

## Star Trek and Beyond with Paul Levinson



[Opening theme music with voiceover.]

### Paul Levinson

"I'm going to make a prediction right here, and we'll see whether this is true or not, so I hope this conversation is listened to a hundred years from now. And here's my prediction, that as time goes on, Christopher Pike is going to be the most important Captain in all of the Star Treks."

[Theme music plays out.]

### Joel McKinnon

Welcome back, friends, to what I hope will be the last episode of Seldon Crisis before we get back into the final story episodes of the original Foundation trilogy by Isaac Asimov. Casting is finally complete, and it's only a few more weeks until our first episode of the final chapter, "Searches by the Foundation." During my search for the last piece, our new voice of Arkady, I've had more than the usual bout of life's distractions some good and some less pleasant. Among the best distractions is a new TV series, the latest entry in the storied Star Trek franchise entitled "Strange New Worlds."

## Joel

It's a prequel to the original series and features a couple of characters beloved fans of the show in the half Vulcan, half human science officer Spock and the communications officer, Lieutenant Uhura here just a cadet fresh out of Starfleet. I've watched a little more than half of the first season and am enjoying it quite a lot. It's also spurred me to go back and rewatch some of the classic episodes of the original series. Being immersed in the Star Trek universe again has made me think about some of the similarities and differences with Asimov's version of the distant future described in Foundation.

I thought this would be a great time to welcome a new guest on the podcast, but one I've come to know well from his reviews and commentaries on Apple TV's version of Foundation and the new Star Trek series and many other TV shows. Paul Levinson, PhD. Is a professor of communication and media studies at Fordham University in New York City and a musician. His science fiction novels include "The Silk Code," winner of the Locust Award for best first science fiction novel of 1999, "The Consciousness Plague," "The Pixel Eye," "Borrowed Tides," "The Plot to Save Socrates," "Unburning Alexandria," and "Chronica."

His award nominated novelette, "The Chronology Protection Case," was made into a short film and is on Amazon Prime Video. His non fiction books include the, "The Soft Edge," "Digital McLuhan," "Real Space," "Cell Phone," "McLuhan in an Age of Social Media," and "Fake News in Real Context," have been translated into 15 languages. He appears on CBS News, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, the Discovery Channel, National Geographic, the History Channel and NPR. His 1972 album "Once, Twice Upon a Rhyme," was reissued in Japan and Korea in 2008 and in the UK. In 2010. His first new album since 1972, "Welcome Up Songs of Space and Time," was released on old Bear Records and Light in the Attic records in 2020.

Welcome, Paul, to Seldon Crisis. Anything you'd like to add to that impressive bio?

### **Paul**

Well, it was such a great and impressive rendition of that bio that you just delivered that I hate to even add anything. But on the other hand, I can never resist an invitation like that. So I will mention that I wrote and had published a few months ago a short story called "It's Real Life," and it's one of my two favorite science fiction gambits. Time travel is probably still my favorite, but alternate histories have become a close second favorite, both as a writer and a viewer and a reader, for that matter. Anyway, this is an alternate history about the Beatles, and it's gotten such a good response that I'm now expanding it into a novel.

And I think I'm up to the fourth chapter, and I'm having a really great time writing it. So this is a good time to do an interview, because as a writer, I'm always happiest when I'm actually writing something and it's going well, which is not always the case.

### **Joel**

Yeah, I loved the short story version of that. So I'm really looking forward to an extended treatment. Sounds really fun. This is a podcast about Asimov, as, you know, and Foundation primarily. So let's start there. We don't have to just talk about Asimov. I was thinking this episode could be about Star Trek. It's in the title and whatever else that takes us to. Let's start with Asimov. I understand you had some kind of personal relationship, at least in writing. I'm not sure if you ever said you met him. How did you come to intersect with Asimov?

## **Paul**

Well, let's go back to the 1950s, when I was just a little kid, but I began reading science fiction literally when I was seven or eight years old, in the mid 1950s. And everywhere I turned, I came into Asimov's worlds, which, as most people know, for the most part, consisted of two at that time, separate universes. One was his Foundation series, and the other were his robot stories. And also in the 1950s, he had two robot novels, and I just loved all of them. And I remember by the late 1950s, I had also read Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity*, which to this very day, I think is the best time travel novel ever written.

In fact, I just had occasion to write up for another site what my five favorite time travel novels are, and *The End of Eternity* is still number one. So I always loved Asimov's work, and I always tell people, and it's true, when I really love something, I want to have all of it. And if that means we're talking about a writer who's still alive, I always want to meet and get to know the writer. And this has happened to me several times in my life, with excellent consequences. For example, I got to know Marshall McLuhan, the media theorist, and we eventually did some work together.

I met Carl Popper, the Austrian British philosopher, after I included a section on him in my doctoral dissertation in the late 1970s. So I always knew I wanted to meet Asimov and apropos the late 1970s, I was invited by a magazine, I think its name was *Media and Methods* to write an essay on some science fictional theme. And I decided to talk about how predicting the future was essential theme in those days. And I still think this is the case. The two greatest science fiction series, and that would be the Foundation series, but the other would be the *Dune* series.

And so I wrote an essay about that. It was published. I sent it to Isaac Asimov. And people can see this if they just search on "Paul Levinson isaac Asimov postcard." The word postcard in there. I received one of

I didn't know at the time Asimov's famous postcards, in which in this little postcard he said, Dear Professor Levinson - I was already a young professor then - Thanks so much for your essay. I didn't quite have that in mind when I wrote the Foundation trilogy. I wasn't quite as clever as you are, or something like that. And of course I was thrilled beyond belief to get that back then.

And we had several other important interactions back in the 1980s. My wife and I founded an online educational operation called Connected Education. And I was in not email touch back then, but in postcard and telephone touch with Asimov. And he knew about that, and he actually wrote a very good article about what we were doing and about online education. I never really had a long in person conversation with Asimov. The closest I got was in the late 1980s at an American Association for the Advancement of Science conference that was taking place in New York. I was delivering a paper, and I did deliver a paper, and that, by the way, was a real trip.

At the end of my delivery, this bald guy comes up to me with a beaming face. He was Jonas Salk. The guy that invented the polio vaccine. That was thrilling too. But I knew where Asimov was. He had also delivered a paper. He was with his wife Janet, and I went up to him as they were walking out. Janet was very protective of him, so we just exchanged a few words. And then to everyone's chagrin, he died. Even suffering from AIDS, he had picked it up in the blood transfusion in the 1980s.

**Joel**

I imagine he was easily recognizable.

**Paul**

Oh, 100%.

**Joel**

Yeah. Nobody looked like Asimov. I still regret now that... Asimov was my favorite when I was a teenager. It was my introduction to science fiction, pretty much. And not just science fiction. I read a lot of his nonfiction because I always found it to be just a great way to come up to speed on any topic. He was just so clear in how he would explain things. And it's only later, looking back, I'm thinking I had chances to see him talk if I just looked up his calendar or something. I probably could have gone to one of his famous talks that I've heard so much about. That was his element. He loved to talk, and now it's too late.

**Paul**

Yeah, well, one of the things with Asimov, a lot of people don't know this. He had a fear of flying, I guess, a kind of agoraphobia. So he didn't like to travel much. And so pretty much it was New York and Boston where he gave most of his talks. But he loved to have people coming to his talks.

**Joel**

In hindsight, living in Western Pennsylvania, that wouldn't have been a big problem to make it to New York to see a place where he was talking.

**Paul**

Absolutely. One day I was driving home on the West Side Drive, you would like this. And I noticed a car in front of me has a license plate and all that's. On the license plate is Bova Bova. And a couple of days later yeah, Ben Bova wrote a comp, said, oh, I had a great time. I had dinner with Isaac Asimov and his wife in you know, there was something about Asimov. He had a way of cropping up and popping up in all kinds of unexpected places.

## **Joel**

Yeah, cool. I wanted to give you a little anecdote of how I re-ran into you, because I remember we had a very brief exchange on Twitter, like a few years ago. I think another mutual follow or something had something to do with it. And then a couple years ago, when I was just starting this podcast, or just before it, I read this... I checked out from the library a book on Robert Sheckley with five of his novels in it, and I remembered one of them, Mindswap, was one of my favorites when I was growing up.

I just loved that story so much. It's just absolutely hilarious from start to finish. And that was one of the novels in it. But the other four were incredible, too, and I have even more appreciation for Sheckley after reading those. But on the back of the book, there was a blurb from Paul Levinson raving about this book. So I thought, that name sounds familiar. And sure enough, I looked you up on Twitter and I realized that I had a couple of interactions with you, and that's what got restarted, our interaction on Twitter. So that was kind of interesting.

I was just wondering what you think of Sheckley, if you can expand on that little blurb at all.

## **Paul**

Sure. Well, first of all, I love stories like that. This is one of the wonderful things about social media. It brings you back in touch with old friends that you haven't seen in 2030 years, and it creates new relationships, and it's really wonderful. You and I have talked already in various ways, including on Twitter, about the importance of humor in science fiction and how, for example, *The Orville*, I think, does it much better unsurprisingly than *Star Trek*. Certainly the new *Star Trek*, *Strange New Worlds*, and even better than the original *Star Trek*. Although I think *The Trouble with Tribbles* is obviously a comedic masterpiece.

But that's what attracted me to Sheckley. But I'll tell you, my single favorite, all of his work is wonderful. And by the way, I did meet him in person several times. Sheckley never won the Science Fiction Rise of America Grandmaster Award, but he did win, in effect, the second award in that venue, and it's called the Author Emeritus Award. And that happened when I was president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and we were having our annual convention out in California, and I had a wonderful dinner with Robert Sheckley. But the single funniest thing, and to this day, when I think about it, makes me laugh.

I don't know if you ever heard of Michael Resnick. He also wrote a series of novels, but I think he really achieved his best work as an anthologist that is, an editor who put together some really brilliant anthologies.

**Joel**

That's probably where I've seen his name.

**Paul**

Yeah. Like, this might have been the late 1980s, early 1990s. He had an anthology called Alternate Presidents, which I regretted that I hadn't really started writing science fiction then, otherwise, I certainly would have contributed something. Anyway, Robert Sheckley had an article, had an essay in there, and it was about Michael Dukakis, and it was about Michael Dukakis is elected president in 1988. Of course, he lost to George H. W. Bush in our reality, and one of the things he hears listen, there'll be spoilers here. Will you tell me do you want me to tell you the ending of.

**Joel**

This story, or that's a really tough one. I'd love to read it.



**Paul**

All right. Maybe you could just hint at, you know so basically, Michael Dukakis, after he becomes president, that's not giving anything away, that's in the title of the story, hears this rumor and wants to investigate it, that in fact, interstellar visitors have been here for a long time. Other presidents have known about them. And so Dukakis insists that he gets a Secret Service detail and they go find where these interstellar visitors are, and it turns out they're in Washington. I won't tell you anything more, but the idea of that is so funny.

**Joel**

What I think about piques my interest, I'm going to have it. Is it online somewhere?

**Paul**

It might be. Look, the truth is you could probably get the paperback of Alternate Presidents for, like, \$0.50 somewhere on Amazon, but it might be online.

**Joel**

The story I most remember from that collection was "Imagination, Inc.," was the first one, and I just loved that so much. But they were all great. Anyway, we should probably move on to the topic at hand, which you started talking about a little bit, Star Trek. So I wanted to know what's your favorite version. I'm kind of guessing it was the original series, but I shouldn't presume. I'm just kind of curious what you think of all the different renditions of it. Have they ever matched that, or what do you think of the whole canon?

**Paul**

Sure. Well, it's a close contest between the original series and Star Trek: The Next Generation, so let me just talk a little bit about Star Trek: The Next Generation. It was a much more, let's put it this way, savvy, mature series. One of the things about the original series is you could almost see somebody shaking the set, lying down on the floor, shaking the set when the Enterprise was hit by something. Everything was that flimsy. But after all said and done, even Star Trek: The Next Generation, I don't think was as good and brilliant as the original series.

And that's for a variety of reasons. First of all, there were individual shows. I already mentioned The Trouble with Tribbles that to this day is easily the funniest Star Trek episode. And one of the things that annoys me about the latest Star Trek series, Strange New Worlds, although I love a lot of it, is their attempts at humor are clumsy and obvious in comparison to The Trouble with Tribbles. And of course, David Gerald, who later went on to write The Martian Child. And he is a great author.

**Joel**

He was the writer of The Trouble with Tribbles.

**Paul**

That's right. And he was much younger then, so it's not surprising. It's just an hilarious episode. Brantley ripped. And then I always talk about city on the edge of forever. I remember, as I mentioned earlier in this conversation, time travel is my favorite genre, and I remember seeing that episode when it was first on the 1960s. And again, although The Next Generation had some excellent time travel episodes as well, Yesterday's Enterprise, The Inner Light, in effect, is a kind of time travel story. But still, City on the Edge of Forever, for me, is the pinnacle of a science fiction time travel hour long...

We're in the case, actually, of commercial network television, 46 minutes or 44 minutes long series. So that's one reason. Another reason is also, after all is said and done, and this is one of the reasons I love a lot of Strange New Worlds. My favorite character in all the Star Trek is not Kirk. It's not Picard. It's not Pike. It's Spock. I thought he was absolutely mind blowing in the original series. And one of the things I like best about Strange New Worlds is Ethan Peck is doing a great job as the younger Spock. And, you know, Data was and still is, maybe might even still be kicking around somewhere a brain character.

But again, as good as Data was, I don't think Data is as powerful and intricate and fascinating a character as our Daneel Olivaw, who, of course, shows up in Foundation. But even before Foundation, I like in general Asimov's robots, a little better than Data, but there's no one else who compares to Spock this combination of an alien species, but he's half human. And so for that reason, there was no single character in TNG that equaled Spock in TOS. And then finally, to give credit where credit is due, Star Trek: The Original Series is what got it all going.

And by the way, it wasn't easy back then, as I'm sure you know. I wrote an essay about this. It's in a collection of essays about Star Trek, co edited by the same David Gerald and Robert Sawyer, a friend of mine, a Canadian writer. And one of the points I made in that essay was how the original series beat the network system, because as you and every Star Trek fan knows, it was canceled after three years on NBC, and that would have been the end of it. There were a few exceptions, like I Love Lucy, which came back in syndication, and even Jackie Gleason show from the 1950s.

Nobody thought that would happen with Star Trek in the first place, but it did. And it nurtured the Star Trek fan base to such a level that that's what led Gene Roddenberry to want to do and to be able to do The Next Generation. And that, in turn, set in motion everything that we now know about Star Trek, including what Paramount Plus is doing. So Star

Trek, totally aside from its science fiction, Star Trek the original series is revolutionary in the history of television. You can talk about the various eras of television. There's the network era.

There is the cable era that starts with The Sopranos in the late 1990s. Now, of course, we're into the streaming era, even though we still have network and cable. More and more people see things streaming. Star Trek the original series, revolutionized the network era of television and, in a way, set the groundwork for everything they came after in television.

### **Joel**

Yeah, there's another thing about the original series that sticks out to me, and I was just reading the Wikipedia on it this morning. The multiracial, multicultural cast and how they got a lot of pushback for that on that. What are you doing? What are you talking about? Putting all these different a black woman on a show. Come on. And a Russian guy. An Asian guy. And I think that had a lot to do with its success in just standing out as something different and something really progressive and woke up a lot of new ways of looking at what comedy could do and drama could do on television.

### **Paul**

Absolutely. I mean, look, a lot of people forget CBS around the same time as you had on Star Trek and at least a romantic energy between her and Kirk. CBS dared to have Harry Belafonte on the same screen with Julie Andrews showing a number and X number of racist Southern stations refused to air the show, whatever that show was, or some kind of musical show. I used to say when I talked about that we've come a long way, and not to open up a can of worms. This is a completely different topic, but it's relevant. Yeah, we've come a long way, but those racist tendencies are still with us, and they rear their ugly head all the time.

So Star Trek deserves credit for trying to buck that back in the 1960s.

### **Joel**

Sure does. So let's talk for a moment about technology. Actually, what I wanted to talk about with comparing Star Trek and Foundation, or comparing it with Asimov's vision of the future, what's in common and what's different? And what strikes me is it's a relatively optimistic view of humanity in the future, succeeding and spreading through the galaxy that they have in common. But they're very different in that Asimov didn't like the idea of aliens because he thought that aliens would be so much more powerful if they existed that they'd just wipe us out. And that's really foundational to Star Trek is having all these alien species who are pretty much on generally the same level as humanity.

That seems rather unrealistic.

### **Paul**

Yeah, well, I agree with that. Let's get back, though, to the beginning of your question. What's my favorite Star Trek technology? I've been giving that some thought. I think it's the transporter and beaming teleportation has not received enough attention in science fiction. When it has. Alfred Bester had it in a few of his novels in the 1950s. It's a very exciting concept. And unlike time travel, which, in fact, one of the reasons why I love it, I think it's impossible because if you travel to the past, the so called grandfather paradox, and you accidentally kill your grandfather, how did you exist in the first place?

That doesn't need to be so brutal. You don't have to even kill your grandfather, just prevent him from meeting your grandmother. And it doesn't have to be so sexist. If you prevent your grandmother from meeting your grandfather accidentally or deliberately, how did you come to exist? So there are ways out of that paradox. Every time you travel to

the past, you trigger a new alternate reality that's even more incredible than time travel itself. So I love time travel, but I don't think it's possible. There is no paradox involved in beaming, and to me, that's a really exciting thing.

So that would be my favorite technology. The Holodeck in the Next Generation and subsequent Star Trek. That's maybe a second and I guess third and the obvious point, and this gets back to what you're talking about, the faster than light travel of the starships. And that's obviously something that both Star Trek and Asimov have very, very much in common.

### **Joel**

That's kind of an absolute essential to having a human presence spread throughout the galaxy. Right?

### **Paul**

It's absolutely essential. And sometimes these scientific purists say, no, it's impossible. Einstein said it was impossible. No, Einstein didn't say it was impossible, actually. Einstein just said it would be incredibly difficult and it would warp all kinds of things if it happened. But Einstein never once said faster than light travel is impossible. And even if he had, that's just a theory. We've never traveled fast enough to see whether or not that's impossible or not. So I think it's a reasonable proposition that at some point we will develop faster than light travel. And that is what, as you just said correctly, you can't have human beings jumping from one sector of the galaxy or universe to another in any kind of way that makes sense in a narrative unless you have faster than light travel.

So I think that's an important similarity. I do think there's an optimistic similarity, although, between Asimov and the Star Trek universes. Although probably Star Trek is more optimistic than Asimov. I mean, over the long run, look, the Mule wins and is in power for a while. So translate

the Mule into an Adolf Hitler or a Donald Trump, although that's given Donald Trump too much power. I don't think he's as good as the Mule, but Vladimir..

I'd rather elect the Mule, I think.

Exactly. Yeah. I would hope for the Mule, too. He at least was... So I think that there were some negative things in Asimov's universe that we don't find in Star Trek. And I think ultimately it's very unfortunate that Asimov just ignored the possibility of, okay, and when I first read the Foundation trilogy as a kid, I didn't think that, hey, why aren't there aliens? You know, once the issue is raised, it's hard to ignore that absence in the Foundation and getting into and I know you wanted to talk about this as well, the Apple series. It feels to me like there's almost a hint of alien species there, right?

I mean, some of the people on those planets, I can't quite tell if they're humans who evolved in a different direction or if they're somehow some kind of alien aspect to them. What do you think about that?

**Joel**

I think it's probably likely they're going to bring in aliens at some point, and then the purists on the Internet are going to go ballistic again.

**Paul**

So much fun.

## **Joel**

I was going to say one other thing, though, about the differences, is that if you focus just on humanity, one thing that really strikes me about Foundation being 20,000 years in the future is humans are almost exactly the same. Not just that they smoke cigars and all that, but they haven't really progressed in the same ways that if you look at the universe of the next generation and the optimistic utopian feeling about humanity as like having put aside all this dependency on currency and that there's no poverty anymore. Because these humanistic ideals have progressed to such a level that it's a fundamentally different society than we have now. Whereas in the society of Trantor at the beginning of the Foundation has all the same flaws as it does at the time.

He was writing very similar, kind of, and that always struck me as like, humans haven't really progressed. We still don't even live longer than 70 or 80 years. I guess that was the true on Star Trek, too, that there weren't really 200 year old people or anything.

## **Paul**

Right, exactly. But, I mean, I think that's a good point. It's an interesting point. On that lifespan, basically, as far as anyone can tell throughout history, there were people who lived a pretty long time, like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, who pretty much both died, I think, on the same day or on the same week, 4 July, I think, right, yeah, that's right. And although there's some people who think that one of them, I think I'm not sure whether it was Adams or Jefferson had actually died a day or two earlier and some doctor somehow managed to keep his heart beating until July 4.

That sounds like somehow an episode of Star Trek. I think, in all fairness to both Asimov and Star Trek on that point in our whole history of humanity yeah. You have people living into their nineties and sometimes even into



100 or a little more. That's been the case throughout history. What's changed are the number of people who live that long. So I don't think we can fault Star Trek that much on that or Asimov. But the other thing about Asimov which I do think is correct, and I think you're raising a very important point I always had the feeling with Asimov, but this was one of the things that made and make his work.

So interesting to me is what he does is he takes human beings as he knows them, as he sees them, as he Asimov is living in the world. And then he projects them into some future situation and we see what happens. And that, I think, is a reasonable way of doing a science fiction scenario. It is true that, yeah, if you pay more attention and you put into the story ways in which our mores, what we even physically look like might have changed, it does add more verisimilitude to it. Maybe it makes it more believable.

But I wouldn't fault Asimov for not doing that, because, again, as I think I probably mentioned to you sometime, someplace, maybe in the conversation we had with Cora Buhlert about the first season of Star Foundation on Apple TV. Plus, I've read the trilogy three times, three different ages, so forget what I thought when I was a kid, because who knows what kind of perspective I had then. But the last time I read them was with my son Simon when he was about twelve years old, and obviously I was no longer a kid, and I felt the same way about the series then, and he loved the series. Too, and he was twelve years old in the mid 1990s, so yeah, I think that's a good point.

But for whatever reason, it never really detracted in the slightest from my love of the Foundation story.

**Joel**

Well, I think he understood that he needed to make it relatable to the audience, to make things sometimes. A lot of people can't get into extreme, like cyberpunk kind of stuff and really far off concepts of humanity in the future because they can't relate to it. And that's another reason why Star Trek is so successful. It's got ordinary human beings just in an unusual circumstance.

**Paul**

Yeah, let me just say jump in here. If you think about both written and I think it was on Netflix or Amazon Prime, I can't remember, Altered Carbon, a very good series about the future in which they in that series, the human beings there have undergone enormous change both physically and what their attitudes are. And if anything, that made it harder for me to get into the stories because it took me a while to make sense. I didn't even know what I was seeing. Not because they look so different, but just their reactions to things weren't making sense and it's all explained.

But one of the joys of Asimov is, it seems, you know you and I could be in one of those Foundation stories and we would fit in quite naturally, I think.

**Joel**

Yeah, and I think when I think about Asimov's, where he was coming from in his writing, he was such a fan of history and knew so much about history and the history of the Roman Empire and all sorts of things, Shakespeare and all that. So he understood humans really well, and he just saw it as, hey, if I stick these humans in the far future, I can write really entertaining stories, and I don't even have to think of new ideas. They've always all happened in the past. We'll just put them in new circumstances and just take it from there.

And it did very well. So, yeah, let's talk about the legacy of Star Trek. How do you think it's going to affect science fiction and society, or how has it affected us? Where do you think we're going with it?

## **Paul**

One of my other great areas of work is in our reality, doing everything I can to support our species getting off this planet. And in fact, I co edited a book called "Touching the Face of the Cosmos" on the intersection of space travel and religion. Because I think that there's an aspect of our movement into space that's missing, and that's the spiritual aspect. Not that we have to become all religious to go out into space, but religion at its best has like a magical sense of where we are in the universe and almost like a wondrous luster.

Obviously, religion has been perverted and also used for some bad ends in human history and even currently. But the good part of religion speaks to that, and I think science fiction and something like Star Trek speaks to that. And that's what's been missing to some extent from our space program. So I like many other advocates of let's get our species out into space, and after we walked on the moon, we're still just diddling around here in space stations, international space stations. No one would have ever said in 1969, when we first got to the moon, that we are now going to be here we are in 2022, and we're still nowhere near Mars.

I know there were plans to get there, but For All Mankind, the alternate history story that's also on Apple TV, plus they're going to get to Mars much more quickly than we are in our reality. So I think that what Star Trek has done is it's kept that magic alive. It's kept it burning far more than Foundation or Star Wars or any of these other shows. I think that anyone who grew up in the 1960s and loved Star Trek, anyone who came to love it later on, would know instantly that what we need to do is get our real space program more in line with what they have in Star Trek.

And obviously, it's not that easy, and obviously we don't have faster than light travel, so that part of Star Trek is just way behind. But the fact of the matter is, we are in a situation where maybe we'll get to Mars in the next couple of years, and I'll change what I'm saying. But right now, we're languishing. Right now, the space program in terms of how far we've gotten out into space is still stalled. And one of the things that's kept that hope alive is Star Trek and all the various series that have spun off of the original Star Trek series back in the 1960s.

Let me say that I think we have to give Paramount Plus credit, or CBS, it's the same company for starting all of these various Star Trek new series. And I have to say, so far, Strange New Worlds is my favorite. My least favorite was the first one that they did and which is still going on. And I would say Picard is somewhere in the middle. So it's not that every single Star Trek series is wonderful, but by starting up these new series, I think there's also some kind of cartoon series below that's, right?

### **Joel**

You read the Wikipedia on Star Trek. It's just amazing how much Star Trek there is now and how much there has been.

### **Paul**

So that's a healthy thing. That's great. And that keeps this burning.

## Joel

What you were just saying, that brought up a couple of thoughts with me, I think, about the arguments against going into space and going to other planets, that Mars is a deadly place. Why would anybody want to go there? It's kind of like, duh, we know that, but that's not the real point. My thinking is that these arguments, and many of them come from really intelligent people. A lot of scientists and everything make these points as well, and they just seem really lacking in imagination. And when you think of the future in an imaginative way, you can see lots of ways that it can change humanity's future for the better in all sorts of ways.

And Star Trek is one of the best examples of showing those kind of changes because it fosters that sense of imagination. And I'm hoping that this barrage of new Star Trek and the reach of it really extends its tendrils into people's minds and they think of new ways of thinking about the future and not just in just like a dead end. Why would we want to go to Mars? It's an ugly, hideous place where you get killed. Great science fiction demonstrates the possibilities of how you can change a place, how we can be changed to adapt to a place that's very different.

And I think there's just so many positive things that can come out of that kind of spark to the human imagination.

## **Paul**

Absolutely. Let me tell you about my PhD mentor at New York University, Neil Postman. He was basically a critic of technology. He didn't like computers, he didn't like space travel. I don't know exactly what he liked as far as technology was concerned. He was a brilliant teacher, however, and in fact, he's the best teacher I ever had just in terms of the love and the passion that he brought to his delivery and the subjects he taught about. But I'll never forget one day I was talking to him about space travel, and he looks at me in this way that he did and he was shaking his head and he says to me, and this is like my best impersonation of him he said to me,

Paul, don't you understand? There's no air up there. If we go out into space, we'll die. I do understand, but don't you understand? If we went up in an airplane, there's not much air up there either. The plane actually distributes air into the cabin. That's why passengers are okay even though they might be at a very high altitude. And this is an example of either you get it or you don't. For people like...

## **Joel**

If you Google arguments against flight from around the turn of the century into the 1900s just a few years before the Wright Brothers, or even there's some that happened after the Wright Brothers proved flight was possible that said, absolutely no way that you will ever be able to fly, you know, this is nonsense. Why is anybody even thinking about this? If man was meant to fly, you'd have been born with wings, that kind of thing. And it's just very enduring part of human psychology, I guess, this inability to think in completely new and imaginative ways.

## **Paul**

Yeah, it's worse than that. One of the things I often like citing to these technophobes is people somehow who were thought to be experts on this said getting on a train was something that would be fatal to us. This goes literally back to the 1830s and 40s when they were first laying down just train tracks. Well before the transcontinental railroad, these were like just train tracks from, like, London to Brighton, England. And some people who were impressed with their own knowledge of humanity said human beings weren't meant to travel 40 miles an hour on a train.

People's hearts will collapse or some kind of nonsense. And, yeah, this happens over and over and over again. And to get back to Star Trek, Star Trek speaks to people who, ever since they were kids, thought that view, that is that we can't do this because somehow it's not natural. People who, from the day they began thinking about this, thought that was nonsense, and that's what's so good about Star Trek. And I'll tell you a story about my mother, who I'm not 100% clear what her view was about space travel, but this is relevant in terms of science fiction.

When I first told my mother I'm working on a science fiction novel, and I gave her part of it to read, she got back to me and said, well, hey, this is very enjoyable, but when are you going to write about something serious? So then I gave her, like, a copy of my doctoral dissertation. She read that also and said, all right, this is good, but when are you going to write something that a person can understand? So she didn't like anything I wrote, but her comment about science fiction is actually relevant to what we're talking about because she really thought that science fiction was, like, just some kind of crazy nonsense.

And okay, it's escapist, it's fun, but let's talk about the real world. Whereas you and I, we think science fiction is just a description of a natural human projection into the future. And when we see something like Star Trek, it

makes us feel good. And let's not forget to talk about The Orville because I think they are doing a great job also of getting us into the future.

## **Joel**

I'm a huge fan of The Orville, and I never expected to be. I was never a fan of Seth McFarlane before I started watching The Orville. I thought it was all just like - I never actually watched Family Guy, to be honest, but I saw little clips and things, and I expected it to be just complete nonsense and parody kind of thing. And it became really serious and heavy and, like, great dramatic storytelling on very similar level and sometimes exceeding what Star Trek does. And I've been really impressed with this season so far.

## **Paul**

I think this season is fabulous. They've done very well going from Fox to Hulu. They have more time. They can use somewhat salty language, which is fun, and with a few exceptions, the stories have been top notch. And in many ways, I think The Orville captures the ambience of the original series and to some extent, The Next Generation. I mean, the standard description of the Orville is that it's a takeoff of The Next Generation. You have someone there who looks like Worf, you have that robot. Everything is a slight exaggeration of the characters that we saw in Star Trek The Next Generation, and that's true enough.

But to me, the ambience of the stories capture a lot of what the original series did. And so I would put the author right up there in the Star Trek genre or in the Star Trek corpus of works, to use that fancy word.



**Joel**

Yeah, I agree. And I know we have a different opinion of episode three, the one with the mortality paradox - it was called. You called it hodgepodge, I called it Kafkaesque. And I just love what ideas it stimulated in me, and especially that ending, because it really makes you think about human evolution far beyond the level they're at at the point, and they seem like primitives to this exotic being that's been around for 50,000 years. And she says to them, Evolution is blind and drunk, and no offense, I hope.

**Paul**

What? No, I wouldn't be offended if somebody called me blind.

**Joel**

And then the very end with the little conversation after everything is resolved, where Seth's character, Ed Mercer, the Captain, is asked, why would you want to live forever? And he says, I just want to see what happens. That struck me. I thought that was brilliant, mainly because that's been my answer that I've always given. My wife asks that question sometimes, and that's the simplest and most direct answer to the question. I'm curious and I hate to miss what's going to happen. And that's one of the reasons we read science fiction and want to see all these shows, and we just love that people are making them.

Is it's the best alternative to living forever? You get to see what's happening or possibilities of what could happen in the future?

## **Paul**

Absolutely. And first of all, that was my favorite part of the show. When Ed Mercer says he wants to see what's going to happen, that's his reason for wanting to live forever. Because like you, I agree with that completely. But I'll tell you why I gave that show a by and large negative review in general, and this goes well beyond the Orville and Star Trek. It pertains to any narrative. I think that a story should be exciting and provocative and weaving you into it throughout. I don't particularly like stories where you have to put up with what I would say is a whole lot of fluff, and then eventually there's a wonderful payoff.

And so when I was saying that the third episode of the third season of the Orville was a hodgepodge up until the ending, I thought it was because there was no explanation as to what was happening. And it was just scene after scene. This character had this horrible experience. There's a bully in the high school, and the bully turns out to be literally a monster. There's a plane that's going to crash because there's no pilot, et cetera, et cetera. But there was no thread that was tying that together until the very end. And for me, having to sit for almost an hour before that tying together came is not good writing, I think.

It's not good writing in print when you have to read it, and it's not good writing in science fiction that you see on television.

## **Joel**

Can I just give you my interpretation of that? To me, I read it differently and got drawn into it because I saw it as a mystery, and I saw it as, from the perspective of the characters, like a growing sense of terror. What the hell is happening? It just seemed completely no way to explain it, and it just seemed like it was getting worse and worse, and for each one, they were coming close to death one after another, and there was just no logical explanation for what was happening. But from the perspective of being one of them, I could imagine this sense of almost like a horror situation.

They're getting farther and farther away from the idea of making it back to the ship because they're just more and more disconnected from it, and they seem to be completely in the grasp of something that they can't understand. And then I love the moment where the steps appear in the big door and Mercer looks at it and know, Screw this. Basically, we're not taking the bait anymore. And that was a nice turning point to me, is like, okay, now they're going to find their way out of this. And sure enough, they did.

## **Paul**

Okay, fair enough. I can see what you're saying, by the way. I just have to say one of the things I love about *The Orville*, and obviously their strong suit, in addition to usually having great stories, is their humor. I think it's great that they have these characters in the future with the same sense of humor and the same cultural references as we have right here. And this, again, is Asimov versus the *Star Trek* series. *Star Trek* makes a point of not doing that, whereas *The Orville*, they assume that people in Ed Mercer's time know who the Moody Blues were or whatever the group is, and I think that's a reasonable assumption.

**Joel**

Yeah, there was a great one in this last one. Did you watch the fourth one yet?

**Paul**

Yes, I did.

**Joel**

When he looked at Teleya Yeah. And uh... Uptown Girl.

**Paul**

That's exactly right. Look, Uptown Girl is a great song. I would say however far that is into the future, there's no way that anyone's going to make that reference. But on the other end, who knows?

**Joel**

And it makes it relatable. We can understand the vibe he's going for there because we know the song. So he's not creating this series for people in the 25th century. He's creating it for us. So we're entertained by that. And I don't have a problem with it.

**Paul**

No, not at all. And by the way, that Teleya story was a really beautiful, heart-rending story. One of the things, as a writer and a viewer, I would have preferred to see his daughter, Mbenga's daughter, actually be physically cured and have a complete life. But the ending was very gratifying. And if you think about it, and I made this point in my review, it's a callback to the menagerie, right? Because that's how Pike winds up living a life after he's horribly disfigured. He's on a planet where he mentally can live a life. So one of the things that I think The Orville is really superb at is very subtly sometimes making references to previous things that were in Star Trek. And that works very well also, I think.

**Joel**

Yeah, I have to watch that again because I'm now on like a re-watch of selected episodes of the original series. Just watched City on the Edge of Eorever. Just so wonderful. And. what's... The Corbamite maneuver? What's the other one with the giant cone shaped thing that attacks the ship and the planet killing thing? I forgot what it's called.

**Paul**

It led to the cone heads on Saturday Night Live in the 80s.

**Joel**

That's what the one where Kirk beams off the Constellation just in time.

**Paul**

Yeah, I know what you're talking about. I can't remember the name of it, though, by the way. I got to say, though, because one of the reasons I can't remember is I'm on City On the Edge of Forever, you know the Guardian is a very important role. One of the reasons why I'm not thrilled with Discovery I don't know if you remember this. Have you seen Discovery?

**Joel**

I just watched the first episode and one of the main reasons I'm hesitant to get into it is my son has been panning it since for as long as it's been out. And I'm kind of torn because I want to know it and explore it. But I've been kind of led to believe I'm not going to enjoy it.

**Paul**

I won't give anything away here, but I'll just say this. So there's the Guardian in City on the Edge of Forever in one of the Discovery episodes. Some of the people from that crew go back to where the Guardian is. And the guy who was playing the Guardian is not that I have anything against him, but he is the same actor who played the police lieutenant in CSI. And if you or anyone who's watched CSI, for that guy to be the Guardian is totally mean. He's like the complete opposite of gravitas, whatever that would be. So I don't know who made that casting decision, but that's not really fair.

I mean, I'm sure other people don't feel that way, but anyway, I won't say anything more about Discovery, but see if you mean... I agree with your son. That's why I said of the three new Paramount plus Star Trek's that I've been watching again, I've watched two seasons of Picard. I like Picard a lot better than anything in Discovery.

**Joel**

I watched the first two episodes, and I wasn't crazy about it, so I might give that one more of a shot.

**Paul**

Give it a shot. It's not as good as Strange New Worlds at its best. Back to Strange New Worlds, I think Pike is a great character, and I have to say you remember I said earlier in our conversation that I like Spock better than this? I'll probably be banned from any, but I think I actually like Pike better than Kirk in some ways.

**Joel**

I think there's a lot of people that are growing to like Pike an awful lot, and I'm one of them. I really like his style. What's your favorite Strange New Worlds episode so far?

**Paul**

I guess I can't remember which number it is. I I love the fact, you know, and this, again, gets into alternate history where you know what your future is. In Pike's case, it's a horrible thing that's going to happen to him ten years from now, and he's struggling with that. And there was one episode in particular. It might have been the third episode. I'm not sure the fourth episode, whether they're up to eight episodes, I can't remember the number. But I love that episode in which Pike is aware of it and oh, yeah, I think I know the episode.

I'll tell you a little bit more about that, where pike may be in love with this woman on this planet. They had an affair. Yeah. Okay. And not to give too much away.

**Joel**

That was a great episode.

**Paul**

Yeah. But she basically says to him at one point, without to give too much away, why don't you just stay here with me? We can change the future. And Pike is not willing to do that, but you can see he's tempted.

**Joel**

Before he finds out how horrible things are.

**Paul**

That's right, exactly. But I mean, if you think about it just a little bit more on Pike, Pike was the first starship captain, right? He was in the pilot for the original series. He came back in the menagerie. I'm going to make a prediction right here, and we'll see whether this is true or not. So I hope this conversation is listened to a hundred years from now. And here's my prediction that as time goes on, Christopher Pike is going to be the most important captain in all of the Star Treks.

**Joel**

Wow. That is a bold prediction.

**Paul**

Yeah.



## **Joel**

I'm not sure I'd go that far. Kirk's a legend. Whether he deserves it or not, he's a legend. I'll tell you what, my favorite is my favorite is the second one where they have the comet one where this comet is going to wipe out this planet, and they need to go in and divert it. And then the shepherds appear, this giant spaceship that's going to blow them away if they touch the comet. And that kind of creates the classic dilemma of humanist dilemma. Do we go along with what these aliens are saying and honor their sacred traditions and let millions of people die?

Or do we get involved somehow? And I thought they found such a brilliant middle ground. And Pike and Spock figured out what they needed to do. And Una or no, not Una, Uhura, figured it out. And I loved the way she figured things out, using music to decode the message that was on the comet. In some ways, it resonates with my rock opera I wrote years ago, because it's also a story of mythology and how a planet and its atmosphere have this romance together and they create a story and that later people find this story and have to interact with. I could go on and on about that.

## **Paul**

No, I think that's great. I'll just throw in here. I love that episode, too. And the music as a language also resonates with my very first novel, "The Silk Code," in which the neanderthals who may or may not have actually had bones and they poked holes into them and they played them as flutes. There's a language in that as well. They can't speak yet, but they communicate through that music. Yeah, that was handled very well.

## **Joel**

Now I want to read your story. What's it called?

**Paul**

It's called The Silk Code, and it was my first novel published in 1999, and it won the Locust Award for best first science fiction novel of 1999. So some critics it's a very discursive novel. Basically, it starts off in the present, then it goes back to 700 Ad. Then it comes back to the present. So not a lot of people some people found that a little bit too disconcerting for them. But that's how I felt like writing it, so too bad.

**Joel**

Yeah. Well, it piques my interest. So we're getting pretty far into this, and I wanted to get into one more question, and that's about Apple TV Foundation. We had a wonderful talk with Cora Buhlert on this a while back, and I'll definitely put a link to that in the show notes. But I'm wondering if you've had additional thoughts about that show and if you have any predictions for what might be coming up in the next season.

**Paul**

Yeah, look, I have to say, and I really hate to say this, because you know how much I love Foundation, but you know how it is. You have a reaction to something when you first experience it, and then you go months, maybe even years, and you think about it again, and sometimes you think it's even better than you thought. Sometimes you feel exactly the same about it. Sometimes the glow has worn off and you don't even feel as good about it as you did then. And I have to say, in contrast to Asimov's novels, which know, we've discussed, they've stayed with me all my life.

Every time I think about it, I love them. Every time I think about what to me is like the epitome of a great story where this might be a spoiler for people who haven't read any Foundation. But I assume most people have that scene on the first Foundation where they're sitting watching the Hari Seldon hologram and Hari is telling them one thing as the Mules ships pierce their atmosphere. That was just so brilliant. And even when I think

about today, I almost get, like, chills. That's like, one of the most thrilling things I ever read in fiction, anyway.

Honestly. Look, I very much enjoyed the first season. I'm certainly going to see the second season, but there was something lacking in the first season, and it was a big something lacking, and I'm not even sure what that you know, I didn't like the know what our Daneel Olivaw had become. I didn't like the way she was portrayed. I didn't know Hari Seldon being killed. And even though that was explained later on, and I think, as I did say at the time, I thought nonetheless that that first series was an excellent piece of science fiction. But I thought that because of something that had almost nothing to do with the original Asimov trilogy.

**Joel**

The empire parts.

**Paul**

Right, yeah. The clonal triumphant was brilliant. And so that's honestly how I feel, and I feel bad that I feel that way.

**Joel**

I understand what you're saying. I don't think I'm quite as far towards the disappointment side. I'm on the edge and I'm thinking they've got to rescue it in season two. I think they did some things really well, and especially I found the last two or three episodes really engaging. But I want to see more of the magic that you felt in Foundation and Empire going into that era. How they handle the Mule is going to be really telling, I think, because I'm afraid it's going to be horribly disappointing because I just love that story so much, and the Mule as a character, I love so much, and I can't imagine being pleased with how they do it.

But I'm going to try not to be too bound in my memories of how Asimov brilliantly portrayed it and take it on its own, as its own, as a separate thing, just a science fiction story, effectively unrelated in some ways. I wish it was completely unrelated. I wish it was almost like *The Orville* is to *Star Trek* without any canon to worry about, because I think they'd do better if they had a whole new story to tell and not be having all these characters dubiously. Named after characters they don't resemble in the books at all.

### **Paul**

Yeah, look, it's a sad but also fascinating thing. I don't particularly usually have sympathy with people who don't like this or that movie or television series because it doesn't follow to the letter what they read in the book because that's not what translating something from one medium to another is about. It has to be somewhat different even in terms of what characters look like.

### **Joel**

I think one part of it is that what we love in *Foundation* is not the details as much as the big ideas and the sweep of it and the big themes. The great man of history versus psychohistory and things like that, which seems to be largely missing in trying to craft this edge of your seat thriller kind of storyline that works on TV these days. And I agree completely that it would be a disaster to try and duplicate it, all the details and it would make it like a documentary or look.

### **Paul**

I mean, look, the fact mean, I don't even think that psychohistory was well presented. What exactly did Hari predict that came true in that first know, you can struggle and say, well, he said this again, this is like too strong maybe, but they inhibited Hari Seldon's character. They said the right things about him, but we didn't see him doing those.

**Joel**

Right now what's interesting to me is that the people I've talked to I have talked to people who really loved it and they're generally people who didn't read the books. And that's the goal of the director of it, the showrunner, is to bring in a new audience that hasn't read the books. And it's working for a lot of those people, apparently. They're seeing it as a really entertaining show. It's not for us, apparently, but I try to be two people. I try to separate the me that loves the original books and those ideas in those books and the Asimovian the fan of Asimov from just try to be an ordinary person who hasn't read the books when I watch the show.

**Paul**

Well, we talked about this in the conversation we had with Cora, my first love syndrome theory. And I think it's true people what they're first exposed to. But I think that the problems with Foundation, of course it's hard this can't be proven. I think this goes beyond the first love syndrome. And I'm not surprised, however, that people who didn't read the Asimov novels can love the Foundation series. Because first of all, again, the clonal triumvirate is brilliant and there are a lot of good aspects to that story. But my reason, and I suspect your reason, is not just that the television series doesn't live up to Asimov and his work.

It's that it doesn't deal in any significant way with some of the essential things that made the original trilogy so wonderful. And so is there a chance that they can in the second season. Sure. But frankly, I would be amazed if we're having this conversation next year and we both say, hey, you know what? David Gore really came through with the Mule. I would bet money that we're not going to feel that way.

**Joel**

I feel 99% sure I'm not going to like what he does with the Mule.

**Paul**

Yeah, I hope. I'm surprised, but I'm not expecting to be.

**Joel**

Yeah, me too. Okay, well, I think we've been going on for an hour or so, a little more maybe. So I should let you go and really appreciate you coming on. I'm going to put notes in the show notes to the two things that I've done with you previously on your website, the one on talking about Severance and the earlier one with Cora.

**Paul**

I'll do the same for you. I'll put this episode we're now recording I'll put URLs to that on the various places where you and I talked before.

**Joel**

Excellent. Okay, well, it's been really fun. Paul, take care. Glad I got to know you.

**Paul**

My pleasure, Joel. One of these days, when Covid is over and who knows what else is going on, we'll have the pleasure of meeting in person.

**Joel**

You got it.

**Paul**

All right, take care.

## **Joel**

Well, that was a lot of fun. I'll have links to Paul's website in the show notes, where you can find frequent reviews of Star Trek's Strange New Worlds episodes, along with his takes on The Orville and lots of other TV shows. I'll also link to the two video appearances I made with Paul, the first, a talk with him and Cora Buhlert, a science fiction writer herself and recipient of multiple awards, and the second, a conversation about another Sci-Fi show recently debuting on Apple TV called Severance, which I heartily recommend. I hope to introduce the new episode on the conclusion of Second Foundation very soon.

Keep an eye on your podcast feed and join me again here on Seldon Crisis!

[Closing theme music.]