

## Foundation for Newbies



[Opening theme music.]

### Joel McKinnon

Hello. This special episode of Seldon Crisis is for a different audience than my usual batch of listeners I've come to know and love. These listeners have become accustomed to me reminding them that this series assumes they have already read at least some of the books and urging them to do so prior to listening. It occurs to me that there are likely many more potential listeners who have not yet read the books. And with Apple TV launching a new series dedicated to Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" and debuting in only a couple of days, there are many who will only know the series through the TV adaptation.

### Joel

I'd like to let this short episode serve as a primer on Foundation to give these potential new listeners a comprehensive background with which to understand the context of the television series. Again, though, you should really try to track down a copy of the core trilogy of Foundation and read the books for yourself. The Foundation series began life as a series of short stories in serial form, with the first chapter entitled Foundation appearing in Astounding stories in 1942 when Isaac Asimov was only 22 years old. The first three volumes of the eventual epic, later to be known as the core trilogy, were published in 1952 as The novel's Foundation, "Foundation and Empire," and "Second Foundation."

Asimov returned to the epic in his wrote two sequels "Foundation's Edge" and "Foundation and Earth," and later two prequels, "Prelude to Foundation," and "Forward the Foundation." I will discuss them in the order they were published, beginning with the core trilogy. In Foundation, mathematical genius Hari Seldon introduces his new science of psychohistory, claiming that it enables him to predict the future to a high degree of accuracy through analysis of the patterns of the behavior of the many quadrillions of human beings occupying the entire Milky Way galaxy which has been ruled for a dozen millennia by a single empire. He predicts the empire will fall within a few short decades, and the authorities arrest him for disturbing the peace and threaten to execute him for this crime.

The story is told by his eventual biographer and a student and protege, Gaal Dornick, written as male in the original series, but to be cast as female in the Apple series. Seldon outwits the leaders of the empire by claiming that his science predicts immediate catastrophe if he is executed and is instead exiled with 100,000 followers to the remote planet of Terminus, where they will begin a project to compile an Encyclopedia Galactica containing the breadth of all human knowledge, which will serve to shorten the coming period of chaos from 30,000 years to a single millennium. Gaal Dornick disappears completely from the Foundation stories at this point, but will be a major continuing character in the Apple TV series.

The next chapter of the novel Foundation, "The Encyclopedists," takes us to Terminus 30 years later. The colony is governed by a committee of scientists called the Board of Trustees and an important new character is introduced in Salvor Hardin, the mayor of Terminus City. Hardin is responsible for the civic affairs of the colony, but initially has little real power. In another gender swap, the Apple show will make Hardin female. There are no significant female characters in the books until

halfway through the core trilogy, which I'll get into later in this chapter. A new threat is introduced in the rising power of the nearby star system Anacreon, which has recently been granted effective autonomy by the Empire.

Along with several other star systems in the peripheral region of the galaxy. Anacreon sends an envoy to Terminus with an ultimatum to effectively surrender control and pay tribute to their king in the form of landed estates for their nobility on the planet. Another envoy is sent by the empire but proves to be unhelpful to the colonists, and the ultimatum becomes the first of a series of "Seldon Crises." At the critical moment, a holographic image of Hari Seldon appears in the vault, a special chamber designed for the purpose of providing a means of updating the colonists periodically with important information about the plan.

Seldon shocks the gathered scientists by informing them that their real mission has nothing to do with their encyclopedia project, but they are instead to become the Foundation of a new base of power which will eventually replace the empire and that the solution to the Anacreonian conflict was obvious. Salvor Hardin had anticipated this obvious solution and the mayoralty becomes the governing authority of the Foundation. I'll pause here to note that the clues provided in the information released by Apple TV indicate that this cliffhanger may be the end of season one of the show. I've spent a fair amount of time on these first two chapters for this reason the rest of my overview of the series won't go into nearly as much detail and will avoid spoiling some of the best surprises to be found in the stories, because these are one of the most delightful aspects of reading Asimov's original text.

Moving forward with the novel Foundation into the third chapter, "The Mayors," we next jump ahead three decades and Salvor Hardin has solidified his control over the planet and now controls a democratic Foundation. He's faced with threats from without and within, Anacreon

has become stronger than ever and an attack seems inevitable, while internal dissent has given rise to the emergent Actionist party that threatens to remove him from power. Hardin, however, has an ace he hasn't fully played. He has initiated the development of a faux religion based on nuclear science and advanced technology. At the moment when Anacreon is determined and seems intent on attacking Terminus and destroying the Foundation, Hardin uses the new religion in ingenious fashion to undermine Anacreon and establishes security for the expansion of Foundation authority.

Seldon makes another appearance in the vault and validates Hardin's actions, further securing his continuing power. A short chapter follows, *The Traders*, focused on the lone exploits of a Han Solo like rogue named Limmar Ponyets, who successfully rescues a Foundation special agent from a backward kingdom on the periphery of the Foundation sphere of influence. This seems almost like a one off adventure, but turns out to be instrumental in accounting for the context of the much longer adventure to follow. The fifth and final chapter, "The Merchant Princes," follows the activities of a new hero of the Foundation, the trader Hober Mallow.

He is sent on a mission to uncover the secret of how several Foundation trading ships have gone missing while trading with the authoritarian and secretive Republic of Korell. It's a long and involved story, but in the end it becomes apparent that he is being set up to fail and to undermine the growing power of the Independent Traders. While on his mission, he discovers that the declining empire remains powerful, and this leads into the first of the two major chapters of the second book in the series, "Foundation and Empire." The first chapter of the second book is named "The General" for General Bel Riose, a young, charismatic, and ultimately fatally ambitious general of the declining galactic Empire.

It is weakening, but still much more powerful than the relatively tiny Foundation. The lines of battle are drawn, and the swashbuckling trader

Lathan Devers is enlisted as a spy for the Foundation. His ship is captured by Rios by Foundation design, and he links up in captivity with Ducem Barr, a descendant of a former nobleman on the formerly rich and prosperous planet Siwenna, and the son of a man Hober Mallow had met in *The Merchant Princes* a generation earlier. The General has a brilliant strategic plan to conquer Foundation, but it is ultimately the dead hand of Hari Seldon who defeats him, setting the stage for the Foundation's inevitable rise to galactic dominance.

As we enter the second and final chapter of *Foundation and Empire*, "The Mule," we find that psychohistorical determinism, as represented in Hari Seldon's infallible calculations, appear to make all further obstacles to Foundation success insignificant. That would be the case if not for the appearance on the scene of a new element not accounted for in his calculations, a mutant human who goes by the name "the Mule." He has strange and unprecedented powers and easily overwhelms one world after another. The residents of Terminus and all the Foundation worlds had believed by now that they could never be beaten, but the Mule has a different destiny in mind for them.

The really awesome thing in *The Mule* is the protagonist is a woman. No gender swap should be needed when Apple gets this far. Bayta Darell finds a surprising way to thwart the Mule, but I cannot reveal it for fear of ruining the joy of reading it for yourself. After *The Mule*, we enter the third book, which chronicles the fall of the Mule at the hands of a mysterious entity known as the Second Foundation, and I'm going to leave it here for now, because I think you have plenty to go on to enjoy the first season of Apple TV's, hopefully long television series.

Keep in mind that there will necessarily be many more departures from the orthodox creation of Isaac Asimov in the mid 20th century, besides a few gender swaps. I will, however, mention one character who will appear in the show who does not appear anywhere in the core trilogy. This is the

character of Eto Demerzel. She is the TV version of a character by the same name who does not enter until the 6th book published, "Prelude to Foundation," and is portrayed as male. In this story, Demerzel is the Prime Minister to the Emperor at the time of Hari Seldon's rise to greatness and becomes a central figure in the story in a completely and unexpected way.

To go any farther would definitely be getting into spoiler territory, so you'll just have to read the books. My recommendation is to read them in the order published, rather than the chronological order of the story, for reasons I have explained elsewhere. Read the core trilogy, then the sequels, and finally the prequels. It also helps if you've read the four Eliza Baley robot detective novels at some point along the way which inhabit the same universe, but those aren't essential. Once you start watching the series, you might be interested in hearing what other watchers and readers of the books are thinking about it.

I'll be mentioning it occasionally on this podcast, but my focus will continue to be primarily on the books. There's another podcast I'll heartily recommend, Star's End, that just spent eleven episodes discussing the core trilogy and will now be changing their focus to the TV show. The three co-hosts are very knowledgeable and a lot of fun, so do check their website at [starsendpodcast.wordpress.com](http://starsendpodcast.wordpress.com). Another great resource is the Foundation Era YouTube channel, which has a series of videos parsing the teasers and trailers and getting set to dive into the TV show content as soon as it's available. Luigi does a great job setting the context of Asimov's Foundation universe.

Another YouTube channel worth checking out is Quinn's Ideas, which has a lot of great videos getting into Foundation and other Sci-Fi classics, including quite a lot on Dune. Quinn's a great analyst and a lot of fun, so check out what he has to offer back to Foundation. There are a few subreddits covering the books and the show, such as [r/asimov](https://www.reddit.com/r/asimov) and [r/foundationTV](https://www.reddit.com/r/foundationTV). There's also some great discussion going on at the

Galactic Empire Discord Channel. I'll link to all of these resources in the show notes.

Be aware that there will be plenty of spoilers out there, so avoid all of this if you're just starting to read the books. If you let Asimov reveal the twists and turns in the plot when he thinks it's appropriate, you'll be glad you did. Apologies to my listeners who are still waiting for my episode "The Mule, part I." Besides the titular character, this chapter will feature Asimov's first fully developed female character. And she is not some bit player, but the central protagonist in the battle with the Foundation's greatest antagonist yet. Your wait is nearly over, as I intend to release it this Friday, September 24, which just happens to be the day apple TV Plus will begin streaming their version of Foundation.

Let's just call it Foundation Day and call it a world holiday! I hereby proclaim it so you can go ahead and tell your boss I gave you the day off. Please join me soon for "The Mule, part I" on Seldon Crisis.

[Exit theme music]