

Isaac Asimov (1920–1992)

Isaac Asimov was a lot like the sci-fi magazines he wrote for as a boy genius—astonishing, astounding, and amazing. Astonishing for an output that allowed him to publish, in 1984, his *Opus 300*, with selections from his first three hundred books. Astounding for both the range and the lucidity of his scientific learning. He could produce, off the top of his head, guidebooks to any scientific subject as up-to-date and well-organized as a textbook vetted by a committee of specialists, and so yes-of-course comprehensible that even quantum mechanics could be coped with in the Asimov version.

He was amazing, most of all, for his co-invention, with Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein, of modern science fiction. “Nightfall,” the story he wrote at age twenty-one, has repeatedly been hailed as the greatest sf tale of all time. It tells the story of a panic that overwhelms a planet when there is a total eclipse of its six suns and for the first time in its history the stars become visible—and the size of the universe imaginable.

That gasp of wonder was the Asimovian grail, and it is evoked most powerfully in the early novels of the *Foundation* series, and in the books mandating the Three Laws of Robotics, especially *The Caves of Steel* (1954). That book is also Asimov’s first cautionary tale about the dangers of overpopulation. Unlike most other technophile sci-fi writers who have acted as NASA’s unpaid cheerleaders, Asimov was a political liberal throughout his life, and became the president of the American Humanist Association.

He was also a lifelong teenager, and his persona, whenever he was far enough away from the typewriter to wear one, was that of a typical high school, slide-rule-toting science nerd. But in Asimov’s case, the nerd was triumphant. Every month his face could be seen, with its bushy white muttonchops, on the cover of the science fiction magazine named in his honor. Often he’d be costumed as an astronaut by way of reminding us that it’s not the jocks but brains like Asimov who are the real architects of our futures.

An Asimov Sampler

Asimov's New Guide to Science, rev. ed. (1984). The best single one-volume science reference book for home libraries.

The Foundation Trilogy. A space opera version of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and probably the mostly widely read sf work of all time.

The Robot Novels. Sci-fi whodunits featuring the team of Baley (human) and Olivaw (robot), the Nick and Nora of Time and Space.

The End of Eternity (1955). By merely literary standards, this tale of time travel from the ninety-fifth century is generally rated Asimov's best.