go back and reread the novel because you had pointed out things that I need to, like I need to re-read Bel Riose again. This guy was...

## **Joel**

I'm really glad to hear you talk about the transcripts because at my day job, which I haven't really talked about on the podcast yet, I'm an accessibility engineer for a healthcare company and one of the foundational principles in accessibility is that people should have access to content in whatever format they need or want. And I don't have a hearing disability myself, but I often find myself wanting to refer to a transcript after listening to a podcast episode. Often guests get into really interesting discussions and, oh, I want to go back and read that. And it's not there. They didn't put one up.

So that's one of the things that was just absolutely necessary for me was to do transcripts. And so I found a host where it was easy to do that, Transistor.fm. And that's been really easy to do for the most part, especially with my pre-written scripts, because I don't have to change those at all. This one's going to be a lot more work. What comes next for you? What are your career aspirations as a historian? Any specific projects you have in mind?

## **Achintya**

Well, this is the question where, if you ask anybody in my field, they'd always be a little nervous. Job market is never sort of certain. With academia, I do a job that's incredibly fun, that's incredibly sort of fulfilling in a way that I don't think I would have gotten if I were doing something more nine to five. But the downside is, uncertainty comes sort of part and parcel with it. In an ideal world, I'd love to simply be able to teach somewhere, some research on the side. But teaching is really my passion, teaching history. My aim with my sort of broad career would be to try and teach.

I don't have ambitions of being the greatest historian of my time, but a competent teacher who's encouraging a generation of students to think

critically about the past would be critically about how to deal with the past in their various ways is something I'd like to do. Asimov is a great inspiration in that sense. People will always ask, what's the point of doing history? And I can point to people like Asimov and say, you know what? There's a million ways you can apply the lessons of history. Look at this guy. He became one of the most famous Sci-Fi authors in the world. And who would Asimov be if he hadn't studied the Roman Empire? I'm sure he'd still be fantastic, but...

### **Joel**

Or just to point them to any book on history that Asimov wrote. And you can see how fun it can be just to explore history and write about it and read about it from Asimov. So anybody who can teach it that...

### **Achintya**

Well more immediately, my current project is really on my doctoral thesis. I'm working on trying to understand lawyering in the British Empire in the 19th century. In some ways, it's a project that is quite influenced by Asimov. I'm interested in people as individuals, but the individuals are gateways to understanding broader sweeps of history. How did ordinary people understand? What was law in the empire? How did law bind people across vast spaces and enormous geographical and cultural gulfs? And how did different legal systems get shaped? How did the systems we have today get shaped by the actions of sort of legal practitioners?

As a class of know, you could argue that what I'm really trying to do is find my Salvor Hardin or Hober Mallow in the world of empire and through them sort of tell this story of understanding the world they inhabit. Sort of like a reverse Asimov story. We know what the Empire is like. The sort of, you know, great sweeps are like, what was it like being a person in that story? Asimov does the opposite. Asimov says here's some people, I'm going to now use them to tell you the story of these great imperial shifts.

## **Joel**

Interesting. Yeah. So do you see yourself writing historical fiction at some point? Like Asimov?

## **Achintya**

The idea has always appealed to me. I have always sort of worked on this little novel. I'm actually more intrigued by the idea of trying to write mythology, but with a historical bent, trying to sort of take mythological stories but write them historically. Historical fiction is incredibly hard to do justice to because I'm so used to looking at my people clinically, it's a little hard to then see them again as people. I've broken them down into such little non-emotional beings and then trying to give emotion back to them is a real always been one project I've been trying to work on is taking Indian mythologies...

We've got these great epics, sort of like the Indian analogues to the Trojan War or the Arthurian cycle, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, but tell them with a more sort of find ways to keep them historically real. No gods, no superpowers. Mythology will have a lot of that.

## **Joel**

That's a lot like what Asimov did with the Old and New Testament. Especially the Old Testament, because so much of it is mythological. It's just so far from, you know, accurate reporting of what really happened. And it really is a great exercise to figure out what might have really happened that led to these stories being developed. Yeah. Well, thank you very much, Achintya, for sharing your historical perspective on Asimov and Foundation and the British Empire too. It seems appropriate to discuss history as we end another calendar year here on Earth in the 21st century. I hope things turn out well for you professionally and that you make the contributions to your field to which you aspire.

I hope you continue to find time to read Seldon Crisis along the way. It's been great having you on and I wish you a Happy New Year and many more to come.

### **Achintya**

Happy New Year and it's been a genuine honor being on the podcast. It's been a lot of fun listening and I'm glad I've been able to sort of play an active role here.

### **Joel**

Great. Okay, and now I'd like to thank all of my listeners for all the downloads and the wonderful feedback throughout the past nine months since the first episode way back in April. You've all made this so much fun and I look forward to plenty of interactions with all of you in the years to come. Please keep reaching out to me via email at [joel@seldoncrisis.net](mailto:joel@seldoncrisis.net) and via Twitter at my handle @JoelGMcKinnon. It's always a joy to hear from listeners. Have a Happy New Year and join me again in a couple weeks as I get back into storytelling mode with the first episode focusing on Second Foundation, Search by the Mule here on Seldon Crisis!

[Closing theme music]