

Guest Editorial

Jay Cole

A SEMESTER WITH ISAAC ASIMOV

Growing up reading (idolizing would be more accurate) Isaac Asimov, I never imagined that one day I would teach a college class about him. My first encounter with the Good Doctor was when I picked up a Perma-Bound® (remember those?) copy of *Fantastic Voyage* from my small but eclectic middle school library. Soon afterward, during a trip to Walden Books (remember *those?*) I asked a clerk where I could find more books by Asimov. Serendipitously, she showed me the science section, and there, on the left side of the top shelf (because the books were in alphabetical order), was *Asimov on Physics* in paperback.

I still remember the cover: two hands using a wrench to tighten a bolt amidst stars and nebulae. Even to a sixth grader, the metaphor was obvious: this book was about using the tools of physics to unlock the mysteries of the Universe. I was disappointed that I could not use my cherished Walden Books *Otherworlds* membership card to get a 10 percent discount because the book was not science fiction—but that was a very small sacrifice for such an excellent introduction to Asimov’s nonfiction.

And thus began my lifelong love affair with Asimov’s science, science fiction, and just about everything else he wrote. But as someone wise once said, “the key to love is sharing.” And so during the 2017 spring semester, about thirty-five years after first reading Asimov, I decided to take some time away from being an administrator and create and teach an honors English course at West Virginia University (WVU) in Morgantown, West Virginia, on Isaac Asimov’s science fiction. For my fellow Asimov fans everywhere, I would like to share a brief recap of my experience.

A few people might wonder, “Why a course on Asimov?” I believe reading and studying Asimov has much to offer—from the history of science fiction as a genre to how science fiction can inform the general public about science and shape public perceptions about scientific issues. This latter angle, the interaction between science fiction and public attitudes, was my primary motivation for this course. During a time of “alternate facts” and “fake news,” we need the clarity and the rationality of “The Great Explainer” more than ever. As part of a liberal arts education, I think teaching Asimov’s science fiction can help to prepare future generation of voters, taxpayers, and citizens for the decisions they will have to make about everything from energy to space travel. There are other science fiction authors whose works could be taught for this purpose, but Asimov is my first love, and I believe his writing strategy of creating complex problems and then solving them as the story unfolds can serve as a valuable teaching tool.

Another motivation for me to offer this class on Asimov is WVU’s significant collection of Asimoviana, donated by two generous Asimov fans: Larry Shaver and Carlos Patterson. Larry is a WVU alumnus who lives in Oklahoma and started collecting Asimov materials after reading one of his books in the early 1970s. Carlos lives in California and has no direct affiliation with WVU, but read about Larry’s donation and decided that the WVU Libraries would be a good home for his Asimov materials. In total, the collection contains almost a thousand items and ranges from autographed first editions and board games to computer software and albums.

Curated by librarian Stewart Plein, a rare books expert and science fiction fan, WVU’s collection is one of the largest Asimov troves outside of the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, where Asimov deposited his own papers in the 1960s. This collection reflects the breadth and depth of Asimov’s work and his impact across a fifty-year career; and, as such, provides a robust academic resource. More information about this collection is available on the WVU Libraries website at

<https://lib.wvu.edu/collections/exhibits/asimov/>. (And if you ever find yourself in Morgantown, not far from Anacreon on the Periphery of the Galactic Empire, please stop by and see the Asimov Collection in person.)

In terms of the course itself, I began with a couple of lectures I entitled, “Who was Isaac Asimov? A biography of a polymath.” For these lectures, I drew from Asimov’s own three-volume autobiography and James Gunn’s excellent scholarly analysis, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction*. I supplemented these materials with a clip of Bill Moyers’s 1988 interview with Asimov from Moyers’s *A World of Ideas* PBS television series. I thought it was important for students to see what Asimov looked like and to hear what his voice sounded like. The sideburns garnered a few comments.

After a visit to the Asimov Collection at the WVU Libraries, we had a good in-class discussion about Asimov’s definition of science fiction as outlined in his essays “My Own View” and “Extraordinary Voyages.” Defining science fiction, as many writers and critics have observed, may seem simple at first, but quickly gets complicated. I wanted students to explore these complications as part of their exploration of the relationship between science fiction and public opinion. The fundamental characteristic of science fiction, Asimov wrote in 1978, is “the perception of change through technology,” and this certainly resonated with “millennial” students whose lives are defined by constant technological change.

We read “Marooned Off Vesta,” more than anything else for the fun I had telling students that the precocious Asimov was about their age (nineteen) when he wrote it, his first published short story. We spent a couple of weeks on the robot stories and the Three (Four) Laws of Robotics, followed by clips from television and film—from *The Terminator* to *Westworld*—to explore the evolution of the depiction of robots in movies and television and Asimov’s influence on it. The steady drumbeat of news stories about advances in robotics and/or artificial intelligence, including plans for Google’s AlphaGo to take on the world’s top human Go player, provided plenty of grist for discussion, and Asimov’s stories served as a compelling starting point. (And yes, we watched *I, Robot*, although I wish I had shown *Bicentennial Man* instead.)

From robots, we moved on to “The Last Question” and continued our discussion about the evolution of artificial intelligence. We spent a couple of days on “Nightfall,” exploring Asimov’s social science musings and the effect of irrationality on society. By this point, we hit spring recess on the calendar. Upon our return, we switched gears from short stories to novels. First up: *The Gods Themselves*, and a focus on ethics, integrity, and egotism in science. The characters of Hallam, Lamont, and Denison are personifications of different motives and results. I also warned students in advance that some critics have pointed out that Asimov rarely wrote about aliens, and even more rarely about sex, so they were in for a real treat to read his exploration of alien sex during the middle part of the book.

Next, we read *Foundation* to consider Asimov’s views on the cyclical nature of history and the exercise of power. In developing the course syllabus, I made a choice I expect many Asimov fans will object to: I included *Foundation*, but not the trilogy (or the additional prequels and sequels in the series). In retrospect, I made a mistake. I also teach an honors course at WVU on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and in that class I teach all three parts of the poem, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, because I think the overall arc of the story is so important. The overall story arc is at least as important in the *Foundation* series, so why did I not teach *Foundation and Empire* and *Second Foundation*? The choice haunts me, and when I teach the course again, I will do things differently.

After a couple of weeks on *Foundation*, we entered the home stretch with *The End of Eternity*, which provoked the most animated in-class debate of the semester about the ethics of tampering with time (not yet a scientific issue, but it may be one day) and

whether adversity is necessary for humanity's progress (a disturbingly timely question). We wrapped up with two more short stories, "The Dead Past" and "Trends," to examine Asimov's take on anti-scientism. Students were quick to use both stories to discuss skepticism about climate change and resistance to climate change research.

As the final creative project for the class, I asked each student to write his or her own science fiction story based on a contemporary scientific issue. I was impressed by the enthusiasm and skill the students brought to the assignment. Topics ranged from environmental degradation to genetic engineering. Approaches ranged from court trial transcripts to television show scripts to illustrated children's books. The students' creativity and passion were a joy to behold.

As I hope this abbreviated account reflects, I loved every minute of this course. Based on the students' evaluations, they seemed to enjoy it, too. Of course, designing a single fourteen-week course on a prolific author with such encyclopedic interests is an enormous but entertaining challenge. I focused on Asimov's science fiction, and just a relatively small (but I hope representative) sample at that. Ironically, I included the first Asimov book I ever read—*Fantastic Voyage*—but I wound up spending very little time on it and the science of miniaturization in class. What about the rest of his science fiction? *Pebble in the Sky*? *The Caves of Steel*? *Nemesis*?

My course was on science fiction, but what about his science? Or the rest of his non-fiction, for that matter, from ancient history to Gilbert and Sullivan? An entertaining parlor game among Asimov fans might be to design their own syllabi—what essays, stories, and novels would you include? What would you leave out? Why? What films, if any, would you show? I chose *I, Robot*, but not *Fantastic Voyage* or *Bicentennial Man*. And how do you explain the absence of a film or television treatment of *Foundation*? Of course, all of these choices depend on your purpose for teaching a class in the first place.

If there are other college courses on Asimov out there, I would love to hear about them. Perhaps it is time to hold a session at a convention or a symposium on teaching Asimov. Perhaps it is also time to develop a teaching guide as a way of stimulating more courses and more scholarship on how Asimov's science fiction can teach critical thinking about scientific issues.

More than twenty-five years have passed since Isaac Asimov's death, and while we are not yet in a Seldon Crisis, facts and rationality seem in dangerously short supply in our national discourse on science and many other topics. In this context, I am concerned about Asimov not making it onto younger readers' radar screens, particularly in the absence of a major film or television show that piques their curiosity and draws them into his writing, both fiction and nonfiction. Hopefully, that movie or show is on its way. In the meantime, I am anxious to do my part to cultivate interest in an author who has meant the world—no, make that the Universe—to me and whose works can promote clear, rational, and optimistic thought at a time when we need it the most.

Jay Cole is senior advisor to the president and an adjunct faculty member at West Virginia University. His scholarly interests include science policy, the history of science, and the relationship between science fiction and public opinion. During the fall 2016 semester, Jay channeled his life-long love of science fiction, and Isaac Asimov in particular, into creating and teaching an honors course on Asimov. Jay's guest editorial describes his experience and makes a case for teaching about Asimov's work as an antidote to a "post-truth" era of "alternative facts."