

## About This Volume

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M. Keith Booker

This volume presents a number of critical insights into the work of Isaac Asimov, perhaps the most prolific author in human history. Though best known as a writer of science fiction, Asimov actually wrote fiction in a number of genres, including detective fiction and fantasy. The holder of a doctorate in biochemistry, Asimov also had a successful academic career as a professor in that field, and he employed his knowledge of science to become one of the most successful popular science writers of all time. Moreover, he wrote nonfiction in a variety of areas, including literary criticism, producing extensive popular reader's guides to a number of literary works, including the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.

This volume begins with a series of discussions of Asimov's work within specific critical contexts. M. Keith Booker's overview of Asimov's career, "On Isaac Asimov," seeks to introduce readers to the unusual volume and variety of writing produced by Asimov in his long and illustrious career. It then follows with additional introductory sections by Booker, including a sketch of more specifically biographical material, as well as a survey of Asimov's career that seeks to place his work within its cultural and historical context, which stretched from the 1930s to the 1990s. This discussion of context includes a consideration of both the social and political events that impacted Asimov's career over this period and the developments within American culture (especially science fiction) that influenced Asimov's writing—and on which Asimov's work, in turn, exercised an influence.

The next chapter, by MaryKate Messimer, is a comparative discussion of the science fiction writing of Asimov and of Robert A. Heinlein, his close contemporary. Together, Asimov and Heinlein represent the two most important American writers of the so-called Golden Age of Science Fiction, and their work arguably contributed more to the evolution of American science fiction than did the work of any other writers. As Messimer notes, the careers of Asimov and Heinlein, beginning in the pulp magazines that arose in the 1930s

and extended into the rise of the novel as the most important form of science fiction literature. However, the consistently liberal Asimov differed substantially from Heinlein in his politics. In particular, while Heinlein espoused support for a radical form of individualism that was suspicious of all forms of authority, Asimov often advocated for benevolent authoritarian rule in which an intelligent and well-educated elite could provide guidance for a human race that was ill-equipped to manage its own affairs.

The next chapter presents Booker's survey of the critical reception of Asimov's work (primarily as a writer of science fiction) over the course of the past half century or so. This reception is inseparable from the critical history of science fiction as a genre, and indeed the visibility of Asimov as a writer and public intellectual contributed significantly to the growing critical respect shown for science fiction in American culture over this period. Asimov's reputation still depends first and foremost on his status as a leading writer of science fiction's Golden Age and on such early texts as the *Foundation* trilogy and the robot stories of the 1940s and novels of the 1950s. However, this survey demonstrates that Asimov was keenly aware of developments in the genre of science fiction (such as the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s) and that his work often responded to those developments.

The first major section of this volume ends with Donald M. Hassler's essay on Asimov's work through the lens of politically-based criticism. Concentrating on Asimov's vision of change within the context of his vision of galactic empire, Hassler demonstrates that Asimov's *Foundation* novels are, in fact, highly political works that are intensely concerned with the question of historical change and what drives it. For Hassler, Asimov's political vision must be understood within a broader conception of intellectual history and can be illuminated through comparison with any number of elements of that history, including nineteenth-century biology.

The remainder of the volume contains a number of general critical essays, including Jari Käkälä's study (which resonates with the essay of Messimer above) of the tensions between social engineering and individual freedom in the *Foundation* novels. This

essay is followed by a series of essays that explore various aspects of Asimov's robot stories, all of which pivot in one way or another on Asimov's crucial conception of the "Three Laws of Robotics," beginning with Péter Kristóf Makai's exploration of Asimov's vision of the "positronic minds" of his robots within the context of cognitive science. Eddie Ardeneaux IV follows with a discussion of Asimov's robots within evolving conceptions of cognition and of what it means to be truly human. Taylor Evans then explores the way in which Asimov's robots serve as allegorical stand-ins for racial Others, so that the robot stories serve as a commentary on the vexed question of race in American society. The next essay is Joelle Renstrom's exploration of the ways in which Asimov's robot stories pose a number of questions about robot morality that clearly reflect on human morality as well. Finally, Frank Jacob presents a discussion of the exploration of interrelationships between humans and robots in Asimov's robot stories.

The final sequence of this volume is a series of essays that explore a variety of different aspects of Asimov's astoundingly diverse body of work. Michelle begins this segment with an essay on the representation of gender in Asimov's work. With a special focus on the 1972 novel *The Gods Themselves*, Pribbernow demonstrates that Asimov's attitudes toward gender might have been fundamentally traditional ones, but that he struggled in his writing to overcome these attitudes and to react to changing attitudes toward gender over the course of his extremely long career. Daniel F. Yezbick then follows with a general discussion of Asimov's extensive output of short stories, demonstrating that these stories were in fact written in a variety of different modes, demonstrating a surprising versatility on the part of their author. Elizabeth Foxwell follows with a general discussion of Asimov's mystery stories, demonstrating that these stories in themselves constitute an extremely interesting contribution to their genre, despite the fact that their author is much better known as a writer of science fiction. Finally, Dan Venning addresses Asimov's work as a literary critic, which essentially involved an attempt to present a number of classic works of literature to a popular audience very much in the same way his work as a popularizer of

science sought to make complex scientific concepts accessible to a broader audience.

This volume then closes with some valuable resources for learning more about Asimov and his work, including a chronology of Asimov's life and career and a selected list of some of the most important of Asimov's book-length publications (including collections of short stories originally published in genre magazines. This section also includes a general bibliography of works *about* Asimov to supplement the individual bibliographies included at the end of each essay. Rounding out the volume is information about the editor and essay contributors, as well as a general index.

## **“I Write Christie”: The Mysteries of Isaac Asimov\_\_\_\_\_**

Elizabeth Foxwell

In *I, Asimov*, Isaac Asimov wrote of his dislike of hard-boiled mysteries and his fondness for traditional mystery writers such as Agatha Christie, Michael Innes, and Dorothy L. Sayers, as well as locked-room master John Dickson Carr. Asimov was a member of the Baker Street Irregulars, the society of Sherlock Holmes devotees, although he wrote a piece pointing out Arthur Conan Doyle’s scientific missteps with Holmes. His vast oeuvre encompasses a number of mystery works, including *Death Dealers/A Whiff of Death* (1958), *Murder at the ABA/Authorised Murder* (1976), fifty-five Union Club short stories involving the intelligence exploits of one member of that club, and sixty-six Black Widower short stories featuring an unassuming waiter who always solves a case related over dinner. Refuting writer-editor John Campbell’s assertion that technology would trump all in a science fiction mystery, Asimov wrote works such as *The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1956), *The Robots of Dawn* (1983), and the collection *Asimov’s Mysteries* (1967). This essay will examine Asimov’s mystery works, discussing his penchant for often scientific puzzles and homages to Golden Age mystery fiction as well as the critical reception of his mysterious forays.

### **Asimov’s Approach to Mysteries**

Asimov wrote, “I like old-fashioned mysteries. . . . the puzzle story; the one where there is a closed circle of suspects, where all the clues are laid out in full view, and where the reader tries to guess the solution before the author reveals it” (“Old-Fashioned” 20). This is a good précis of the mysteries of the Golden Age, a period that runs roughly from 1918 to World War II.<sup>1</sup>

Although Asimov acknowledged that he could enjoy harder-edged novels, such as those by Dick Francis and Ross Macdonald (“Old-Fashioned” 20), he humorously summed up the novels

featuring the “tough-guy detective” as the following: “where the hero is constantly drinking without destroying his liver, constantly having his skull cracked with a pistol butt without destroying his brain, and constantly solving the mystery by shooting down all the characters but one and then pinning the crime on the survivor” (Asimov, Introduction, *Best Mysteries* xii). He wrote, “I write Christie” (*Yours, Isaac Asimov* 17), defining the “ideal detective” as Christie’s Hercule Poirot (*I, Asimov* 260). Consistent with his advocacy of Christie’s type of mystery, he stated that he preferred “to try to have no violence at all in my stories. My stories rarely involve murder and, when they do, the murder takes place offstage and preferably before the story begins” (Asimov, Introduction, *Best Mysteries* xiii).

Asimov noted that it took him six hours to write a mystery short story, whereas a science fiction story required a minimum of six days because of the need to create an “alien society” (*Yours, Isaac Asimov* 17).

### ***The Death Dealers (aka A Whiff of Death, 1958)***

Asimov’s first straight mystery novel has an unfortunate history. Although commissioned by the Doubleday mystery editor, the manuscript was rejected (*I, Asimov* 261). Picked up by Avon, which Asimov believed was a move to lay the groundwork for his writing a science fiction novel for the publisher (he did not do so), *The Death Dealers* did not fare well. “[T]he book simply dropped dead,” states Asimov. “Avon made no effort to sell copies and the book earned back only a portion of its advance” (*I, Asimov* 262). This does not seem to be exaggeration on the author’s part; not one review can be located that coincides with the first publication of the book (possibly a result of its paperback-only publication, when hardcover books receive the majority of review attention). The extant reviews are for subsequent reprints of the book and thus need to be considered as possibly colored by Asimov’s subsequent reputation for prolific activity rather than evaluations of the work solely on its own merits. Asimov does note that a hardcover reprint by Walker resulted in hardcover, paperback, and foreign-language reprints of the novel

(*I, Asimov* 262), so it had a happier ending than its inauspicious beginnings might suggest.

For *The Death Dealers*, Asimov drew on his graduate school experiences, professors, and fellow students at Columbia University (*I, Asimov* 261). Untenured assistant professor of chemistry Louis Brade discovers his graduate student, Ralph Neufeld, dead in his lab after an experiment with cyanide. The department faculty members seem inclined to think accident or suicide caused the death, but Brade, via his own scientific integrity and knowledge of Neufeld's methods, believes these conclusions to be unfounded. In addition, Brade is aware that he is a prime suspect due to his easy access to the lab, known tensions between himself and Neufeld, and the propensity for sharp detective Jack Doheny to hover in his vicinity. Thus, Brade's scientific values and sense of self-preservation rather than affection for the unpopular victim propel his investigation, although there is more than a hint that his academic position may be jeopardized by his pursuit of the matter. Suspects include the departmental chair with the fake smile, the busybody receptionist rejected by Neufeld, the plump fiancée of the victim, the hearty professor who is a sexual harassment lawsuit waiting to happen, the elderly professor emeritus with the book manuscript that is never finished, and the thorny professor who had been the dead man's previous adviser and fought with him.

Reviews of the novel reprints were mixed, although negative comments (such as those by Anthony Boucher) are mystifying, as *The Death Dealers* is a well-constructed and entertaining mystery with many aspects to recommend it. Like many Golden Age mysteries, the victim has few redeeming qualities, the university setting is a hotbed of petty rivalries and inflated egos, and each chapter ends with a cliffhanger. Scientific matters are adroitly explained for readers who may be unfamiliar with them. Asimov notes the similarity of his detective Doheny to William Link and Richard Levinson's later Lt. Columbo (*Yours, Isaac Asimov* 17), and Doheny attracts reader sympathy through his bedrock common sense and apt summaries, such as terming a potential professor-murderer "brain-proud" (125). Brade's relationship with his wife, Doris, might seem

at first glance to be all about 1950s traditional gender roles, but a closer look reveals pleasant surprises. Doris, although concerned about Brade's untenured status because of its effect on the security of her family, will not have him act against his nature to protect that position. Brade respects her, consults her, and listens to her opinion. Doris is shown to be a shrewd assessor of character when it comes to Brade's departmental colleagues. With Brade, Asimov portrays a character who undergoes a journey of self-discovery and winds up empowered at the end. Thus the novel not only presents a puzzle to be solved but also conveys messages about truth and integrity in science and in life.

### ***Murder at the ABA (aka Authorised Murder, 1976)***

According to Asimov, Doubleday editor Larry Ashmead approached him to attend the annual meeting of the American Booksellers Association (ABA), which was marking its seventy-fifth anniversary (*I, Asimov* 263). He wanted Asimov write a mystery set at the meeting. However, for the book to be published in time for the next ABA meeting, it would need to be delivered in two months. Asimov "wrote the book in seven weeks" (263).

Attending the ABA meeting in the novel is author Darius Just, a character based on sf author Harlan Ellison (*I, Asimov* 263), to whom the book is dedicated. Just's publisher requests that he talk to his former protégé, Giles Devore, and persuade him to remain with the press rather than accept a more lucrative offer from a larger firm. Just lunches with Asimov, spars with hotel PR exec Sarah Voskovek, and yells at Devore when the younger author treats him dismissively. To accommodate an ABA representative who needs Devore for a TV interview, Just agrees to pick up a package for Devore. However, he forgets about it when he has a rendezvous with an old flame. Remembering his errand the next day, Just picks up the package, goes to Devore's room, and finds the writer dead in the bathtub. Just suspects foul play because of the disordered state of Devore's clothes (the writer was a neat freak) and the presence of heroin on the table. Just learns of Devore's odd behavior at his book signing and peculiar sexual habits. His nosing about results in an

attack on him and Sarah by a knife-wielding assailant whom Devore repulses. Just eventually uncovers a heroin smuggling operation and unmasks Devore's murderer with the assistance of the hotel's chief of security.

Reviews were mostly negative for *Murder at the ABA*, and the critical assessment of the novel as a misfire by Asimov seems accurate; the plot device is far-fetched, the preoccupation of Just with women's physical attributes irritates, and the technique of Asimov inserting himself into the narrative and dueling with Just via footnotes "turns sticky with coyness" (White L5). Those interested in Asimov's views on paranormal phenomenon may find significant his remarks as a panelist with Carl Sagan (*Murder* 179–81; see also 183). In addition, he comments on his physical appearance, cluelessness, and reputation for prolific publishing (48–49). The minor characters of bookseller Harold Sayers and his wife, Rosalind (81), are likely based on anthologist Martin H. Greenberg (a close friend of Asimov) and his wife, Rosalind. Just makes an encore appearance in the Black Widowers story "The Woman at the Bar" (1980) in which he describes a puzzling encounter at a bar involving a woman and three men.

### **The Black Widowers Mysteries (1972–1991)**

Asimov's Black Widowers short stories began when *EQMM* managing editor Eleanor Sullivan wrote Asimov asking for a story for the magazine. Asimov wrote "The Acquisitive Chuckle" (1972) based on the experience of a neighbor who suspected that some of his possessions had fallen victim to a light-fingered repairman (*I, Asimov* 373); he also incorporated the dinners of the Trap Door Spiders, a male-only club to which he belonged (Asimov, Introduction, *Tales* 12). Although the Spiders do not solve mysteries, they do, like the Black Widowers, question a dinner guest about his or her life and career (*I, Asimov* 377).

The stories all follow the same pattern. A Black Widowers member brings a guest who poses a baffling puzzle encountered during his career, and the members attempt to solve it. The members never find the right answer; the case is always solved by Henry,

## Chronology of the Life of Issac Asimov \_\_\_\_\_

1920	Born on or about January 2 in Petrovichi, Russia.
1923	Immigrates with his family to Brooklyn, in the United States.
1928	Becomes an American citizen.
1932	Enters Boys' High School of Brooklyn.
1935	Graduates from Boys' High School of Brooklyn. Writes his first fan letter to <i>Astounding Stories</i> .
1935	Enters Columbia University.
1938	Joins the Futurians fan group.
1939	Publishes his first science fiction short story. Graduates with a BS in chemistry from Columbia. Begins graduate study at Columbia.
1941	The US enters World War II.
1942	Marries Gertrude Blugerman. Begins civilian work at the Philadelphia Navy Air Experimental Station in support of the US war effort.
1945	Drafted into the US Army.
1946	Discharged from the army to complete his graduate studies.
1948	Graduates from Columbia with a doctorate in biochemistry. Begins postdoctoral work at Columbia.
1950	<i>Pebble in the Sky</i> is his first published science fiction novel. Publication of <i>I, Robot</i> . Becomes an instructor of biochemistry at Boston University.

## Books by Isaac Asimov

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### Science Fiction Novels

- Pebble in the Sky* (1950)  
*The Stars, Like Dust* (1951)  
*Foundation* (1951)  
*The Currents of Space* (1952)  
*Foundation and Empire* (1952)  
*David Starr, Space Ranger* (1952)  
*Second Foundation* (1953)  
*Lucky Starr and the Pirates of the Asteroids* (1953)  
*The Caves of Steel* (1954)  
*The End of Eternity* (1955)  
*Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury* (1956)  
*The Naked Sun* (1957)  
*Lucky Starr and the Moons of Jupiter* (1957)  
*Lucky Starr and the Rings of Saturn* (1958)  
*Fantastic Voyage* (1966)  
*The Gods Themselves* (1972)  
*Foundation's Edge* (1982)  
*The Robots of Dawn* (1983)  
*Robots and Empire* (1985)  
*Foundation and Earth* (1986)  
*Prelude to Foundation* (1988)  
*Nemesis* (1989)  
*Nightfall* (1990, with Robert Silverberg)  
*The Ugly Little Boy* (1992, with Robert Silverberg)  
*Forward the Foundation* (1993)  
*The Positronic Man* (1993, with Robert Silverberg)

### Science Fiction Story Collections

- I, Robot* (1950)  
*The Martian Way and Other Stories* (1955)  
*Earth Is Room Enough* (1957)  
*Nine Tomorrows* (1959)  
*The Rest of the Robots* (1964)