

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Brian Herbert August 2018

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Brian Herbert is known for his collaborations with Kevin J. Anderson, with whom he has written multiple prequels and sequels to his father's (Frank Herbert) science fiction series, Dune. In 2003, Herbert wrote a biography of his father: Dreamer of Dune: The Biography of Frank Herbert.

Eva Sable: How much of the prequel novels are based on notes left by Frank Herbert and how much is extrapolation by you and your co-author?

BH: In 1997, we located more than 1,000 pages of Frank Herbert's Dune-series notes, including plot and character notes on an unpublished novel that he called "Dune 7," which was a working title. After my father's death, Kevin and I used those Dune 7 notes to write two novels, HUNTERS OF DUNE and SANDWORMS OF DUNE. We have also used some of the other Frank Herbert notes in various sequels and prequels. In addition, before writing a word in the Dune series, I created a 600-page [single-spaced] Dune Concordance, an encyclopedic reference work to everything Frank Herbert wrote in the Dune series. I knew Frank Herbert very well, and everything Kevin and I have written in the series is based upon my father's

published writings, his notes, and the inspiration he passed on to us.

Seth A. Milman: The Dune series is very philosophical and introspective. So were the 1960's. What message did Frank Herbert want the Dune series to convey to the readers of the 1960's about modern society and the future of humanity?

BH: [1] Don't trust political leaders, [2] care for the environment, and [3] beware of thinking machines. Those are some of the big messages. Of course there are also corollaries, such as his warning against following charismatic leaders in particular [corollary of #1 above], because they can lead their followers off the edge of a cliff. And as a corollary of #2 above, he spoke of finite resources, such as oil and water, and how he didn't want the resources of this planet to be used up.

Seth A. Milman: The ghola Idaho is an example of the over-use of technology, for the purpose of political gain, without consideration of ethics, morals, or concern for how it affects an individual. Idaho suffered greatly because of the incautious and repeated resurrections. What aspect of 1960's (or earlier) culture inspired this theme? And, if Frank Herbert were alive today, would he issue the same warning to modern readers?

BH: He came up with the ghola of Duncan Idaho in particular [and the concept of gholas], because his readers didn't like to see one of their favorite characters, Duncan Idaho, killed. In a

sense, Frank Herbert is still alive today, in the amazing literary legacy he left for us—but if he were also physically alive, I’m sure he would be issuing the same warnings, and more. For example, I have often railed against the violence committed by men, and I think I was inspired to do that by the way Dad created such powerful women in the Dune series. By the 5th and 6th novels he wrote in the series, women were running everything. I have also said many times that we need more female energy in this world, because of the violence and destructiveness of male energy – 10,000 years or more of constant warfare – and my thinking was inspired by him. So I’m sure he would warn today against the abuses committed by the male gender. And with the “Me Too” movement and other women’s’ issues, that would be a timely warning—all stemming from the respect Frank Herbert showed for women in making them such important characters in the six novels he wrote in the series.

Adrienne Clark/Jim Dean: What was his view on the movies done in the name of his work? I will admit I was traumatized by the movie when I was 8 years old. How “faithful” are the movies to the core *concepts* behind the politics, religions, and social structures that make the books so very fascinating?

BH: He saw 5 hours of the David Lynch film at the studio in Mexico City, and was largely pleased with it, calling it a “visual

feast.” However, that 5 hours was cut drastically to a little over 2 hours, and he was not happy about that, because important information was left out. He also didn’t like material that was added, and which did not correspond with his novel. However, overall, he still saw the merits of the 1984 David Lynch movie, and I have always tried to focus on the good things in it myself—while keeping in mind that it has defects.

Michael Rowe: Does he have any opinion of Jardowsky's Metabarons work? Which based on his film adaptation of Dune.

BH: I’m not familiar with the name you mentioned. If you mean Alejandro Jodorowsky, my father never expressed an opinion to me about him.

Jim Dean: Regarding the visionary transformation of Arrakis: it always seemed unlikely to me that adequate moisture existed in the atmosphere (and various caches) to provide for the massive desired ecological changes described in the book. Did your father do any research / math that might have validated that vision? Or did he anticipate some mechanism would be used other than wind traps etc - such as mining ice comets? And if so, why wasn’t that portion of the solution mentioned in the books? Or (if my concern is valid) did he just not consider “scientific precision” to be essential to the story?

BH: I don't agree with your negative assessment of the science in DUNE. In fact, Frank Herbert did considerable scientific research, including the science of ecology—and he used that as the basis for the warnings he issued about mankind using up the finite resources of the planet. Perhaps the problem you have with the science is because you are looking at the Dune universe and the planet Arrakis too literally, when it would be a more enjoyable experience for you if you were to let Frank Herbert's vivid imagination carry you into his fantastic universe. Sometimes it is necessary for a reader to suspend disbelief in order to fully enjoy a highly creative science fiction or fantasy work.

Martin Dudley: In the first book, many of the cultures and organizations seem to be based on early “old world” history. Arabic/bedouin cultures for Fremen. North European/Scandinavian Feudal houses and merchant leagues. South European/Middle Eastern empires. Far East Asian mental disciplines, etc. The Bene Gesserit always fascinate me. What analogue was in Frank Herbert's mind when he devised this powerful, strategic, advisor/rival to the throne?

BH: Frank Herbert believed in the importance and power of women, and he used the Bene Gesserit as a vehicle to express that belief. It is incredible that Reverend Mothers carry within them the genetic memories of countless generations of women

who came before them. It's a fantastic idea, based loosely on Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious." In one of my other answers in this Interview, I wrote of the importance of women in Frank Herbert's mind, and in the Dune universe he created. Incidentally, he once told me that to pronounce "Bene Gesserit," just think of the word "Jesuit."

Richard Whyte: For me personally, the masterstroke that made the original 'Dune' series work so well was the gradual change in narrative focus from an individual (an Atreides) to a organization (the Bene Gesserit) and their corresponding change, from a mysterious, powerful and ambiguous force to a relatively unambiguous force for good. At what point do you think your father began to get the idea that the 'Dune' narrative might actually benefit from this change in focus? Or was that his intention from the beginning?

BH: Frank Herbert, a genius with an IQ higher than that of Albert Einstein, was able to keep huge concepts in his mind, and to express them in parts that, when taken in their entirety, comprised the massive whole of the Dune universe. He often spoke to me of his experience as a professional cameraman for newspapers [as I wrote in my biography of him, DREAMER OF DUNE], and he liked to write scenes as if he were viewing them through the lens of a camera—going from a description of a

human hand, for example, to the whole person, and from that to something much, much larger.

Doll Aiello: I know Dune was at least partially inspired by Frank Herbert's interest in ecology, my question is: What inspired him to write the novel The White Plague? Was it the then current efforts by scientists with recombinant DNA, or more the geopolitical atmosphere?

BH: Politically, Frank Herbert was concerned about the dangers of terrorism. He worried about one terrorist could fly an airplane into a hydroelectric plant and cause massive damage, or acquire a technology of mass destruction. And he said this long before 9/11 and the Twin Towers. In THE WHITE PLAGUE, a terrorist spreads a plague that kills only women. He developed the science by interviewing many research scientists, so its very accurate. He also held some scientific information back, fearing it could get into the wrong hands.

SFBC Member: Does Brian like Iron Maiden any better than his father did? Lol! Seriously, though... what are his thoughts about the bad blood between the band and Frank?

BH: What bad blood? This is news to me. If there was some bad blood like that during his lifetime, as you say, he was never concerned enough about it to say anything to me about it . . . and I was very close to him.

D'Arcy Ward: Why should those of us who've read all of the original 6 book in the Dune series read your follow up books?

BH: The Dune-series novels I wrote with Kevin J. Anderson follow the Dune canon that Frank Herbert established, and when they were published these novels opened up the Dune universe to new readers who had not previously been familiar with it. Many people told me that they read our new Dune series novels before reading DUNE . . . and I'm proud of the fact that we inspired new readers to find and read that great literary classic. I like to say that all roads lead to DUNE, and that makes me very happy. His great novel deserves to be read for centuries to come.

David Stuckey: Have you considered adding new stories to his father's collection of tales of Jorj X. Makie, agent of the Bureau of Sabotage? Given the tone of "The Garbage Chronicles" I thought this would be interesting to see him write.

BH: Yes, I have considered this—but I've been busy writing my own solo novels, and with working on the new DUNE movie. There are many new story possibilities for Jorj X. McKie, one of Frank Herbert's more popular characters.

Alexandra Brown: Was your conclusion of the Dune Saga in line with Frank's ideas or were they developed over time

based on technological advancements that were occurring once you took on the task of bringing the saga to an end?

BH: The two Dune 7 novels I co-authored [HUNTERS OF DUNE and SANDWORMS OF DUNE] were based on around 30 pages of Frank Herbert's Dune 7 notes that I found in safety deposit boxes after his death.

Kevin Kuhn: Not sure if this is fair or answerable, but was 'the scattering,' Leto's intended outcome of the Golden Path?

BH: Frank Herbert didn't think humankind should have all of its eggs in one basket . . . i.e. all human life on the planet Earth. He felt that we should spread humanity to other star systems, and the concept of the Scattering was his literary way of showing us that possibility. He believed in the great potential of the human being, which is the most adaptable animal on this planet. If humans can live here, even in the most difficult of circumstances, they can also adapt and live elsewhere. Your question is interesting in another sense, because the huge amount of knowledge contained in the brain of Leto II is like the mind of Frank Herbert – Leto II's hopes and visions are those of Frank Herbert.

Kevin Kuhn: This is not really a question, but kind of fun. Have you heard of the fan theory that the Terminator movies are based on the Butlerian Jihad (The Great Revolt)? I haven't really seen anything concrete that tie the two other than they

both reference an army of robot soldiers to enslave humans until a their defeat by human jihadists.

BH: I had not heard of the fan theory, but I noticed this myself. DUNE came before Terminator. DUNE came before a lot of other film projects, didn't it?

Anastasia Hilvers: I am curious if Frank Herbert traveled extensively to get inspiration for the Dune books. If so, Where/when/How long? If not, how to explain the many cultural similarities?

BH: Frank Herbert traveled to many countries, and found inspiration wherever he went. His mind was like a sponge, absorbing everything around it. He once told me that he could not read one page of a reference book, where he found the information he sought, without reading another page, to learn something more. For more information on his life and travels, you might enjoy DREAMER OF DUNE.

Jedidiah Dykstra: I am interested in the similarities that have been drawn between spice and psychedelic mushrooms.

BH: Fans in the 1960s and 1970s drew this parallel, and some of them told my father that they liked to read DUNE when they were high. Dad didn't like to hear that, and could not imagine how that would make the reading experience better. I wrote more about the drug references, and where Frank Herbert

came up with them, in my biography of him, DREAMER OF DUNE.

John Grayshaw/Jim Dean: What was your motivation for continuing your father's work? You wrote 14 Dune novels. How does it feel to have written twice as many Dune novels as your father? Do you like your books better, or your fathers? Why?

BH: It was inevitable that I would write Dune novels. During my father's lifetime, he and I spoke of collaborating on a Dune novel in the future. After his death, I spent 5 years writing the biography of him, DREAMER OF DUNE, and in the process making detailed readings of everything he wrote. I also created a huge [unpublished] Dune Concordance, an encyclopedic reference work to the entire series. It only remained for me to meet Kevin J. Anderson and begin to discuss new story possibilities with him. On my own preferences, I am proud of the novels I have written in the series, but I have to say that I like DUNE the most. There are so many wonderful layers of important messages woven into the novel. It's truly a masterpiece, a novel for the ages that will be read far into mankind's future.

John Grayshaw: Why were Throne of Dune and Leto of Dune cancelled? And is Navigators of Dune the last one or are you planning to write more Dune novels?

BH: THRONE and LETO could be written in the future. We didn't write them yet because we became fascinated with the concept of writing other novels in the series first – such as the founding of the great schools of dune – SISTERHOOD OF DUNE, MENTATS OF DUNE, and NAVIGATORS OF DUNE. There will probably be more Dune novels in the future. Kevin and I have done some recent brainstorming in that regard, but have not yet submitted a book proposal to publishers.

John Grayshaw: Did your father imagine the entire Dune Sage at once or overtime? One of my friends swears he came up with Children of Dune first and then wrote Dune and Dune Messiah just to get to where he could write Children of Dune.

BH: I wrote in DREAMER OF DUNE that Frank Herbert envisioned parts of CHILDREN OF DUNE when he was writing DUNE – and I know he was thinking of parts of DUNE MESSIAH when he wrote DUNE as well [i.e. the danger of following a charismatic leader such as Paul Atreides], so Dad had portions of at least two more novels in mind when he was writing the first.

John Grayshaw: What was it like growing up with your father? Were you debating philosophy and being lectured about ecology at dinner every night? Or was it more normal? Did your father talk about his novels with you and your family as he was writing them?

BH: There is no simple answer to that. I did write of it extensively in DREAMER OF DUNE [a finalist for the Hugo Award], in which I revealed that my father and I did not always get along when I was growing up in his household – but we became the best of friends when I was a young adult.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the authors who influenced your father and who are some of the authors who influenced you?

BH: Too many to list, for Frank Herbert or for me. In both of our cases, we have preferred to read non-fiction over fiction, doing our research to get historical facts and science straight before writing a novel.

John Grayshaw: Why do you write all the Dune novels with Kevin J. Anderson? What does each of you bring to the table? And who does what?

BH: I believe I answered much of that in the Afterword of DUNE: HOUSE ATREIDES, and in various interviews. Basically, Kevin brings a degree in Physics to the table, while I am a graduate of UC Berkeley in Sociology. Kevin tends to write more scientific scenes and storylines and in his first drafts, while I tend to write the more philosophical storylines in my first drafts, such as Bene Gesserit storylines. Then each of us rewrite the chapters of the other. Fortunately, our writing

styles – syntax, dialogue, etc. are similar, which makes for a smooth process of writing to publication.

John Grayshaw: Are you at all surprised that Dune has remained popular for almost 60 years? What do you think is its staying power?

BH: DUNE is the most unique of all science fiction novels, not only for its themes, characters and plot that have become so familiar, but because it is science fiction novel that does not depend upon anything scientific. Ultimately, the story is about people and human potential, not about science or machines. Its readership has gone far beyond the science fiction genre; this classic novel has become mainstream, a great, timeless novel that will be read and enjoyed for centuries to come.

John Grayshaw: Other than Dune what do you think is your father's best work? And what is your best non-Dune work? And why?

BH: For Frank Herbert that would be SOUL CATCHER, his only non science fiction novel—the story of a young Native American who is caught between his own heritage and the world of the white man. The novel is poetic and beautifully written. In science fiction, I also think that THE WHITE PLAGUE is a terrific novel, the story of a madman who sets loose a plague that targets women.

For me, I think OCEAN is one of my best, an ecological thriller I wrote with my wife, Jan. It's the story of sea creatures who are fed up with pollution of the oceans caused by humans, and they declare war against the biggest polluter of all, the United States. I also favor THE LITTLE GREEN BOOK OF CHAIRMAN RAHMA, an ecological science fiction novel about a green utopia that has devolved into a green police state in which humans are forced to live on crowded reservations for humans . . . and those who violate environmental rules are recycled, for the good of the planet.

John Grayshaw: What is your father's legacy?

BH: Obviously, the complex, multi-layered novel DUNE was his masterpiece, a book that started out slowly in terms of sales, but built in a groundswell as word-of-mouth got out about it from readers who recommended it to others. That has been going on for more than half a century, and I don't envision sales of the novel abating. It is truly a phenomenon, written by a remarkable man who was far ahead of his time.