

# The Philosophy of Foundation with Nathaniel Goldberg



[Opening theme music with voiceover.]

## **Nathaniel Goldberg**

"Philosophy and science fiction have this particular thing in common, and that is that they're both really good at thought experiments. The galactic empire is falling. So here's a thought experiment: civilization is ending - what do we do?"

[Theme music plays out.]

## **Joel McKinnon**

Welcome to a very special episode of Seldon Crisis, the podcast. We won't be diving into the first chapter of "Foundation and Empire, The General" quite yet, so I'm sorry to disappoint you on that front. Instead, we have something of an entirely different order an actual guest appearance by someone very familiar with Foundation and Isaac Asimov, who has studied the core trilogy in depth and has some special insights to offer without breaking our no spoiler rule. Before introducing our guest, however, I want to briefly thank some of the people who have made this podcast a success beyond my wildest dreams in only a few months.

## Joel

First, I want to thank someone in my own family who's contributed more than anyone else my own son, Jeremy MacKinnon. When I started rereading the Foundation series last summer, I felt I had to share it with someone and was thrilled to find an accomplice in the joy of reading it in someone under my own roof. He started reading it before I had even finished and read all seven volumes. To my complete delight, he became a big fan of the idea of creating a podcast and lent his talents as a video editor in producing the video trailer for season one, and designed and produced each of the many preview videos I've been posting on the Seldon Crisis video channel.

He's also been a great sounding board for podcast ideas and offers much needed constructive criticism of each episode. I hope to be able to leverage his creative talents throughout the series. Another wonderful collaborator has been a friend I've known since high school and a longtime musical companion named Tom Barnes. I came up with a simple melody idea for the theme music and shared it with him last fall, and Tom enthusiastically transformed it into the evocative and magical theme music that begins and ends each show, along with variations to use to link the sections together. It wouldn't have the same feel without his excellent work, and I look forward to more from him in future sessions if I can maintain his interest in contributing his efforts. I am extremely grateful for all he's done.

A creative effort like this needs visual representation, and I knew I needed something special to honor the power of Isaac Asimov's vision. Who better to create such a look than someone who had demonstrated success in the past? I reached out to the artist who had created book covers for all but one of the seven Foundation novels and all four novels in the Robots series, a guy named Mike Topping, and asked him if he could create an original logo for the series. I asked him if he could incorporate a raven into

the graphic to represent Hari Seldon, and somehow imply the magic and mystery of the Galactic Empire and the Foundation all in one graphic.

And boy, did he deliver! I've been thrilled to post his graphics dozens of times and never get tired of seeing them. Mike can be found online [despotica.com](http://despotica.com) if you would like to engage his services. Lastly, I want to thank all of the listeners and dear supporters who have made it possible to continue this series. I love doing it and get a lot of joy from it, but especially love hearing from all of you out there who appreciate the effort. There's one person in particular I want to call out by name. I had the pleasure of virtually meeting this writer of vibrant and super futuristic science fiction named Tobias Cabral in the past year and read a couple of his works, including a gripping tale called "New Eyes," filled with nail biting action sequences and featuring romance crossing the boundaries of cybernetic and biological life forms.

You can find my review on Goodreads, and I'll add a link in the show notes. Tobias is a wonderful guy, and though I've never met him in person, he's one I can call a true friend. He's lent his enthusiastic backing of my intentions to make this podcast, and I am very grateful for his support. Without further ado, let me introduce another friend and supporter of the show, who I had the privilege of meeting online even before the first episode dropped. Let's meet our distinguished guest.

My guest today is Nathaniel Goldberg. Nathaniel is a professor of philosophy at a university in Virginia. Besides more traditional classes, he teaches a special topics course on philosophy and science fiction, in which he has his students read Asimov's Foundation trilogy against the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's most famous work, "The Republic." Welcome, Nathaniel!

**Nathaniel**

Thank you, Joel. It's a pleasure to meet you and to be here on your podcast.

**Joel**

Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself, including your introduction to Asimov?

**Nathaniel**

Sure. It would also be my pleasure. So I first discovered Asimov when I was a teenager. I was visiting my grandmother in New York. I've got that little bit in common with the good Dr. A. We're both New Yorkers deep down, and she had in her bedroom a book, an anthology, a collection of Golden Age science fiction short stories. I later learned it was my aunt's. She had done a science fiction class in college. And lo and behold, as I started reading through it, I came upon this short story called "Nightfall" by this author named Isaac Asimov.

And it was years later, years later, when I was in high school, that my high school 10th grade English teacher happened to have sets of the Foundation trilogy. And I talked to him, and he lent them to me. And the rest is galactic history.

**Joel**

So, yeah, I'll tell you how I found him. I guess, you know, since you've listened to the podcast. As a teenager, I just discovered science fiction because my dad was into it, and my dad had lots of science fiction on our bookshelves at home. So I read as much of that as I could. And I'm not sure what the first Asimov I read was, but wasn't Foundation, but when I found Foundation, that changed my life, as you know.

## **Nathaniel**

Well, I remember when I was reading Nightfall, learning that Asimov had written it, I think when he was 19, or he published it when he was 21. And at the time, I was 13 or 14, and I thought, no worries. I've got years to be that successful because the gulf from 13 to 19 is like centuries when you're a 13 year old. And then as I crept closer and closer, time started running short. I'm now in a spot where I teach college students who are roughly Asimov's age when he wrote that story, and I like needling them a little bit, like, what have you done with your life?

Have you written a world changing science fiction short story that's the segue to a world changing trilogy? Or haven't you, and you know, they look at me and think that I'm goofy, but they usually think that anyway, so some more Asimov in my background.

## **Joel**

Yeah, I'm really curious about your class and would love to hear you talk more about it because I would have loved to have taken that class when I was in college. So I'm really curious what the students... how they respond to the syllabus.

## **Nathaniel**

Sure. So I guess to fill in a little bit, beyond the Asimov part of my life, I wound up getting a PhD in Philosophy and then wound up teaching at three different universities. I started in Maryland, and then I was in Ohio, and now I'm in Virginia, and where I currently am, I was encouraged to do a special topics course. We all are occasionally to do something like this. So as you said in your kind intro, I'm doing one called Philosophy and Science Fiction, and the idea was each time I taught it, to pair a different work of philosophy with a different work of science fiction.

But Joel, I've got to tell you, the first pairing, Asimov and Plato just stuck because it just works so well. Yeah. For both reasons, and I don't want to say too much about it because the course relies on having read the whole trilogy, and your listeners, including myself, since I'm a listener too, have so far only got through the first book in the trilogy with you. But that was the connection and the motivation.

**Joel**

How do they react to this? We have to read this Asimov guy. I mean, I would think, like, really, I get to read Asimov. Not sure how students react to that.

**Nathaniel**

Now, Asimov is somewhat dated. The trilogy, as you mentioned, was composed of short stories that were written, I guess in the 40s, at least initially, is that right? Joel, am I getting it correct?

**Joel**

He wrote them in the mid to late forties, I believe.

**Nathaniel**

And even though the trilogy was so influential, and it's hard once you read it, not to recognize its influences, it does come across somewhat stilted sometimes to students, or at least they wouldn't have heard of him. But like you, I'm really excited about the Apple TV dramatization or interpretation of the trilogy to get more people interested in it.

**Joel**

Yeah, but we also have our misgivings about how they might treat the subject matter.

## **Nathaniel**

We absolutely do. In fact, if I can share an anecdote between the two of us on I forget what social media platform, but on one of them, I've for years used the alias Gaal Dornick. I don't even remember where, but I commented on your podcast after you and I had already met, but I used the pseudonym Gaal Dornick, and you replied something like, well, thank you for commenting, Gaal, you're one to know, or something like that. So, yeah, I've used that for years, and I was excited to learn that I'm a woman in the new trailer and in the Apple TV, because we all should learn to walk in other people's shoes.

But at the same time, I was reminded, and you asked, how do my students react to the trilogy? They do wind up really liking it. They really do by the end. One of their criticisms, though, is that there are so few women in it, and I'm glad that a relatively minor character like Dornick, it doesn't really matter what gender, but that's one of the criticisms of Asimov that my students have. So I feel like I've talked a bit now about philosophy and Asimov and some of the pros and cons or reactions of my students, at least on that subject.

I really appreciated when you had talked a couple episodes ago about Asimov's handling of women and his sort of background and how that influenced or didn't influence his portrayal of them. So I'm curious, and maybe your listeners are too, if you could say a little bit more.

## **Joel**

I'm glad you brought this up because I wrote that part a few months ago that I read off on a podcast, a couple of podcasts ago, about his treatment of women and his lack of women in the Foundation up to that point, complete lack. And I wondered about it, and I hadn't really done my homework enough to know why he was the way he was in that area. But since then, I've really plunged into his autobiography called "I Asimov," which is a pretty thick tome and covers a lot of the feelings about how he felt about himself and how he related to different people. And he was definitely aware that he had shortcomings in the area of dealing with women.

And a lot of it was that when he was young, his parents had a candy store, he had to work there from dawn to dusk. He never got to meet women much. He never got to date. He went to boys schools, and his first date with a woman was a double blind date, and he ended up falling in love with the woman he was set up with, and that was Gertrude. He said she looked like Olivia de Havilland. She was so gorgeous, and he fell in love with her. And she never really reciprocated the love he was feeling for her, he thought. So he always kind of had a chip on his shoulder about it, I guess.

## **Nathaniel**

But he did marry her, is that right?



## **Joel**

Yes, he married her and he lived with her for 24 years, which was quite a while for what felt in the autobio like a mismatch. They were very different. And she actually resented one of his major character aspects, which was that he just loved to write and write and write all the time. Didn't like to travel, he didn't like to socialize, he just liked to write and write and write, and she thought she felt neglected. And you can tell from the bio that he felt that he neglected her and also his family. He once asked his daughter who he was just obviously he adored, he said, "Have I been a good father?" And she said, "You've been a busy father," and that really stuck with him. He realized something from that.

## **Nathaniel**

You know that reminds me of a description I read once of Frank Herbert. So his son Brian, I guess, is that right? Yes. Was asked about his father, and maybe you know this, that Brian and Kevin J. Anderson have written prequels and sequels to the Dune saga. So Brian was once asked about his father, and he described him in somewhat similar terms. He said that he remembers his father not spending time with him as much as he'd like, and he remembers his father working on Dune. At least Brian didn't know at the time, and then when he finished the first draft, he just locked himself in his room for a couple of days and and that makes me wonder. There's something about passionate people and passionate writing.

**Joel**

Well, you were just referring to your feelings of, like, when are you going to be able to catch up with Asimov? When you were young, and I probably had that same feeling, and sometimes I've thought, wow, I'm such a slacker compared to people like Asimov. And when I think about it in these terms, at least my wife and son don't feel completely neglected by me constantly writing or doing something other than being with them, and I do travel and spend time with them. So being a real human being has its pluses.

**Nathaniel**

I endorse that. My wife's glad I'm a real human being, too.

**Joel**

And I can't say I'm a perfectly real human being. Sometimes I'm too much like Asimov, and in my own self obsessions, like having a podcast and spending a lot of time working on it.

**Nathaniel**

Well, speaking of obsessions, in a way, this lets me answer, or continue to answer an earlier question you asked me, actually, the first one about me and my introduction to Asimov. And I could say a word about philosophy in one of my obsessions, I guess surprise, surprise is thinking or overthinking or overanalyzing, sometimes, to my detriment. And I discovered, I guess, relatively early in life, probably the time when I started reading Asimov, that it was a more productive use of my time to explore. I can't resist to explore strange new worlds in thought rather than obsess about actually things in real life. So there's that bumper sticker, something like what reality is for those people who can't handle science fiction.

**Joel**

Yeah, I like that one.

## **Nathaniel**

Yeah. And I found philosophy, too, because they're both intellectual exercises. And one thing that philosophers always get is that it's only intellectual. And to some extent that's fair, to some extent it's not. That is, there are applications, there are ethics boards at hospitals, and there are philosophers who were basically invented logic. And once upon a time everybody... Isaac Newton called himself a philosopher. So there are connections that are practical. At the same time, philosophy and science fiction have this particular thing in common, and that is that they're both really good at thought experiments. So a thought experiment is like a lab experiment, where you have a control, you have an environment where you're trying to tweak just one thing and keep everything else the same.

And then you see what happens if you tweak that one thing. Increase the pressure, add radiation, deprive the bacteria of sunlight, whatever it is. You don't do everything. You do one thing. And I found that science fiction, at least good science fiction, usually does things like that as well. So Asimov's thought experiment, well, he's got lots in the Foundation trilogy, but the big one, I suppose, is the Galactic Empire is falling. So here's a thought experiment; civilization is ending. What do we do? And then, of course, he proposes. And he proposes more than just a simple, straightforward thing to do.

There's the founding of the First Foundation, there's the mysterious Second Foundation, which we'll find out about. There's the working through of this thing called psychohistory. But in a way, these are all sort of thought experiments that work together for making a really engaging story. Yeah. So it's that kind of thing that I have my students think about as well. So I think it's a pretty good fit.

**Joel**

Do you learn much from your students in their reports? Do they sometimes give you insights you hadn't anticipated?

**Nathaniel**

I do. Well, first, it's always good as I guess, as they say, I've got a face for radio, for podcasts. Maybe as your readers can yeah, well, maybe as your readers or listeners can figure out, I'm a guy like you are, and it's always great to have women react, because I learn different perspectives, which is why I always knew that Asimov had very few female characters. He has some, but I always knew he didn't have many. But it wasn't until I started teaching this that I realized how that makes it harder for female students to get into the story, because they don't really have characters that they can identify with.

So I learned that particular things in the story well, there's some things that come up later in the books, so I won't mention them now, but there are just certain passages I had never read a certain way and that they did. And you know what? I think they're right. Yeah, there are things I know that.

**Joel**

There are female fans of Foundation. I've heard from them already, and it's really nice to hear that. And for any out there who have listened to the first five episodes and don't know what's coming, there are definitely more engaging female characters to come. And I'm horrified that I have to voice them and to stay with my pattern. Unless anybody out there wants to sign up and be my female character voice, that would be wonderful.

## **Nathaniel**

But on a more uplifting note, something else I've learned about them or that they reminded me is, as you were saying, just how prolific Asimov was, because students, at least the better ones, are inquisitive. So they would Google around and Google around. Basically, that's our word for consult the Encyclopedia Galactica. And they would look up the Asimov entry, and then they'd be all spoiled, and they'd pretend not to be. But before that happened, they would see that the guy wrote on, was it every topic under the Dewey Decimal system, philosophy and history and literature and the Bible.

So, yeah, I wanted to ask you, Joel, since you're recently reading his autobiography, what's your take on that?

## **Joel**

Like, why, I definitely have a take on that because in a lot of ways, that's how I felt. I bonded with him because I felt we have so much in common. And the main thing is the boundless curiosity in every direction, what they now call ADHD, I believe, and he may very well have been diagnosed with that, if that was a thing back then, and they probably would have stuck him on Ritalin or something, and it might have changed completely who he was. And he might have not at all been he might have been like a successful scientist, a lab scientist, suffering with not doing what he wanted to really do.

And I'm really glad that he did what he did. But I think what I think about this is that he needed a release for those mental wanderings, and writing was just what he needed. He was never a drinker, didn't do drugs. When he needed therapy, when he was depressed or anxious, he wrote. And he said this often happened. There were plenty of times when he would run into something just horrific in his life and some terrible pressure, and all

he would do is sit down and write. And he said, that was great therapy. So I think that's really nice.

Yeah, that's a nice example of how to treat things instead of taking drugs and drinking. And for me, it's true that podcasting makes me feel better. Doing anything creative makes me feel better. But it had a downside, obviously, this pattern. And we talked about it a little bit, but I think it really ruined his first marriage with Gertrude. She talked about how, why don't you just spend some time traveling? On your deathbed you're going to be horrified with all the things you didn't do. And he just kind of trolled her and responded, saying, on my deathbed, all I'm going to be thinking is, Why didn't I write more?

### **Nathaniel**

And that's Asimov. Yeah, I know. There's also a connection that Asimov had with a different area that I know almost nothing about. So I can go on and on, to some extent, about his interest in history. So, Joel, maybe you or your listeners know that he at one point had contemplated getting a second PhD, one in history. So his PhD was in chemistry, but.

### **Joel**

He had contemplated I know he regretted not getting a PhD in history a couple times. He thought that would have been better for him.

### **Nathaniel**

Yeah. In fact, that's something else that my students hope you'll forgive me if I'm weaving around a bit and answering, but something else that I've learned from my students. I've had classics majors and history majors who filled me in on the actual parallels that Asimov was drawing on. So we know, or at least some of us know, that Asimov loved Edward Gibbons "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," all umpteen volumes of it.

**Joel**

Read it twice.

**Nathaniel**

Yeah, read it twice.

**Joel**

Not too many people can say that.

**Nathaniel**

And I've actually looked at it. I haven't read it other than I read, like, the first paragraph, and spoiler is the last paragraph. It's not a spoiler if it's in the title, right? Rome falls. There, I gave it away. Hope you don't get too much hate mail for this. But what I did appreciate was it's really well written, and it's got these big, overarching themes, and Asimov was approaching his writing, trying to model some of his writing on the Decline and Fall, and there were some well, I don't want to anticipate too much, but your very next episode on Bel Riose...

So, Riose, the general, apparently was modeled after a historic Roman general. And Cleon II, the emperor, was modeled after historic Roman emperor. So there these kind of things that I just didn't know. I do want to say one other thing on the history context that was really interesting to me. I know you're a history buff, and in my missed begotten youth, I was a history major before I saw the light, but somehow I had missed this entire historical epic called the Greek Dark Ages or the Bronze Age collapse.

**Joel**

It's amazing.

## **Nathaniel**

It's amazing. So maybe I'll stop babbling. If you want to describe,

## **Joel**

I want to call out a great book on the Bronze Age collapse by Eric Klein. It's called 1177 BC, I believe. I hope I got that year right. The book was awesome. To me, it really brought it to life of what an amazing era it was just a couple of hundred years before then that it was the most cosmopolitan era humanity had ever experienced with trade crossing the Mediterranean in all directions and major empires interacting, with Egypt and Hittites to the north and the Mycenaeans to the west. And Crete fell a little bit earlier, but the Minoans. But there's so many amazing stories that we'll never know out of that period because the collapse was so total and so much happened so quickly that so much of it was just so devastating, like entire cities just burned to the ground.

And the ironic thing is that's how we know some of what we know is from those cities burning to the ground, because when tablets get baked... bakes them hard or durable, and we would have forgotten a lot of that stuff if it hadn't been from them burning down. So it's some of the most disastrous sites are where we get our knowledge. The ones who succeeded didn't give us the knowledge.

## **Nathaniel**

So that's the silver lining. But the cloud is that it was a complete collapse of Mediterranean civilization that set them back centuries.

## **Joel**

And I'm sure as they were approaching that collapse, they thought it was unthinkable.



## **Nathaniel**

That's exactly what I was going to say. So I don't know the specifics, but I had a Classics major student who's now getting a PhD, I think, at Oxford in Classics. So he knew the material better than I did, but he would say things like, there were whole sorts of industries or techniques that were just lost, so people forgot how to do X, Y or Z, whatever that is. They forgot how to make this kind of pottery, or they forgot this. There were whole things that were lost. And something I try to impress upon my students is, yeah, it might seem like know, decline in fall of the Galactic Empire is yeah, it's far fetched.

It's science fiction after all, emphasis on the fiction. And, yeah, there was this decline and fall of the Roman Empire, but there were Roman states and then there was the rise of early modern Europe. And depending upon how you want to read the Middle Ages, they maybe weren't so called dark because there was still progress in advancement. In fact, the Dark Ages is a term obviously retroactively applied to it. So my students sometimes think, yeah, the Asimov story, that can't happen. And then we do talk. Well, actually, the Roman fall was serious, and even potentially more serious was the Bronze Age collapse and Asimov is focused not just on those historical examples, but on the possibility that this could always happen, that there could always be a fall.

And what do we do? So one reason that I have them read the short story Nightfall is that it's about, that it's about the fall of civilization, and that is the fall of night, the literal and the metaphorical. And then I have them read that right before we start the Foundation trilogy. So they think as they start reading the trilogy, The Encyclopedists, the very first part of book one, they think, I see, I see. This is how we stop the fall of civilization, the bronze age collapse and the Roman fall and the nightfall. In his short story, we just gather lots of smart people and have them write books, because that seemed to be after all, they think that's what's lost, right?

We lose libraries at... the library of Alexandria is later, but we lose libraries, we lose information. Science turns into religion. Asimov talks about in Nightfall. He doesn't disparage religion, but he says it's a repository where people don't always know what it's a repository of, but still, it's a way to hold on to some knowledge. So, yes, wonderful. Seldon has these encyclopedists, right? These however many families, the men with those women and children. There's another case where Asimov could have had women encyclopedists, too. But anyway, here they're writing an encyclopedia. So you asked me whether I have any anecdotes.

That's maybe the biggest anecdote, just how gung ho three cheers for encyclopedia Galactica they are until they get to the very end of the encyclopedists and they learn that it was all a lie.

## **Joel**

Yeah, that's a great turn. And that's only one of the first of the great twists that Asimov delivers going forward and coming up in future volumes. For anyone listening to the podcast who hasn't read it, Foundation and Empire has some amazing twists. But going back to what you were just saying a little bit, Asimov also was a huge history buff. Going back to the Greeks, going back to he wrote an entire history of the bible, Old and New Testament, two complete volumes. And I read them just not that long ago, a couple of years ago, finally got around to it and found them in the library.

Just brilliant stuff. And it's so much more readable than the Bible. And he doesn't do it in a contentious, anti-religious kind of state of mind. He doesn't say, listen to these silly people thinking this or that. He puts it in the cultural context. And he's really just trying to get at the real stories that were going on behind all that. And it's obvious that the fact that the residents of that area, the Hebrews, were able to write their history so eloquently was enormously powerful, and that's still driven so much of what's happened to the current time.

And he really respected that. And I think there is a lot he respects in religion without being a believer, but again and again in the subtext of the Foundation. But another thing I wanted to mention related to that is in his love of history, he also came to love theater. And he saw history as just an endless succession of very entertaining stories and very entertaining characters. And the rise and fall of power was always a huge part of that. And that's what Foundation is built on. It's like taking that history of human sociology and the waxing and waning of power and the kinds of temperaments that leaders and megalomaniacs have and putting that into 20,000 years in the future and nothing's really changed.

### **Nathaniel**

Yeah, well, that's one of the beauties of science fiction. Going back to the thought experiment idea, instead of talking about well, for him, maybe it was World War II Europe and then Cold War Europe, right. The era during his formative life, instead of talking about the Axis and the Allies or the Communists and the so called Free West, he talked about emperors on distant planets in the distant future who controlled countless stars and countless star systems. So it was a way to explore these issues without the nitty gritty politicking of what was going on around him.

Now, I'm not saying he was exploring the Cold War issues in the original trilogy, though. Maybe some of that comes up in the later books, where he seems to return to the themes of free will and the right way of organizing a government just for him. The government's the size of the galaxy, but it's still the same kind of questions. It's still playing in thought instead of playing in act.

### **Joel**

Right. Do you know anything about David Deutsch?

**Nathaniel**

I don't.

**Joel**

Oh, you should look into him. I just discovered him. Just recently I saw a YouTube video where he talks about the great monotony in Cosmology, which is the time from the Big Bang. He said the Big Bang was the most significant moment of innovation in cosmic history. And what came right after it? With the development of the first stars and the first galaxies. But that once that was finished, for the next 14 billion years, nothing much was new. It was just a replication of those things, very simple patterns that just replicated on this colossal time and distance scale. And until a few hundred million years ago, when multicellular life appeared on this planet, actually, even before that, when the first photosynthesis started and the planet changed dramatically based on life.

And he claims that now humans are the first species to develop explanatory power. And explanatory power, he thinks, is a mechanism by which humans can change the galaxy and eventually move out into the entire galaxy and become a dominating, powerful force and modifying what is going on.

**Nathaniel**

The first species we know of. I'm still hoping.

**Joel**

Yeah, and he qualifies "as we know of" through the whole thing. But it's a really fascinating.

## **Nathaniel**

It's got shades of Carl Sagan, who would talk about how with the dawn of intelligence, the universe finally came to know itself because reality created or gave rise to the sort of thing that can know reality, whether we call it explanation or self knowledge. And that also reminds me of the short story that I end my Plato Asimov class with. So for almost the whole class, we're reading the Foundation trilogy. We start with Nightfall because that primes students to worry about what happens when things fall. And then we get the response in the... no spoilers because we're not done on your podcast with it, but we get Asimov's answer.

And then I end the class with the story I've shared with you called "The Last Question," where the last question asked is basically what happens when entropy increases, when disorder takes reins over order and the universe comes to an end. And I'm not going to give away that answer either, but the way I Asimov...

## **Joel**

It's a short story that everybody should read.

## **Nathaniel**

Yeah, and google it. It might be public domain at this point.

## **Joel**

Or if it's I think there's actually a YouTube version of it that's very nicely narrated. I found it, but haven't watched it yet. I've been meaning to because I've read it a while back and want to experience it again.

## **Nathaniel**

Yeah, no, it's a great story. Sort of the meta question that I ask in my class is what do we do with these cycles of history? So in Nightfall, the short story that seems like they're inevitable, and then in the Foundation trilogy, hey, we've got psychohistory that can help predict the future. And hey, we have the Foundation that can help limit the interregnum between decline and fall. And hey, as we're going to see, we've got some other things that may prevent future declines and falls. That comes up in the book called Second Foundation, and it involves the entity known as the Second Foundation.

But then by the time we get to the last question, well, I'm not sure. I'll let your listeners find out for themselves.

## **Joel**

Yeah, we're a ways off from that. I hope I have the endurance to make it through podcasting, all seven novels, because I think the last ones well, there's two sequels and two prequels which I hadn't read until last summer. And I was really blown away by them because they're different in that he wrote them 40 years later. And he took a long break from science fiction and wrote mostly nonfiction for most of the middle of his life, with a few exceptions. But he got back to it eventually, and I'm so glad he did, because he realized, I think, that the story wasn't complete in terms of it was supposed to last 1000 years and it didn't go that long.

And also that he wasn't entirely satisfied with how he'd wrapped it up, I think, and that it didn't feel right to him. And he spent the last few novels really pondering how it should have wrapped up. And I think it's a fascinating introspection that he takes us on in those last novels. If you read them, they're quite something. And you also get to after the sequels, you get the prequels, and you get all the backstory on Hari Seldon and how the beginning of the story, which turns out there's a ton of material there, too.

## **Nathaniel**

Yeah, there is. But maybe some of my final thoughts as I'm privileged to be talking to you, but I don't want to overstay my welcome too much is just to say the special place that the original trilogy has for me personally. I take it for you personally for the whole genre of science fiction. So I can share an anecdote, not from my students, but I've got a colleague who teaches English, English literature and his particular research area, it's really interesting. It is. The effect or the influence of the decline and fall the Roman Empire on English literature.

So there were many authors who took up the idea of Decline and Fall and worked it into their novels, and I can't name too many of them, but I can name two. One is Isaac Asimov, and one is J. R. R. Tolkien. There are others as well, but they both have those two have that decline and fall. Frank Herbert has it, and other people have, but as my colleague pointed out, sort of Star Wars it's the Empire is falling and what's going to follow it. Yeah, but there was one particular line that he really that just clinched it for me.

In the prequel trilogy, in Revenge of the Sith, that moment when the Republic does fall and the Empire is announced and is born shortly before Darth Vader manifests his suit, maybe you or your listeners know the moment I have in mind. Chancellor Palpatine, the head of the Galactic Senate, is in the Senate, and he declares before everyone that the Republic will be reorganized as. Do you remember what he says Joel?

## **Joel**

I do not. I've watched it, but it's been a while.

## **Nathaniel**

As the first Galactic Empire. And my colleague said to me, why the heck would he say the first? When George Washington and so on became, I don't know, when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he didn't say, ah, I'm now signing the first declaration of when when, I don't know. The United States chose Washington, DC. As its capitol or struck the Washington Monument and built it. They didn't say aha, here's the first Washington Monument. So why would he say the first Galactic Empire? And my colleagues responses because he'd read Asimov because everybody had in the back of their minds, if they're into science fiction and the idea of galactic empires, that of course, there was a first, and then there was going to be a second.

So you have to say the first, because it just became part of the parlance of Sci-Fi.

## **Joel**

Right. And he was such a powerful influence on that.

## **Nathaniel**

Such a powerful influence, yeah.

## **Joel**

One thing I want to add before we go, this just occurred to me. You were talking about names and such in the book, and Cleon I, the Emperor, the second, the last emperor, I believe, that we know about, and there were some unnamed ones in the fall. But I read a book that just blew my mind about another book on psychohistory, kind of, that was written or it's placed in the 19th century, mid 19th century, and the idea it's by Michael Flynn and it's called "In the Country of the Blind," but the premise is fascinating.



It's basically, Charles Babbage came up with the design of the first computer, mid 19th century, early 19th century, and never built it. But the premise of the book is he did build it, or it was built and somebody got a hold of it, and basically they became psychohistorians, and they became kind of the driving forces behind the modern world by knowing what was happening and guiding the evolution. And they have splinter groups that break off and they fight against each other, and it's going on into the modern day. So it was really interesting. But the point I was going to make about Cleon I is the science of psychohistory was called Cleology, which from the Latin, which is the study of history.

**Nathaniel**

Right. Because Cleo was the Greek muse of history, I think.

**Joel**

Yeah, I believe you're right.

**Nathaniel**

Yeah. History.

**Joel**

So I'm thinking Cleon was not entirely coincidence.

**Nathaniel**

Oh, goodness, there's so many names. Once you start thinking in the trilogy.

**Joel**

I love his names.

**Nathaniel**

Yeah, well, that makes one of us. I think they're kind of clunky. But here's one I'll share because I listen to your podcast.

**Joel**

Maybe it's because I am all those names. I have to be.

**Nathaniel**

That's true. But do you remember, Joel, because you just mentioned it in your most recent episode, or was it who was the person who was the high priest of the church, who was at the same time the head of the...

**Joel**

Publis Manlio?

**Nathaniel**

The generation, the one before that?

**Joel**

Poly Verisov?

**Nathaniel**

Right. You know what Poly Verisof means?

**Joel**

Many truths?

**Nathaniel**

Many truths. That's what he was.

**Joel**

I didn't really think about that.

**Nathaniel**

He spoke many the truth, right.

**Joel**

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I imagine you could probably analyze a lot of his names and figure out...

**Nathaniel**

Some of them I haven't figured out. Some of them I think he just made up.

**Joel**

But some of them, like these two syllable first and last names Hober, Mallow, Salvor, Hardin, Hari, Seldon. Yes, most of them are like that, but I don't know where he came up with them. But they work for me.

**Nathaniel**

Me, too.

**Joel**

All right, well, anything else we need to talk about, or are we just going to move on? I think maybe we should save some other things for later, after we finish another series of Selden Crisis, maybe we can come back and talk again.

**Nathaniel**

I'd love to. As I said in my initial email to you, which you kindly read aloud, I'm happy. I'm flattered to participate. There's nothing like the trilogy. But if a way to help you is to be quiet and never bother you again, Joel, that's okay too. So I would love to come back. I'm at your discretion, however you think I would be interesting for your listeners.

**Joel**

Well, thank you very much for taking part in this and letting our listeners know about this amazing course you teach and your insights that I think are really powerful and really fascinating. So thanks for being a part of this and this change of pace between seasons. And before we get back to just me reading.

**Nathaniel**

My pleasure, Joel. Thank you.

**Joel**

Well, I hope you all enjoyed that as much as I did. I'm very grateful and honored to have Nathaniel on the show, and I hope I can have him back for similar appearances later on, when he can more freely discuss some of the philosophical implications of the later volumes of this series. Before wrapping up, I want to acknowledge a couple of podcasts that I have found hugely inspirational and would encourage my listeners to sample. First, as a big fan of ancient history, I've been entranced by some of the earliest stories humankind has produced. Some of the most epic story cycles came down to us from the works of the mysterious author or authors known as Homer, The Iliad and The Odyssey, the first of which tells the tale of the semi mythical Trojan War some thousand or so years BCE.

If you like stories like that, you'll love Trojan War, the Podcast, as well as the later Odyssey, the Podcast. Jeff Wright is an amazing storyteller,

and I modeled some of my approach to the retelling of Foundation off of his wonderfully dramatic recreation of these ancient tales, including a lot of the backstory with expert analysis. They're both really fun shows, and I encourage my listeners to dive in. My favorite podcast, however, without a doubt, is Literature and History, hosted by Doug Metzger. No one in podcasting works harder than Doug at putting together extremely polished productions covering the history of Anglophone literature, starting with the earliest tales of the ancient Near East through the works of classic Greece and Rome, including some 20 episodes on the most influential work ever produced, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and many of the apocryphal works.

Besides being a master storyteller and analyst, Doug is also an amazingly talented and creative musician. He composes and produces all of the background music for his show and includes a fun comedy song at the end of almost every episode. I was extremely fortunate to engage Doug's awesome narrative talents with my very own first podcast Planet and Sky, The Deeper Story. Oh, did I forget to tell you about Planet and Sky? I guess I did. This was a podcast version of a rock opera I composed and performed in, a cosmic love story between a planet and its atmosphere, told in a science fiction context.

Yeah, it's a bit weird, but it came to me and I had to tell this story. The music is available online, credited to the Max Wyvern Band, a group headed by my alter ego from my days playing bass in a band called Jupiter Sheep. I'll add links in the show notes for this as well. The podcast is a deeper exploration of the story than the lyrics of the songs provide, and Doug graciously contributed his prodigious talents in editing and narrating my story. Back to Foundation and a couple of items directly related to Asimov. I want to mention a couple of great resources you'll want to know about that might be helpful in understanding Asimov's literary history and the future history timeline he created.

A guy named Luigi Demelio has produced an amazing series of videos at his YouTube channel Foundation Era, focused mostly on previewing the upcoming Apple TV Plus series on Foundation. He does an amazing job of deconstructing the limited hints available in the official teaser trailer and a recent sizzle reel unveiled at Apple's WWDC conference. A recent video, however, covers Asimov's future timeline in detail, including books outside of the Foundation series, notably the Robots and Empire series that mostly coexist in the same universe as Foundation. I'll link to this video in the show notes, but I encourage listeners to enjoy all of Luigi's excellent videos.

Lastly, a listener named William Woolard emailed me recently and shared a very cool resource. He's put together a Google sheet listing every book Asimov wrote in chronological order to assist him with his very modest aspiration of reading every single thing the great master has written. This might be just a little too ambitious for most of us. It certainly is for me, but the sheet is a great guide to what is available and a wonderful view into Asimov's prodigious output. He's given me permission to post it publicly, and I'll share this link in the show notes as well.

William also blew my mind recently by taking Mike Toppings' artwork and applying it in the video game Gran Turismo to show a car rolling around the globe emblazoned with a gigantic Seldon Crisis logo. He surely knows how to tickle a podcaster's heart. By the way, this also inspired me to order some Seldon Crisis stickers, so email me at [joel@seldoncrisis.net](mailto:joel@seldoncrisis.net) if you want one. Hopefully, I've given you all a few distractions to indulge in while I prepare the second season of Seldon Crisis for release in just a few weeks. When we return, we'll be back to the standard format as we launch into the amazing "Foundation and Empire" and meet another classic batch of Asimovian characters, including Ducem Barr, the surviving son of Onum Barr, described in the sad tale in The Merchant Princes, the heroic Foundation trader Lathan Devers and the man who will pose the

greatest existential threat to the growing Foundation yet in the imperial general Bel Riose.

Be sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to be sure to be informed when the next episode drops, and if you can, please review the show on Apple podcasts to help spread the word. Until then, perhaps read a little Asimov!

[Closing theme music.]