

Science fiction and empire on environmentalism

[History](#), [Empires](#)



One of the main aspects of science fiction that sets it apart from almost all other genres is its ability to influence the direction of humankind. By stimulating a reader's thoughts of the possibility of different futures, not only does science fiction serve as a popular source of entertainment, but it also encourages one to analyze the possible prospective effects of the generation's powerholders' and their decisions.

As a science fiction writer himself, Isaac Asimov once said, " Intelligent science fiction writers attempt to look at world trends in science and technology for plot inspiration and, in doing so, they sometimes get a glimpse of things that later turn out to be near the truth" (Asimov, page 79). Through the use of empires as the powerhouses of society, SF books like *War of the Worlds* and *Foundation* dig deep into the question of what would happen if societies continued to allow the progression of destructive and commercial technologies.

Frank Herbert's, *Dune*, also questions the future of the universe while shining a spotlight on the clash between humanity and the environment. By providing a glimpse of the future as a product of current technological change, science fiction helps an audience examine which way they want to shape the progression of human kind, and therefore provides a unique service to the world. Since the beginning of time, the purpose of technology has been to enable one to do something that otherwise would be impossible.

Technology is an incredibly powerful tool, but with great power comes great responsibility. Serving as a symbol of power, positive technological development will generally distinguish a good empire from an evil one, in both the real world and the world of science fiction. In the novel *The War of*
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the Worlds by H. G. Wells, a Martian invasion leaves a previously invincible British Empire in ruins. The aliens violently expressive a total disregard for human life and the environment of earth. Weapons, called Heat-Rays are used against the humans and completely destroy everything in their way.

These laser guns were a good prediction of future military technologies, resembling those of mass destruction known today. The book's use of mass destruction of both the human race and the environment draws attention to our own planet's possible future if nuclear weapons were ever to be placed in the hands of enemies with merciless hostility. Perhaps one of the most famous SF writers of all time, Isaac Asimov has also expressed his distaste for destructive technologies. " The Earth faces environmental problems right now that threaten the imminent destruction of civilization and the end of the planet as a livable world.

Humanity cannot afford to waste its financial and emotional resources on endless, meaningless quarrels between each group and all others. There must be a sense of globalism in which the world unites to solve the real problems that face all groups alike" (Asimov, page 5). However, his book, Foundation, serves as an interesting contrast to the imperialistic warfare from The War of the Worlds. Focusing on a trend that the ideal progression of civilization may one day reach, this book introduces a pacifistic society in which violence is considered the last refuge of the incompetent.

However, the environments depicted in Foundation are inconsistent with Herbert's conception that a peaceful universe will also be rich in ecology. Given that violence was spoken as a thing of the past, and taking into consideration the environment of planets like Trantor consisted of civilization

under a steel dome, this may further imply that violence and mass destruction have already taken their toll on universe of that time. This may suggest that total destruction of nature, by evil technologies, was what finally convinced humanity to become a pacifistic universe.

Asimov's use of ecology as a sacrifice made in order for peace among mankind questions if future pacifism will be possible before the misuse of technology annihilates Mother Nature forever. Conserving the environment seems to be a popular theme in SF, especially after the publication of *Dune* in 1965. This book depicts a future universe where even though a nuclear holocaust of the human race is not an issue, other powerhouses' affairs continue to dominate in priority over the environment of planets. *Dune* encompasses an interesting parallel that would almost exactly predict current issues.

Global wide controversy that major industrial accidents have significantly negative impacts on global environmental degradation is one of the main concerns among environmentalists today. These risks include human induced climate change, ozone depletion, and the loss of biodiversity, and if remain ignored will lead to the inhabitability of earth. *Dune's* harsh desert environment may not have been a result of human interference with nature, but the failure to proliferate a lush green ecosystem, because of an empire's concern of profit off the spice trade, does express concerns of global industrialization.

This planet, originally known as Arrakis, is described as the empire's wasteland, while at the same time being the most valuable planet in the universe. This inverse relationship between commercial gain and ecological

richness advocates a need for major change in the distribution of power in a globally economy, especially aiming to put a halt to exploitation of earth's natural resources by industrial power-head's. Dune ultimately criticizes commercial empires for valuing profit over concerns for ecology, and above all pressures for change that will benefit the common good of humanity. What distinguishes us human beings from all the less advanced forms of life on earth is that, having at last become conscious of the challenge of survival, we have consciously undertaken to shape our own future. This requires us to look ahead, even beyond the p of any single generation" (4). This quote, published by the Council of Foreign Relations in a journal for Foreign Affairs, surprisingly has no intentional relationship to SF. It does, however, coincidentally represent not only the current impact of science on progression of humanity, but also embodies the underlying theme of Foundation.

Foundation is focused around a character named Hary Seldon, who uses the science of Psychohistory to predict the future of mankind. While conducting his research, Seldon discovers that the Galactic Empire, which is currently in power, will soon fall, and a new empire will not arise for thirty thousand years. Knowing that the time between empires will be nothing but barbarism, Seldon initiates a plan to create a compendium of all human knowledge, called the Encyclopedia Galactica, that will ultimately decrease the time of the dark age to one third of its original prediction.

Seldon's goal to improve the quality of life for the people of the collapsing empire, through knowledge, is significantly similar to environmentalists' research efforts to prevent the demise of earth's ecosystems. Considering

that crisis aversion through science has very much come to life, it can be concluded that SF can, to some extent, predict the future. A nuclear physicist, by the name of Dr. Ron Nielson, coincidentally possesses many of the characteristics of Seldon in *Foundation*, almost as if Hary had come to life. In 2005, Dr. Nielson published a book called *The Green Handbook: Seven Trends Shaping the Future of Our Planet*, which he described as an essential reference for anyone who cares about the future of the planet. It surveys not only the deterioration of our physical environment but also economic, social, and political trends that give an understanding as to how these critical issues can be addressed. There are many similarities between Dr. Nielson and Hary Seldon, but the most meaningful quality would be that both scientists advocate change in humanity for a cause that they will not be alive to redeem the benefits of.

Unlike industry officials, who are only interested in immediate commercial gain, these two men embody the characteristics of a true SF hero; one who protects of the progression of the future of humanity. The hero of *Dune*, Paul, is a character of interesting complexity that also strives to change trends in the ecology of his planet, much like Dr. Neilson. Paul is different from his family and social class in the sense that he feels a great connection to the environment, similar to those of the native people of Arrakis, called Fremen.

The Fremen dream of a surreal utopia in which the harsh desert environment is metamorphosized into a lush self-sustainable ecosystem, in which the scarcity of water is no longer an issue. With the help of the Fremen and an ecologist named Kynes, Paul is victorious against his greedy rival, the Baron Harkonnen. Paul exhibited characteristics exactly opposite of the Baron's

ruthlessness. When a sandstorm endangered workers in the spice mines and a large shipment of spice, Paul did not hesitate to sacrifice the spice for the lives of his people.

The book places a special stress on the absence of a sense of altruism and respect for nature in the antagonist's character and empire. Herbert's characterizations, that embody the struggle of good versus evil, are suggestive that drastic policy changes must be met by either a change in morals and values of the people in charge, or a complete overthrow of authorities by advocates who have righteous intentions for the future of mankind. The association of the word 'utopia' with the notion of nature makes the theme of environmentalism even more obvious in this novel.

The novel is strongly suggestive that environmental problems of today cannot be ignored any longer. Frank Herbert and Dr. Neilson share a common objective of advocating environmentalism through their writing. The difference is that Herbert incorporates it into fictional pieces of literature, while Neilson chooses a more scientific and direct path of expression. Herbert's use of SF literature, to push for a green movement by society, shows how SF can be used as a tool to improve scientific literacy and knowledge of future concerns associated with our current usage of technology. Science fiction uses a blend of entertainment and science to create, what some might, call more effective means of scientifically educating an audience. The impact of science fiction does not just stop at a mere introduction of scientific problems to the public. Plots of science fiction often offer possible plans of action to induce change and progression in a positive direction. In both *Dune* and *Foundation*, government or politics was used to bridge the gap between

what was happening and what needed to happen. In these novels, as well as in real life, possession of high political power is almost always a requirement for initiating radical change.

In *Dune*, Paul inherited his father's position and power. By joining forces with the Fremen, Paul became the leader of a mini-empire in hopes to put an end to the exploitation of the planet's resources by the evil Harkonnens. It was not until Paul was named the new emperor of the universe, however, that his plans to change the planet into a garden paradise could finally begin. Dr. Neilson chose to end the preface of his book encouraging policy-makers, decision-makers, and journalists to use their influences and lifelong experiences to help steer away from the future taking an undesirable course of events.

However, this encouragement does not give a concise solution the problem he lists in *The Green Handbook*. Applying concepts from the three SF books being analyzed, the process to change the course of the seven trends that Neilson feels are slowly degrading our planet, a high position of power among policy changers must first be obtained. A book by Michael Howes, called *Politics and the Environment: risk and the role of government and industry*, gives intense incite to what further needs to be done to save our planet.

This book focuses on meeting the challenge of undoing environmental risks with more technical innovation and economic reform. It also shines a light on the roadblock that people who deny that there is any serious risk are causing, mainly those who benefit from industry. The struggle between those interested in commercial gain and those who attempt to advocate change to

benefit the environment is realistic problem often portrayed in SF. Dune, Foundation, and War of the Worlds all express a common concern for what impacts destructive technologies, like weapons and exploitative industries, may have on the future of mankind.

These books also seem to preach that good motives and compassion for humanity are qualities of good empires, while evil ones are still focused on the use of violence and greed. The power placed in the hands of the most influential people of the empire is also a symbol of responsibility of those to always make decisions for the greater good of humanity. Governments of today's nations could effectively avert future ecological crisis on earth by balancing power scientists and big industry officials. The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom" (Asimov, pg 13). By taking a glimpse into the future, politicians that value the earth's well-being can be the change needed to save the planet, ultimately making them heroes like Paul and Seldon. In this case, science fiction may also be useful tool in impacting the public to push for changes from politicians. The ability of the genre of SF to really impact the future of technology makes it the most relevant type of literature in current time.