

## Who is Hari Seldon?



[Opening theme music.]

### **Joel McKinnon**

Welcome back, friends, for another episode of Seldon Crisis. First, it's been a challenging summer, and it's made it more difficult to devote as much time to the podcast as I would like. There will, however, be some guest appearances coming up that you won't want to miss, and my desire to get back into the continuing story is growing. Once again, I thank you for your patience. With the return of the Apple TV Plus series on Foundation with season two debuting last week, I've been plunging in with a new attitude of accepting the story as it is, no matter how much it diverges from the books.

## Joel

Ironically, I'm finding new connections with the source material I didn't expect and just enjoying the spectacle of it all without nearly as much dread that they might ruin the whole thing somehow. Asimov's Foundation series in the form of his seven great novels, plus the connected four novels in the Robots and Empire series will remain regardless as the profound and timeless classics they are and have always been. I think we can recognize that and have some fun with a beautiful science fiction epic on our TV screens at the same time, you might recall an episode a while back featuring a discussion with the media critic and science fiction author Paul Levinson. I enjoyed his regular reviews of all the episodes in the first season and am happy to see that he's back reviewing this season as well.

Having enjoyed the first episode of this season myself, I looked forward to his take on it. He wasn't quite as pleased as I was, and one of the aspects of the premiere he didn't comment on very much was one that I thought was one of its strongest components a significantly deeper dive into the character of Hari Seldon. I got into a friendly little back and forth with Paul on his blog, Infinite Regress, and it ultimately led me into the need to write a comment that was more of an essay. I've posted it to Reddit and my Patreon page and will now read it in its entirety.

The title is simply who is Hari Seldon? And it begins I have some thoughts on where Apple TV might be going with the character of Hari Seldon and why I'm super intrigued with what I've seen in the first episode of season two. First, putting aside the book prequels for now, Hari Seldon wasn't much of a real character in the original stories, with The Psychohistorians only added in later for the novelization of the first Foundation novel. This meant that Seldon was either a holo-recording seen for a few brief minutes across a couple of centuries, or a myth created from his legacy.

There was very little known about his character besides his obvious brilliance as a mathematician and groundbreaking scientist. Obviously, once the show creators cast Jared Harris and had the chance to use him across multiple seasons, they had the choice of a) doing a lot of Hari stuff in flashbacks or b) somehow bringing him into the story as a real living character. They chose the latter, and that forces them to give him a personality and a backstory, beyond just being a super geek. Asimov's Seldon, including the prequels, was another variant of a classic Asimov protagonist; smartest guy in the room, capable of outwitting fools and power hungry maniacs with his brain and generally possessing a good heart and a strong interest in the best for humanity.

In short, a humanistic and likable genius like Asimov saw himself. Salvor Hardin, Hober Mallow, Ebling Miss, Dr. Darell and Golan Trevize were all variations on this same kind of character. A long running TV drama needs more variance in the characters, especially if many of them will be interacting contemporaneously. They've done that with Hardin for sure, and with Gaal, a virtual non character from the books, and I assume we'll see new dimensions to Mallow's character and to those of Darell and Trevize, if we ever get that far. Hari Seldon has to have a real personality as well, especially since he's literally everywhere in it.

They've chosen to make him disturbed and easily angered, and are hinting at a difficult childhood with an abusive father. The one major aspect of book Hari's personality, his desire for humanity's best future, is clearly present as well, and will likely see this as something he gets from his more understanding mom. Now to plumb the prequels for a moment, the Hari Seldon in the books was preoccupied with his science, doubtful of its applicability for predictions (it actually was to him "just a theory"), loved his family dearly, though was a bit dim about relations with humans sometimes, or even if he was married to one.

Was a hell of a street fighter twister when pushed and became a crafty politician, then ultimately ended his life in a great sadness, with many tragedies befalling his nearest and dearest. Another nod to the author himself in his final days reading the last few sections of his final novel "Forward the Foundation", published posthumously, it's hard not to get a little choked up. The TV show has introduced a complex relationship with his son Raych, which matches the book, perhaps with the father son dynamics magnified somewhat by Hari's abusive past shows him as psychologically traumatized, perhaps to a higher degree, but as absolutely consistent in his desire for the best for humanity and a determination to see his plan succeed. So far, so good.

Where can they go further in building a real character for him? I'd love to see his scientific and mathematical brain explored in a deeper way than we ever got to see in the books, and that's why I love the opening to season two with Hari trapped in a mathematical cage of some kind, with uncertain rules and structure, which he must deduce. This also jibes with Asimov's love of mystery, as shown through Foundation and the robot stories. Moreover, it appears that he has deduced that he has been trapped within a creation of his own mind, the Prime Radiant, and that the Radiant has developed sentience.

To me, this is a fabulous line of inquiry that the show could plunge into across extended seasons. How can a human-created mathematical construct become self aware and capable of independent action? This is a central question of our own times. With the accelerating increase in AI capability and the ramifications for our society, can Hari be sure that the Radiant he designed to help humanity will continue to have humanity's best interests at heart? Recall this exchange with the now apparently sentient Radiant in the form of Kalle the mathematician, after he questions whether sentience could possibly result from his creative inputs.

**Prime Radiant**

"Ah, but you're not the only designer. As you said, Kalle and Yanna contributed. Your work was always incomplete. Perhaps I am its completion."

**Hari Seldon**

"If you're the Prime Radiant, what's your goal?"

**Prime Radiant**

"I have a vested interest in humanity's destiny."

**Hari Seldon**

"Oh, that's worrying. I wish you'd said you had a vested interest in our survival."

**Prime Radiant**

"Isn't it the same thing?"

**Hari Seldon**

"It isn't. And you should know that."

**Prime Radiant**

"Well, the creator and his creation have reached an impasse."

**Joel**

Have we, as a human society reached or are on the brink of reaching, such an impasse in the creation we are continuing to make with superintelligent machines?

In Hari's case, it appears he's no longer capable of completely understanding how his creation works and what it could evolve into, because he was not the only creator, and the nature of consciousness

is still a mystery to him. When and how does his creation become self aware? And at that point, does it necessarily share its creator's goals? We face a similar dilemma here and now as humans on planet Earth in the 21st century. Will Hari learn to trust his child and its motives? Should he? Will and should we trust our mechanical children and their indecipherable motives? Will they want what's best for humanity, for our world, for the future of intelligence and consciousness? Can we put our faith in them, having learned from both the best and the worst of what we are?

Science fiction at its best asks profound questions such as these, while it simultaneously entertains us and allows us an escape from our day to day travails. I'm hopeful that this television show will lead us on just such an adventure. If it does, I think Isaac Asimov would be pleased.

So that was my little essay, and I just wanted to share it with you. Stay tuned for upcoming guest appearances on the podcast with a little more focus on the TV show while the show airs. And then perhaps, if the universe is willing, we can get back to more dramatization and analysis of the source material. Until then, respect and enjoy whatever peace you can find in your own lives, here on Seldon Crisis.

[Closing theme music.]