

My Dog Ate My Book Report

Episode Six Transcript

Brandon

Welcome to My Dog Ate My Book Report, a podcast where two weirdo thirtysomethings take turns introducing each other to a formative book from our childhood that the other has not read. And then we talk about them. And, you know, sometimes...sometimes it's good and sometimes bad.

Wren

Spoiler alert: this time, it's great.

Brandon

Oh, really? Okay. I'm Brandon.

Wren

I'm Wren.

Brandon

And this episode is one of my picks. We're talking about *The Caves of Steel* by Isaac Asimov. Technically, the first novel in the Robot series, although *I, Robot* did come first.

Wren

So we have a rule with each other, while we're reading these books, that we're not allowed to talk with each other about them.

Brandon

Right.

Wren

So aside from a little bit of like griping with each other about how autocorrect kept misspelling the characters' names on me, I've withheld my opinions.

Brandon

Yeah, cuz we want to actually have things to say when we're recording.

Wren

I really liked this book. I've never read any Asimov, and now I kind of want to go devour all of it.

Brandon

Cool. I think, especially the Robot stuff I think you would enjoy. I guess before we get into this too much, customarily, we'll give some content warnings if there's anything we feel like we ought to say,

Wren

Oh, yeah, there's definitely some content warnings. So this was, what, 1950-something? '52?

Brandon

'53.

Brandon

So the nature of the book does deal with various kinds of prejudice, not strictly racism, but like it's basically racism. There's also classism, and some mentions of eugenics, and...

Wren

I'm glad you wrote eugenics down because I have eugenics just like underlined with one of those emojis that's like the face being sick.

Brandon

Yeah. Yes.

Wren

I've been taking notes on my phone. So...

Brandon

You think there's anything I've missed? Racism, classism, eugenics?

Wren

Racism, classism, eugenics, yep. The good ol'... 50s sci-fi cocktail.

Brandon

The big three.

Wren

The good ol' '50s sci-fi cocktail.

Brandon

So the books we've previously read so far have all been books that were like written for young readers of some sort or other. This is our sort of first foray into a book that was not written with a younger audience in mind. Not that it's a difficult book, but like, Asimov was not writing YA, specifically, right. But it is a book that I read as a kid. It's probably one of the first like, quote, adult novels that I ever read. I don't remember for sure if it was the first but it was probably one of the first, because as we talked about previously, particularly with my Hardy Boys pick a couple episodes ago, a lot of stuff that I got into early on were mysteries and sci-fi. And so this book is a sci-fi mystery, so it just seemed like a logical path.

Wren

I don't feel like that it would have been difficult for a kid to read. Like...I'm trying to think back on it. And I don't remember there being any particularly like difficult vocabulary or anything.

Brandon

Yeah, it's not a difficult book, right? It's not like super dense or explicit or anything like that.

Wren

Yeah, I don't think there was actually a whole lot of like cursing unless you count the like 20 times he says "Jehoshaphat!"

Brandon

I do remember this book being the first and possibly only time that I've ever seen Jehoshaphat spelled out.

Wren

Actually, now's a good time to point out for...for the majority of these books, I have been reading them in paper version. This book, I do have a paper copy right here, but I only actually read a couple chapters of it in the paper version. I got myself into a little health situation, and it was easier to just listen to it on audiobook. So I actually don't know how Jehoshaphat is spelled. I will say, Audible's version of this has the best narrator. He does voices. His Daneel voice is amazing. It was a treat. I'm very pleased that I decided to listen to this. It was like a little radio drama. It's great.

Brandon

Right. So my grandparents are big readers, and always had been, and were thrilled to start to give me books as I was looking for more things to read. And my granddad—Granddad Wayne—he was also a big sci-fi reader, so he was the source of a lot of the sci-fi novels that I would read in my in my younger years. Because those were the things he read and enjoyed, and so he was the one who turned me on to the Robot series. *I, Robot* is technically a fix-up novel, is what it's called, but it's a short story collection. You don't need the context, but they are all in the same setting. Anyhow! So *The Caves of Steel* is a sci-fi mystery set thousands of years from now—it doesn't give a specific year, but it's thousands of years from now—when much of humanity lives inside big arcologies because Earth has just sort of been turned into this nebulous manufactory wasteland and nobody wants to go outside. There are also colonies on other worlds, but they're somewhat estranged from Earth. So we find ourselves in New York City, which is not the same New York technically. It's in the same location, but it's an arcology. And with detective Elijah Baley, who people usually call "Lije," but it feels weird to say that on my mouth, so I will call him Baley or Elijah.

Wren

Yeah, I feel like he's often referred to as Baley in the book.

Brandon

So he's a plainclothes detective, and to his great dismay, gets assigned to try to solve a murder in Spacetown, which is a little place outside of New York, where Spacers—that is, humans from other planets—live. And it's kind of sealed off and Terrans like Baley think Spacers are super weird and vice versa. And so they just don't really like each other. Aside from the fact that like Spacers live in the open sometimes, and it's weird, and also they have like better technology and stuff. Spacers also are much more welcoming of robots. Robots exist in the cities, but nobody likes them. Everybody hates them.

Humans resent them for taking over labor jobs. These are not robots that really have much in the way of free will, in this context, but they're a present but generally kind of distasteful part of Earth society. But the Spacers are like, robots are really a very accepted part of their of their stuff. They think robots are good. Their robots are more advanced. And because Spacetown is concerned about like solving this murder of a Spacer in Spacetown, they make Baley work with a partner, a robot partner, R. Daneel Olivaw, who is a robot that, shockingly, looks human. He's built to look human, unlike all of the other robots in the setting. And he's a convincing enough human that generally people don't realize he's a robot unless they're told. And Baley is not a fan of this because he doesn't like robots, and he doesn't like Spacers. And he doesn't like having to solve a Spacer murder, and he's pretty sure the Spacers have, like, invented this murder to give them an excuse to, like, militarily exert their influence on Earth. Or something like that. You know, blame the murder on a Terry.

Wren

Yeah, he goes on a lot of wild accusations for the first half of the book.

Brandon

Yeah. Baley's investigative style is less about gathering clues and more about accusing people and then seeing what happens.

Wren

It's like he's playing Clue and doesn't realize that once you make an accusation, you're out of the game.

Brandon

So Bailey and Daneel, have to solve this murder, and hopefully in a way that is agreeable to both the City and Spacetown, all the while dodging a possible medievalist plot of these of these people who want to go back to the good old days of no robots and like not super technologically-integrated lifestyles and stuff, because this is this is a world where within the Cities, within the arcology, you're always inside, everything is like really strictly rationed, everything kind of runs in this like very fine-tuned machine sort of way.

Wren

It teeters on almost being dystopian, because of the class system and stuff, but it's more like a population problem thing.

Brandon

Yeah, like there's the overpopulation is significant enough that like this is the way that Earth's population has determined they can support the number of people on Earth, you know. How much food people have access to is controlled, what kind of living facilities they have access to is controlled. You have to apply to be able to have children because the planet only can support so many people. And your job kind of determines what things you have access to. There is mention of stores and stuff, but it's unclear to me like how much currency exists. Ultimately, that's not the point of the book, but this is the world they live in.

Wren

The worldbuilding, I thought, was just tremendously well-executed. They sort of like trickle it in throughout the entire book so it's not completely overwhelming. It's not like the first two chapters are like, "this is the situation, digest it all right now." I thought it was well done.

Brandon

Yeah, the things that I that always stuck with me about this book were like the world that it was set in and things like the personals, which is to say the communal like bathrooms and stuff, although it seemed to have other features, and especially like how aggressively private everybody was about the personals.

Wren

Okay, that part was funny, because the whole thing is that, like, women talk to each other in the bathroom, but men pretend that the other men don't even exist, and I feel like that's true. I mean, I was talking to a friend after after a LARP game at one point, and there's, you know, male/female bathrooms split up that have like, you know, shower facilities, because this is at like a campsite. And I was, I said something like, "oh, yeah, so-and-so said something to me while we were, you know, like debriefing in the bathroom," and the friend was like, "wait, you talk to each other in the bathroom? That's fucking weird." I was like, "You don't talk to each other in the bathroom? What?" So so that part made me giggle because I was like, yeah, that's just a natural extension of how bathrooms work right now.

Brandon

Yeah. And Baley gets extremely scandalized when Daneel is not just extremely quiet in the personals.

Wren

He does get real creepy in the bathroom though, because he does that whole thing where he's like, "Oh, the robot has anatomy that the robot shouldn't have."

Brandon

Yeah, he checks out Daneel a bit.

Wren

He just gets a little creepy on Daneel.

Brandon

And then that spawns, of course, another wild accusation.

Wren

"You're not really a robot because you have a penis!"

Brandon

Yeah. "What kind of person would make a robot this human-like?"

Wren

Oh, but speaking about the worldbuilding, I...maybe it's just because I'm dense. It didn't click to me that the Spacers weren't just like space aliens for several chapters, where it's sort of like spelled out actually, no, they're colonists that, like, human colonists that just came back.

Brandon

Humans have colonized like 50 planets, and that entire project has been going on for centuries. I think there was some some hint of a military conflict that happened at some point where the colonies kind of broke free from Earth, or maybe just Earth stopped caring. I don't recall it going super into detail about that because it was far in the past. Then, through a variety of twists and turns, Baley and Daneel kind of become friends. I guess Daneel never disliked Baley necessarily. I was gonna say they like each other, but Daneel is always always pretty cooperative, and Baley is just kind of like...

Wren

Gruff human jerk.

Brandon

Yeah, he's, he's a jerk, but he's less of a jerk to Daneel later on. Eventually. And they they do ultimately solve the murder.

Wren

We were like, running out of chapters. And I was like, he is not even close. How is he going to solve this thing? But I haven't read a lot of mysteries.

Brandon

As it turns out—and, you know, spoilers, I guess for the end of this book—the culprit was, in fact, Baley's boss, Commissioner Julius Enderby, who wanted to kill Daneel, but actually accidentally killed Daneel's creator, because of course, Daneel is made in the image of the guy who built him. That's just how robots go.

Wren

So instead of killing Data, he killed Dr. Soong. Oops.

Brandon

Yeah, exactly. That's what happens. He went to this guy's place to kill the human-looking robot and it didn't work out. And then put Baley on the case, because there was political pressure to do so, and he thought Baley wouldn't ever consider him as a possible culprit, because they were like old friends, and it's mentioned several times that in like Baley's psych profile, he has very high marks for loyalty. So you know, the theory, I suppose, was he had to put somebody on the case, and Baley would be really unlikely to turn against the department.

Wren

And I think because Baley so notably disliked the robot that worked in the police department, and robots in general, that I think he just sort of figured that Baley would sort of self-sabotage with how much he didn't like robots.

Brandon

Which, to be fair...

Wren

He almost did.

Brandon

Yeah, I mean, he wasn't exactly wrong.

Wren

Yeah. Speaking of which, there is a robot that works—I think there's actually implied to be several robots that work in the police department—that uh, like took over really menial task jobs from like, I don't know, like like interns or whatever, and that they don't look like Daneel, and I desperately want to know what R. Sammy looks like. They mentioned that like the head can hinge up and he looks like metallic but I just really want to know.

Brandon

Yeah, R. Sammy, and all other robots in the book besides Daneel, are obviously robots even if they are humanoid. They don't have like any real attempt to look human. It's very clear that they're robots. And Earth robots sound like they're also just kind of bulky relative to Spacer robots. There's a lot of anxiety in Earth's population about robots replacing humans in, like, labor roles, to the point that there there have been riots and vandalisms and stuff in recent years. You know, people getting mad that they don't have their factory job anymore because robots took the jobs.

Wren

Topical!

Brandon

Yeah, there were actually a lot of parts of this that felt like it wouldn't have been weird if you had told me this book was from recently.

Wren

Yeah, especially like the germ medical stuff.

Brandon

Yeah, because the Spacers are extremely strict about hygiene. Partially culturally, but partially because like, many of them were not born on Earth and just literally don't have the antibodies to combat a lot of Earth diseases that just like anyone who was born on Earth would have a lot of. So to go to Spacetown, you have to pass through this, like extremely rigorous disinfectant protocol, and that just really made some Terrans mad.

Wren

Like, to the point where there were riots because of it. Cuz, you know, our body our choice...or something?

Brandon

They were extremely upset that they had to possibly take a shower, before going into Spacetown, even though going into Spacetown without taking a shower, means that you could quite possibly kill multiple people who you infected with a flu they have no antibodies for, you know?

Wren

Yeah, they were. They were, you know, the anti-vaxxers. Anti-maskers. Asimov was very, I think, keenly aware of the nature of humans.

Brandon

That's sort of where robots came from, literary-wise. The first robot story is dealing with some of those ideas. The word "robot" comes from a play from the early 20th century, named R.U.R., which stands for Rossums Universal Robots. It's by Karel Capek, who I think was Czech, and the word "robot" just comes from the Czech word robota, which means forced labor. And in that play, the whole thing is like this industrialist creates artificial people so that these artificial people, these robots, can do all of the work and humans can just like live this life of leisure henceforth, and the robots eventually destroy the humans because they didn't like being slaves, you know? So that's the source of the word robot.

Wren

So I wanted to know a couple of things about robot books in general. Is Asimov sort of the first, or one of the first, people that starts writing about, you know, the, like conflict of, of humans vs. robots? And also, is he the first person that wrote about the concept of the positronic brain?

Brandon

The positronic brain is Asimov's creation, I believe. Asimov's robot stories, in general, add a lot of things that many other things use just as, as like a point of normalcy with robots. So the positronic brain appears in lots of things as a concept.

Wren

I mean, like, harkening back to my joke earlier about Data.

Brandon

Yeah, Data is absolutely...I wouldn't be all that surprised if Data is on some level outright based on Daneel.

Wren

Well, yeah, like, I was reading and thinking like, gosh, this guy is so Data-like.

Brandon

Yeah. I don't recall ever seeing anybody, like explicitly say that about Data, but like, they're very similar. And certainly the positronic brain thing is from Asimov.

Wren

And the whole, you know, being made in the form of your creator. I love you, Star Trek, but you you, that's...you just took Asimov's plot.

Brandon

A lot of things that use robots borrow from Asimov. The Three Laws of Robotics are also pretty common to see in stuff about robots.

Wren

Oh, yeah, I really wish they had said the other laws because they only talked about law one. But they implied that there were like other laws. And I was waiting for them to explain other laws.

Brandon

They do give all three, I think at one point in the story, but the Three Laws are much more prevalent in *I, Robot*. And the Three Laws are: first law, a robot cannot harm a human or, through inaction, allow a human to come to harm. The second law is a robot must follow orders given by a human, unless that would contradict the first law. So you can't tell a robot to kill somebody. Well, you could, it just wouldn't listen. And the third law is a robot will attempt to preserve itself as long as that does not conflict with the first or second laws.

Wren

Oh, okay. I don't remember them outright saying the second two. But now I understand.

Brandon

I think there's one point where where Baley and Daneel are kind of debating whether or not a robot could have been involved in the crime. The first law is, of course, the most pertinent one because that's the one that prevents a robot from being the murderer, right. And there's also a few times that Daneel does things that, like, come off as threatening. Like during a near-riot at a shoe store early on, he pulls his blaster and threatens to shoot the protesters if they don't back off. And Baley's like, "What? How, how could you do that if you had the first law?" and Daneel's like, "The blaster wasn't charged. I wouldn't have fire. I couldn't have fired." And the second law, ultimately, is kind of important, because the way that Enderby pulls off his crime is, you know, you can't just walk into Spacetown carrying a blaster. They'd notice. And the only way to get into Spacetown without going through their checkpoint is to go outside, which doesn't sound like a big deal, but petrifies literally everyone who was in the City. Like the idea of going cross-country, unprotected, just sounds...everybody's like, "You just couldn't do it! Who would possibly do that?" And so Baley writes off the notion that somebody could have left the City and gone overland into Spacetown. So what, what happened is Enderby told R. Sammy to go overland to bring him a gun and then leave with it again. And Sammy had to, because he was told, you know, and of course Enderby didn't tell him why, right? He just said, "Hey, R. Sammy, take this. Take this route, bring it to me. And then hey, R. Sammy, take this. Go back. Tell no one."

So yeah, those are those are the laws of robotics. They are prevalent in pretty much all of Asimov's robot stories, and many fictional worlds that have robots in them adopt these laws anyway. As far as

whether or not Asimov was the first to write about robots in this manner, I'm not sure. He certainly was probably the most influential. But I don't know that he was first. In addition to the positronic brain, Asimov, I think, is also the person who coined the word robotics, for example.

Wren

Wow, damn.

Brandon

Like, it's it's Asimov's influence on robots, and the concept of robots, both literary and scientific, is pretty huge.

Wren

Yeah. So when when do you think the last time was you read this?

Brandon

Um, it was probably around 15 years ago, I think.

Wren

Okay, cool. I was not sure if it was something that you sort of, like regularly read, or...

Brandon

No, I've read it twice before. The first time I ever read it, and then I reread it on a cruise my family took, which was while I was in college. It was over a Christmas break, so I wasn't like, at college at the time, I was on a boat. But I can't remember exactly what year that was. But it was it was when I was in college. So that would have been...I would guess 2007 or so.

Wren

Cool. Cool. So what was it like reading it again?

Brandon

I mean, I still I still really enjoy it. And there were a lot of things that I had forgotten. A lot of little bits and pieces and, and interactions that I really enjoyed. And, you know, certainly the last time I read it, it didn't feel as timely as it does now.

Wren

Oh my gosh, yeah.

Brandon

You know, it was...it was interesting to see how many things feel like they're talking about today, right? Or feel at least relevant today. And, you know, I'm...I imagine when Asimov was writing this, there was some anxiety about automation replacing people, right? Because that had been...that had been an anxiety that had been building throughout the Industrial Revolution, right, you know, even going back to things like the assembly line. And by the '50s, there were certainly at least the ideas of even greater automation maybe someday being possible. So, you know, I don't think he was entirely just like

predicting things. I'm sure he was writing about things that were very real for at least American culture at the time, but they're things that have come around again, or have spiked again, I suppose, in more recent years, I think.

Wren

I wish I'd come across this book when I was younger. I tried to read a lot of sort of like older sci-fi when I was, you know, just sort of like, voraciously reading everything I could get my hands on, but I think the first couple of things that I encountered were, like '70s and '80s sci-fi that was just incredibly sexist. And there's a little bit of light sexism, I would say, in this book. Like, the women, the few of them that there are, are portrayed as being kind of very silly and emotional, but it's not as overt, like, gross as some of the early sci-fi that I tried to get into. I feel like this would have been much more accessible to me and would have gotten me into sci fi a little bit sooner.

Brandon

That makes sense. Asimov, um...here's the thing about Asimov. Asimov was unfortunately a well-known sexual harasser. He even kind of adopted, as his personal brand, being like the dirty old man in sci-fi. Yeah. Not great. He did, however, and this is—I'm not saying he's right—but he did consider himself a feminist insofar as he thought...he thought that the notion that, like, women belong in the home, doing child raising, etc, was archaic and bad. And although there weren't really any super empowered women in this book, there are some women in Asimov's fiction, probably most notably Susan Calvin, who is a recurring character in the Robot stories, as like one of the pioneers of robots in his setting, who are like competent people. Granted, he does still also talk about them, in a sense that's kind of unkind sometimes, particularly about their looks.

Wren

Yeah, he was so rude about Baley's wife's looks.

Brandon

Yeah. So all that being said, he's a very mixed bag when it comes to the portrayal of women. But, yeah, he does avoid some of the more egregious stereotypes that a lot of genre fiction of a certain age fall into.

Wren

I don't know what it was, but there was some book I tried to read when I was maybe 12. And I feel like the first female character that is introduced is like, described as this like, dumb, but very busty, half-dressed alien lady, or something. And like, I know that the thing that really bothered me was one of the first things that happens is she's like, super emotional, and the guy just like, slaps her, and then kisses her. And it's like, I hate this. I hate the slap and then kiss. I hate it. I hate it so much. Why is it in so much of this crap? And I didn't finish reading the book, because I was so annoyed. I don't think that's enough to pinpoint what this book was, but...

Brandon

It's not. I was waiting for any telltale thing, but it's sadly not specific enough.

Wren

No, I know. Yeah. Anyway, yeah.

Brandon

Yeah, our only real like, significant female character in *Caves of Steel* is Baley's wife, Jessie. And yes, she...there are moments where she almost becomes more interesting.

Wren

Yeah, I suspected her pretty early on. A, because of her name, and how much emphasis they put on her name, and her like disappearing for chunks of time. And so I have in my notes, like, you know, she's like the ringleader of this this thing and turned out not to be the case necessarily, but...

Brandon

Yeah, she does...there's a point early on when Baley brings Daneel back to their apartment, because Daneel has to stay with him, and introduces Jessie to Daneel, like, "This my new partner." Does not say the robot thing. And and then she goes away for a while, and then comes back later and is like, "Daneel's a robot, isn't he?"

Wren

Oh, yeah, that was so suspicious.

Brandon

At that point, we knew that Daneel had fooled Baley, but I was like...my hope at that point has always been that it would be like, oh, no, Jessie is actually just like, way more observant than Baley, at least when it comes to people, perhaps. But no, she actually got the information elsewhere because she's part of a medievalist group. But not one of the terrorist kind, at least according to her.

Wren

I love the name of the anti-robot people. I loved them being medievalists.

Brandon

Yeah. It's funny because, like to them, what they're really talking about a lot is, you know, more like today, but they refer to it as medieval because as far as they're concerned, we're not that far removed from, you know, knights and castles and stuff historically.

Wren

Oh, yeah. I had a good giggle when they said like medieval New Jersey or something. That's so cute.

Brandon

Yeah, because like, it's all thousands of years ago to them. And you know, like, Enderby likes certain certain medieval affectations, like wearing spectacles and having a window in his office. Windows! How silly.

Wren

Oh my gosh, I will say: at first I was very impressed with Asimov for having contact lenses in his story. And then he has a scene where Baley's son is taking out his contacts using a like glass suction cup, and I was like, oh, Jesus, these are the most like archaic-sounding contact lenses ever. This is horrible.

Brandon

Yeah, yeah, there's still definitely like moments in this, like with many older science fiction things that we can chuckle at now. Like, Daneel spends some of the book, while Baley is doing other things, in like the police department's archive room, where he is shocked to discover they have a computer to search like criminal records and stuff. And like, Daneel's never heard of a computer, basically. They don't call it a computer, but a machine that is meant for doing searches through police records. And it seems like that's still basically the only thing that they use a computer for, but there it is.

Wren

Yeah. And they use a lot of paper, too, for it being several thousand years later than right now.

Brandon

Yeah, I think it's probably kind of a matter of like, what else would they use? Right? But uh, I wonder if it's made of yeast. Is the paper made of yeast? Everything's made of yeast.

Wren

I know! It's so funny to me.

Brandon

And of course, by the end, we also come to discover that, like, the reason the Spacers are even on Earth at all right now, the reason they have maintained Spacetown, is they want to encourage more people from Earth to travel to the colonies and stuff because they are having an under-population crisis.

Wren

Oh, yeah, that was the part where they sort of like lost my thinking that they were the good guys.

Brandon

Yeah, I think an interesting thing that happens in this book is that we spend a while of it, seeing really intimately the City, and, especially now, a lot of, like, the City's perspective seems super backwards. And of course, their perspective on robots is explicitly characterized that way, right? Like we as readers are supposed to feel that robots are cool.

Wren

Yeah, but then they start talking about how they filter their babies.

Brandon

Yeah, yes. Spacers are eugenicists for sure.

Wren

And the Spacers are like, wait a minute, you just let like all of your babies live, like no matter if they're defective? And I was like, oh, this is bad. This is real bad. Oh, Spacers. No.

Brandon

The outcome being, all human society in this setting sucks. You just have to decide if you want robots or children. That's the decision.

Wren

I feel like the robots are the better people in this situation. Not as like a replacement...I don't know, maybe just as a replacement for the decision-makers. I also found it very icky that even the roboticist guy—I forgot his name, Dr. G...G-name—doesn't really talk to Daneel. He talks to Baley asking permission to like inspect Daneel or touch Daneel and I'm like, wow, even the guys that like the robots still treat the robots like crap. There's no robot agency in this at all.

Brandon

Robots are definitely still treated as objects. Daneel being made to look human, and designed to behave, at least passively, as a human, is not some high minded like let's create, like, sentient life. The Spacers wanted to be able to have a robot that could like spy on the City, basically. They basically wanted to be able to build a bunch of humanoid robots that look human and just kind of like filter them into the City population to like, quietly encourage a pro-emigration-to-space mentality, and that plan was just kind of like fouled up by Enderby killing the guy who was making the robots. So they quickly downloaded justice into Daneel's brain.

Brandon

Now, if you like go looking for Asimov's Robot series, there's like an enormous swathe of stuff, many novels, lots of short stories, things that are kind of strung together to a certain degree, but not necessarily following the same story. But there were two more books that follow Baley and Daneel.

Wren

Oh, nice. I wasn't sure if they were going to for their characters, that's good to know.

Brandon

Yeah. So the sequel to *The Caves of Steel* is *The Naked Sun*. That is Baley and Daneel. *The Naked Sun* was released in 1957, so a few years later. Basically, *The Caves of Steel* was Asimov's most successful novel to date at the time. I do think it predated, like *Foundation*, which I think is probably the novel he's best known for. But at the point in his career, where he wrote *The Caves of Steel*, it was far and away the most successful novel he had written, so a sequel was a logical step. So a few years later, *The Naked Sun* picks up Baley and Daneel for another story, and then some years down the line, in 1983, *The Robots of Dawn* is the third Baley and Daneel story, so there's essentially a trilogy that are specifically following these two and that take the form of mystery stories. I've read all of those, but I haven't reread either of the sequels, and I intend to fix that sometime soon. There are also a whole slew of robot stories that are in this same world, most notably the stuff that's in *I, Robot*, but there's others, and eventually in *Robots and Empire*, which is another novel that ultimately kind of ties the Robot series to the rest of what is called Asimov's Future History. Essentially, Asimov had these sort of

three different broad series of stories and novels—the Robot stuff, the Galactic Empire stuff, and most famously, the Foundation stuff. And in a couple places, not only *Robots and Empire*, he links off all three of these big things to being in the same setting, essentially, but they are like thousands of years removed from each other.

Brandon

Asimov was an interesting dude. His family emigrated from Russia when he was very young, in 1923. He was born approximately 1920, so he was an infant. And in a convenient tie-in with the Hardy Boys episode, he actually when he was young started writing—not, like, commercially, but started writing—when he was 11 and mimicked the Rover Boys, which were, I believe, another one of the series done by the Stratemeyer Syndicate.

Wren

The Stratemeyer Syndicate sounds like a bad guy group in some book or something. Every time you say it, I'm like, I'm expecting you to then go off about how there was some horrible thing they did.

Brandon

Well, I guess it depends on you know, if you if you think the Hardy Boys were good for literature. He grew up in Brooklyn. His family owned candy stores where they also had like, magazine racks and stuff, and that's where he discovered like, pulp sci-fi magazines. And, you know, once once he was a bit older, he literally went to the offices of Astounding Science Fiction to ask a question, and then a short time later, personally submitted his first story, called "Cosmic Corkscrew," and then editor John W. Campbell, who would become a significant force in Asimov's development personally rejected it and told him why. But from that point forward, they met on a regular basis, and Campbell had a lot of influence on Asimov's development and would eventually buy stories from him. Campbell wrote "Who Goes There?" which is the story upon which *The Thing* is based. I don't know how faithful *The Thing* is as an adaptation, but it's based on that. So Asimov then went into college. He started in zoology—which I didn't know, I felt that was kind of neat—but didn't want to dissect things, so he switched to chemistry. Because he was Jewish, and the '30s and '40s were terrible, he had to attend the part of Columbia that was for Jewish and Italian kids, because Columbia had to admit a certain number of like these ethnicities and stuff, but they didn't want to let them in the normal Columbia. He ultimately, after some other things, he couldn't get into medical school. It's unclear if that had anything to do with racial profiling. And so instead got a master's in philosophy or a master's rather in, I think, some kind of chemistry and a doctorate in philosophy, and became a professor of biochemistry, which he did until he got to the point that he was making so much more money off of his writing than off of having a job. That he that he stopped doing that. He's best known for his science fiction, and certainly a lot of his early stuff is science fiction, but he also wrote many other kinds of fiction, mystery fiction, in particular, part of the reason that *The Caves of Steel* takes the form it does is that another editor that he sometimes submitted to named Horace Gold, was like, "you really should make a novel out of these robot ideas, because you've got all of these short stories you've published throughout the '40s that are about robots and everybody likes those, you should make a novel," and Asimov was like, "I don't know what it would be about." And Gold was like, "Well, you like mysteries. Make it a mystery!" And then he did. *The Caves of Steel* was published in serial form in the magazine *Galaxy*, which Gold was the editor of. It was published in three parts. And then, that was in 1953, released in 1954 as like a novel, complete.

So. So yeah, he's written a ton of science fiction. That's what he's known for. He does have some mystery novels and stories and stuff out there as well. He also wrote a number of textbooks and a number of books that are like science popularization. I know I had several books when I was a kid that were like, Asimov's *Planets*, and it was like a book about the planets, you know, nonfiction, etc. Depending on how you count, he is the author of some 500 books and stories. He was astoundingly prolific. I already touched on him being a serial harasser. He also like definitely cheated on his multiple spouses on numerous occasions. So he wasn't necessarily a good dude, at least when it came to fidelity and women. And then died in 1992 at the age of 72 of, reportedly, kidney failure, although his family has said later on that he had contracted HIV prior to that, and I'm not sure if that had anything to do with his death, but he had apparently been fighting HIV for a number of years prior to is to his death.

Brandon

Other things in the Robot series, notably *I, Robot*, have been adapted more. *The Caves of Steel* has seen relatively little adaptation. The BBC did an adaptation as part of a TV series called Story Parade which it sounded like was an anthology series in 1964. That one is apparently mostly lost; there's only a few segments that still exist. Peter Cushing was Baley, which I have a hard time wrapping my head around, and the adaptation was done by Terry Nation, who people not me might be like, "A-ha! That guy!" because he's the creator of Doctor Who's Daleks. I'm not enough of a Doctor Who fan to have known that but I found it and I was like, this will be meaningful to somebody.

Wren

I guess I just don't picture Baley as being that skeletal, but I guess I'm picturing Peter Cushing as old.

Brandon

Yeah, I don't know what Peter Cushing was like in 1964.

Wren

I'm gonna Google him.

Brandon

But who knows. BBC Radio 4 did an adaptation in 1989. It was a radio adaptation. And then, most importantly of all: in 1988, many elements of the plot were adapted into *Isaac Asimov's Robots*, the VCR game.

Wren

What!?

Brandon

Yep. There's an adaptation of this, which is one of those VCR games that you would, you know, have VHS along with game stuff and playing the game was like a mystery game where you would watch stuff happening and then sometimes you'd be prompted to like open up clue packets or whatever and you're trying to solve the mystery along with Baley. As near as I can tell it exists in its entirety on YouTube, the video part. I haven't really been able to dig up like the other components that would have been in the

game. I haven't watched all of it; I watched the first six minutes or so. It's clearly very cheap, and...and that is what R. Sammy looks like.

Wren

Oh my god.

Brandon

He's clearly just like they took at trash can or something, wrapped it up in some...

Wren

Oh, this poor little robot.

Brandon

Yeah. Clearly a bit a bit cheap.

Wren

Well, look at the picture I just sent you of Peter Cushing. He does not look right for this at all.

Brandon

Yeah, so...adaptations not not a lot of note of this particular story.

Wren

That's a shame. I feel like this deserves a good adaptation.

Brandon

They did just recently do—I forget who it was. Was it Amazon, maybe? Somebody just recently did a streaming series based on *Foundation*. I haven't watched it, so I don't know how good it is, or how well it's done, but perhaps that's a sign that they'll get around to maybe some other Asimov stuff. Certainly prestige sci-fi for streaming services...really prestige sci-fi and fantasy for streaming services is having kind of a good time right now, so...you know, maybe. Maybe sometime soon.

Brandon

If you had to add a fourth Law of Robotics, what would it be?

Wren

I mean, I'm probably always gonna be on the side of robots here. So my fourth law of robotics would be something about more agency. Maybe my fourth law would be that a robot is allowed to always tell the truth, even if somebody has ordered them to silence.

Brandon

Yeah. That's not bad. Robots must always be honest.

Wren

Not that they must always be honest, just that...they're allowed to be honest, even if somebody has said, "Hey, kill this guy." Or not kill this guy. "Bring me a gun, and then don't tell anyone about it." Like, that would have been able to solve some stuff. It's just not fair how the rules make it that they're just...they can't say anything. It's not fair.

Brandon

It's unclear to me what would have happened if Baley had asked R. Sammy, like, did he do a thing? Baley just didn't know to ask. Like that's, that's I presume why Enderby offed R. Sammy. Because theoretically, according to the laws, there may have been some some permutation of asking Sammy for that information that would have...that Sammy would have been bound to answer truthfully, and like, give up, give up Enderby.

Wren

Yeah. I really love, looking back on that very first chapter now, how much Asimov set up just everything in that first chapter. I'm thinking specifically about how Baley like lectured Enderby on the way that he gives R. Sammy orders, and how that really like, explained to us information we needed to know about how they follow orders exactly, and if you forget to tell them to like, come back they won't come back.

Brandon

Like a lot of these details are seated in there. And then a lot of the stuff in between is kind of...it's not it's not meaningless, right? It's not Baley just like chasing his own tail down dead ends that don't go anywhere, because they all go somewhere character-wise, or setting-wise at least. Then, of course, like the destruction of R. Sammy is important to Baley being able to prove anything, but the pieces were largely in place pretty early.

Wren

Well, this is why I am generally like the perfect reader for a mystery book. Because I don't put things together.

Brandon

I'm generally pretty bad.

Wren

I get like wild suspicions. Like if I scroll through my notes I've got...let's see. In order of when I started suspecting people: the wife is involved in something. The kid who wanted to poke his head back in the office looks real suspicious. And then my very last note that I took at the last chapter was: "oh, fuck, I hadn't even bothered contemplating the commissioner had done it." I'm like Baley, I just keep accusing the wrong people.

Brandon

Yeah, well, and I know the first time that I read it for sure I would not have dreamed that it was the commissioner. It's one of those things that I kind of wish I could come at it without knowing who it was, but I remembered who it was. I didn't necessarily remember every like piece of evidence for that, but I remembered that it was Enderby.

Wren

Well, you're smarter.

Brandon

I mean, I'd read it before.

Wren

Fair.

Brandon

So we rate these books on our giant peaches scale out of five. How many giant peaches do you think Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* gets?

Wren

Oh, this is getting to five get the five I in my, in my note I have, this is one of the most enjoyable books I've read in a very long time.

Brandon

I'm super glad. I'm thrilled. I figured you'd like it, but I wasn't sure how much.

Wren

I'm kind of sitting here thinking, like, of all the stuff we've got down here in the pipe, what else is going to deserve a five? I don't know. Probably stuff I've not read yet. But definitely this, so I might as well give something a five. Especially with as much as I liked it.

Brandon

Yeah, fair enough. You've gotta do it eventually.

Wren

And even though it had some icky concepts, it was not as icky about them as some things, especially for the time. And I hate the phrase, like, "product of its time" or whatever, but as a product of its time, it wasn't as icky as a lot of things, so I'm not docking it any points for the ickiness, because it's actually probably pretty progressive for its time.

Brandon

Well, and to be sure, some of the things, like the eugenics policies of the Spacers and stuff, aren't necessarily presented as positive.

Wren

Oh yeah, no, I meant more like women being painted as silly and stupid and emotional.

Brandon

I think I am...I think I am at a four and a half, maybe. Four to four and a half. Maybe. Somewhere in there. I liked it a lot.

Wren

Is it just because like some of the magic isn't there anymore for having known the killer?

Brandon

I don't know. I'm not really sure. I still really enjoyed reading it. It's not a difficult read by any means, but it does feel fairly substantial nonetheless because there's a lot of talking about concepts and things.

Wren

Yeah, there was a lot of like really cool philosophy stuff, there was a lot of really cool pseudo-science speech, some of which is even based in concepts that he clearly understood—and that had actually been a question of mine, was how much of a science basis did he actually have before he started writing, because I was like, he talks about sciencey stuff like someone who's done some science thinking.

Brandon

Yeah, this book, in particular, would've been...I don't know if he was still a biochem professor when he wrote this, but it was several years after he began as a biochemistry professor. So he had multiple degrees in multiple fields, including a doctorate in philosophy as well as being a biochemistry professor at the Boston College of Medicine.

Wren

Cause sometimes, you know, as somebody with a science background, you read pseudo-science and it's like, this person just grabbed a bunch of terms they thought sounded cool and stuck them together, and this science speak was very rooted in...it felt natural and knowledgeable.

Brandon

Yeah. Yeah, Asimov was very...privity to the sciences. And like I said, especially as his career went on, wrote a lot of nonfiction, both in the case of textbooks and in the case of things that were more like, science popularization kind of things. You know, here's science about things in a way that is digestible by laymen or by children to get them interested and so forth. That was definitely a thing that he was very involved in throughout his life.

Wren

Cool! Well...

Brandon

He was pals with Carl Sagan, I think.

Wren

Oh! Fun.

Brandon

So! What are we reading next?

Wren

Well, since you had your first pick that was a, “this is not a book that was written for children, but I, as a child, read this,” I am doing one of mine that’s like that. Very different genre though. We are finally doing the promised thing of sending some Stephen King your way, and I decided to be kind because there was a number of multiple-thousand-pagers I could have selected that I read first, but I picked *Pet Sematary*. It’s a little bit of a shorter one, but also was definitely one of the ones that gave me some lasting nightmares for a little while.

Brandon

Yeah. Yeah, I don’t...don’t know if you should’ve read that as a kid.

Wren

There’s a lot of things I shouldn’t have done as a kid.

Brandon

I haven’t read any Stephen King, aside from *On Writing*, so I’m excited.

Wren

Well, buckle up...and think while you’re reading it, “Wren read this sort of stuff as a child. That explains a lot.”

Brandon

It does. Spoilers, I’m like halfway through the book and, yeah, a lot of things are falling into place.

Wren

Oh no...