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***Discovering Dune: Essays on Frank Herbert's Epic Saga.*, edited by Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly**

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Discovering Dune: Essays on Frank Herbert's Epic Saga., edited by Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly

Abstract

G. Connor Salter reviews *Discovering Dune: Essays on Frank Herbert's Epic Saga*, edited by Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly, considering its new contributions to studies of Frank Herbert's work. Essays included fit into four categories (Politics and Power, History and Religion, Biology and Ecology, and Philosophy, Choice and Ethics) and range from Herbert's use of ecology in *Dune* to how game theory may help explain certain characters' apparent ability to see the future. *Discovering Dune* also includes an appendix which contains the only up-to-date bibliography of Herbert's work (primary and secondary sources).

Additional Keywords

dune frank herbert; dune messiah; children of dune; chapterhouse dune; god emperor of dune; heretics of dune; leto II atreides; paul atreides; brian herbert; kevin j anderson; dune saga; leto atreides; bene gesserit; dune franchise

Just as Christians and non-Christians alike will today talk about “light speed” or “inferiority complexes” or the “one percent,” without necessarily being advocates of or specialists in Einstein, Freud, or Marx, so too did medieval Christians and ancient pagans share a number of general “background” beliefs that made them “far more like each other than either was like a modern man.” (11, quoting *Discarded Image* at the end)

The literary scholar has access not just to ancient ideas but also to ancient feelings, and thus has access to specimens even more valuable than a paleontologist’s prehistoric insect frozen intact within amber. (42)

[I]n medieval thought pure evil is the same as nothingness, it’s like absolute zero on the Kelvin scale. (98)

He’s like the master teacher from Lewis’s “Bluspels and Flalensferes,” who invents new images to convey meaning where it would otherwise be inaccessible.

Like a medieval author, he can borrow an image from his source, and proceed to festoon it into greater significance. Borrowing from Lewis’s description of the medieval model as a great cathedral, Baxter writes:

Standing in a medieval cathedral gives you a kind of x-ray vision of the world. Meaning is everywhere, full and rich. The material world has been gathered to a saturation point. In a cathedral, then, the spiritual world feels like it is leaking in, and our response is to want to soar up and through and out. (34)

Baxter’s book invites readers to do the same.

—Josiah Peterson



DISCOVERING DUNE: ESSAYS ON FRANK HERBERT’S EPIC SAGA.
Edited by Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly. McFarland & Company, Publishers. August 2022. Paperback. 978-1476682013, \$49.95.

MUCH HAS CHANGED SINCE 1965 when Chilton Books, best known for its car repair manuals, decided to publish Frank Herbert’s science fiction novel *Dune*. At the time, science fiction wasn’t known as a particularly mythopoeic genre—the hard sci-fi of Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke still defined the field. Herbert’s story combined (among other things) Messiah narratives, Islamic references, ecology, eugenics, and mind-altering space drugs to create an epic that was certainly science fiction, but certainly also

mythic. Today, *Dune* is an undisputed classic, often described as science fiction's equivalent to *The Lord of the Rings*.

Saying a book is a classic which changed its field is one thing, but *Maker of Dune* author Timothy O'Reilly argues that Herbert's work hasn't lost any of its relevancy. In his foreword to *Discovering Dune*, O'Reilly recalls his time interviewing Herbert for what became the first book-length *Dune* study, specifically Herbert's advice to avoid futurists seeking to control the future (1-2). Instead, Herbert believed humans must emphasize their ability to adapt and "get better at responding to uncertainty" (3). In a society where politicians, transhumanists, and others promise surefire formulas for the future, O'Reilly finds this advice more vital than ever, which makes him pleased to see new scholars engaging with Herbert's work (ibid).

Given O'Reilly's view that *Dune* is a classic that truly keeps on giving, it's surprising that Herbert studies has often been fragmentary. Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly explain in their introduction that *Discovering Dune* was written because "there has been relatively limited scholarship engagement with Frank Herbert's fiction" (5). Nardi and Brierly contrast this situation with Tolkien studies, arguing that "the study of *Dune* and of Frank Herbert's works in general never coalesced into an academic subfield" (6). They see the problem as caused by limited interdisciplinary discussion. Herbert scholars are "often segregated into disciplinary silos" without a Tom Shippey or a Verlyn Flieger whose extensive work provides a "touchstone for the field" (ibid). This point presents an important reminder to scholarship communities. Fans sometimes describe authors' legacies as if the work was so great it couldn't be forgotten. Sadly, great authors are frequently neglected because no touchstone scholar or supportive scholarship community appears to carry the work forward. Tolkien's contemporary, T.H. White, author of *The Once and Future King*, is a close competitor for the title of the twentieth century's greatest British fantasist. However, White studies has never had a Shippey or Flieger—just a biographer, a few of White's friends publishing letters and reminisces, followed by isolated studies and dissertations every few years. Today, the biggest news in White studies is that Handheld Press republished the (only) White biography in January 2023, over 30 years after the previous edition appeared.

Fortunately for Herbert scholars, interest in his work hasn't stagnated to such a point. In fact, Nardi and Brierly observe that *Discovering Dune* has arrived during "a significant revival of the *Dune* franchise," evidenced by the 2019 reprints of Herbert's *Dune* novels and the upcoming *Dune* adaptations for various media (9). They hope *Discovering Dune* will "reinvigorate and refocus the scholarship on *Dune* and on Frank Herbert generally" and "serve as a reference point for future *Dune* scholarship" (6).

Given the editors' desire to create an interdisciplinary resource, it's appropriate that the essays in *Discovering Dune* are organized into four clear sections, yet each contains diverse perspectives. Part I is titled Politics and Power and includes the following. In "Dune and the Metanarrative of Power," Edward John Royston discusses how *Dune's* characters sculpt mythic metanarratives about their role in the events they experience. In "Political Prescience: How Game Theory Solves the Paradox of Foreknowledge," Nardi considers how game theory lets individuals make seemingly prescient choices, thus explaining *Dune's* apparently prescient characters while sidestepping the free will vs. determinism debate. In "'The greatest predator ever known': The Golden Path and Political Philosophy as Ecology," Michael Phillips uses sociobiology to interpret Paul Atreides's son Leto II, the eponymous *God Emperor of Dune*, who fulfills Paul's Golden Path strategy to force humans to adapt before thinking machines subjugate them. In "He Who Controls Knowledge Controls the Universe: Leto II and the Golden Path," Caroline Anne Womack analyzes Leto II in more tragic terms: drawing on Aristotelean tragedy and Robert Sapolsky's work, Womack shows how Leto II dies like an Aristotelean tragic hero, yet he dies knowing his Golden Path successfully tyrannized humans until they craved freedom.

Part II is titled History and Religion. In "Frank Herbert's Byzantium: Medieval-Futurism and the Princess Historians Irulan and Anna Komnene," Maximilian Lau argues scholars have overlooked Byzantine influences on the *Dune* saga, particularly regarding the Corrinos empire; Lau highlights how the often-maligned Princess Irulan Corrinos (Paul Atreides's state bride who becomes a historian) resembles the often-maligned twelfth-century Byzantine princess and historian Anna Komnene. In "Beside the Sand Dunes: Arab Futurism, Faith, and the Fremens of Dune," R. Ali details Herbert's layered uses of Arabic and references to Islamic culture in the *Dune* saga, notably his quotations from the Quran and hadith traditions. In "'A critical moment': The O.C. Bible in the Awakening of Paul Atreides," N. Trevor Bierly considers how *Dune* depicts the Orange Catholic Bible as a super-religious text reconciling various traditions into a new creed, a creed which critically impacts Paul Atreides's personal journey.

Part III is titled Biology and Ecology. In "Locations of Deviance: A Eugenics Reading of *Dune*," Leigha High McReynolds applies disability studies to Paul Atreides, highlighting how he deviates from the Bene Gesserit eugenics plan yet his deviance makes him exceptional rather than inferior. In "From Taming Sand Dunes to Planetary Ecology: Historical Perspectives on Environmental Thought and Politics in the *Dune* Saga," Paul Reef traces how environmental views evolved during Herbert's lifetime, giving context for Herbert's eclectic environmental perspective and his environmental warnings

in the Dune saga. In “Shifting Sands: Heroes, Power, and the Environment in the Dune Saga,” Willow Wilson DiPasquale summarizes the protagonists’ attitudes to nature in each of Herbert’s Dune novels, showing Herbert’s complex vision of the Atrides dynasty.

Part IV is titled Philosophy, Choice and Ethics. In “The Sands of Time: Dune and the Philosophy of Time,” Nathaniel Goldberg considers whether *Dune’s* depiction of time fits an eternalist or growing universe perspective, then applies Boethius’s view of time in *Consolation of Philosophy* to Paul Atrides’s prescience. In “The Choices of Maud’Dib: Goods, Traditions and Practices in the Dune Saga,” Jeffery L. Nicholas argues that traditions center on pursuing goods (i.e., things that people value in themselves), then considers Paul Atrides’s rise as a Nietzschean journey in which Paul learns about many goods and chooses to pursue power. In “I suggest you may be human’: Humanity and Human Action in Dune,” Curtis A. Weyant applies praxeology to *Dune* and shows how four groups (the Bene Gesserit, the Mentats, the Fremen, the Great Houses) give Paul Atrides different definitions of being human; Weyant argues that Paul’s view of humanity amalgamates these influences, fitting Herbert’s advice to his 1970s University of Washington political science students that they should consider many perspectives on what it means to be human. In “Belief is the Mind-Killer: The Bene Gesserit’s Transcendental Pragmatism,” Kevin Williams shows how differing definitions of “belief” have different consequences, and how the Bene Gesserit approach to belief—ever questioning assumptions, ultimately pragmatic, thinking as a creative act—informs the group’s interactions with the Atrides dynasty.

Following these chapters is the appendix, created because Nardi and Briery “noticed there was no single, updated bibliography of scholarship about Frank Herbert or his works” (257). They acknowledge three useful guides they built on—Gregory Tidwell’s bibliography of Herbert secondary sources, Haris A. Durrani’s *LA Review of Books* article “Sietchposting: A Short Guide to Recent Work on ‘Dune,’” and the website Dune Academic—and state their hope that later scholars will update their work (ibid). The appendix includes both primary sources (the original and continuation Dune novels, Herbert interviews, archives) and secondary sources (ranging from podcasts to websites to peer-reviewed articles).

Some specialists will doubtless argue that the essays included in *Discovering Dune* don’t capture the full range of Herbert studies. For example, many will find it interesting that while Phillips mentions Leto II’s all-female army with their “institutionalized homosexuality” (52), there is no essay devoted to sexuality in the Dune saga. As demonstrated by Emmet Asher-Perrin’s essay on *Dune* antagonist Vladimir Harkonnen (“How to Handle the Baron Harkonnen in a Modern Dune Adaptation” 1), sexuality in Herbert’s

work continues to be a thorny but important discussion. While critics would be correct that this volume could cover many other topics, such a critique would miss the point. As noted earlier, the editors aimed to provide a reference point for future scholars (hence the appendix) and refocus and reinvigorate (rather than summarize) current discussions. The essays in *Discovering Dune* are select works for enticing scholars to take new directions, not entries summarizing every facet of Herbert studies.

Discovering Dune succeeds admirably at its stated goals. The essays provide new focus by showing some of the current discussion, giving an idea how things have changed since Herbert scholarship's early days. At the same time, the essays invite new scholarship by showing how much room Herbert studies has for innovative discussions. Even when these contributors share ideas or conclusions, their different disciplines generate unique insights. For example, Phillips, DiPasquale, Reef, and Nicholas all emphasize that readers can only understand Paul Atreides by seeing the Atreides dynasty's full journey across Herbert's Dune novels. In varying ways, each of these scholars agrees that Herbert paints a critical picture of the Atreides dynasty. However, their disciplines provide different lenses for understanding the picture. For Phillips, the sandworm-human hybrid Leto II (physically and symbolically) resembles the Biblical Leviathan, while his policies resemble the statesman in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (49). For Reef, Leto II's choice to become a sandworm-human hybrid fits Herbert's use of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's Gaia concept: "his amalgamation with the sandtrout symbolizes a sentient, self-regulating Gaia-like planet" (169). For DiPasquale, Paul Atreides is a critique of Western imperialism, treating Arrakis as a backward location to transform (162). For Nicholas, Paul Atreides is a nuanced response to Nietzsche's *übermensch* who "chooses power over the goods of community and love" (223). Each essay adds something interesting and substantial to the discussion, showing that Herbert studies has room for more than just science fiction scholars or ecologists. The field clearly has enough complexity for various disciplines to contribute interesting work.

Discussing every essay in detail would be impossible. However, the following essays stand out for their novel or timely approaches. Some readers may concede that Herbert shows across his Dune novels that Paul Atreides leaves a tragic legacy, but still wonder if Paul's Messianic rise in the first book is problematic. Royston helps those readers see that Herbert complicates his hero's journey from the start. Herbert makes it clear that Paul knows he participates in a mythic narrative—as seen in scenes like Paul assuring his first wife Chani that generations will remember her as his true wife (15). Like Bilbo discussing the book he will write about his life—"I have thought of a nice ending for it: *and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days*" (*LotR* I.1.32)—Paul

simultaneously talks about his life as something he experiences and as something memorable that will be recorded. However, Tolkien presents heroes who know their stories will become legendary, yet do not manipulate those narratives for self-centered purposes. Aragorn makes no attempt to use old prophecies to claim the Ring-bearer role for himself, letting Frodo take what may be the more celebrated role in the epic tale of Sauron's defeat. Herbert shows a series of "narratives the Atreides coopt and create" (18) from the start. Hence, even within the first *Dune* novel, Paul is not a clearcut Messiah figure taking a journey that ends in glory. Royston emphasizes that Paul and Leto II are metafictional characters—not to the extent that they know they are fictional characters, but "they are aware of themselves as the heroes, or superheroes, of myths that they are coopting or creating" (18). Hence, even Paul's seemingly glorious rise to power at the end of *Dune* becomes complicated, something beyond a celebration of power.

Royston's essay is the only one that considers the nature of mythopoeia itself, but others provide excellent aids for understanding Herbert's complex mythopoeia. Much has been said about how Herbert works Middle Eastern elements into his mythopoeia, including recurring concerns about cultural appropriation. Ali shows that the Islamic and Arabic references "are not merely used to add a sense of exoticism; they add a dimension and growth to the characters and narrative in fascinating ways" (121). Readers wanting to explore overlooked influences on Herbert's mythopoeia will enjoy Lau's discussion about Byzantine imagery. Readers wondering about Nietzschean themes in *Dune* will appreciate Nicholas's essay, where he goes beyond past discussions to highlight Herbert's Nietzschean overtones "in relation to the discussion of goods" (211).

McReynolds's essay may surprise the most readers, given that the term "disability" carries a negative connotation for many. However, McReynolds is right to apply disability studies to discussions about "the eugenic and evolutionary themes in Herbert's work" (145), since eugenics and disability studies have an unfortunate, intertwined history. Drawing on the works of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, McReynolds observes it was "the American historical eugenics narrative" that created a model where disability automatically equals deficiency (146). Disability scholars like Benjamin T. Conner increasingly push against this narrative, arguing that viewing disability as "a pathology or a deficit of the person" proves inadequate (19). Given this expanding conversation, McReynolds's point that Paul's exceptionalism comes from him being an anomaly that eugenicists never wanted is very topical. McReynolds also provides a very topical hook by drawing on discussions about exceptionalism perceived as deviance in the X-Men franchise, and how Paul fulfills a similar role (146-147). Given how the X-Men franchise and other

superhero stories have become the early 21st century's most popular mythopoeias, understanding Herbert's hero as a disabled superhero raises fascinating possibilities for new research.

The appendix is an equally excellent tool for Herbert scholars. The works cited are as up-to-date as possible—the most recent work listed is “The Sciences of ‘Dune’: An Introduction,” edited by Haris A. Durrani and Henry M. Cowles, published in the *LA Review of Books* just three months before *Discovering Dune* appeared in print. The only noticeable flaw involves a URL that changed after *Discovering Dune* went to press, which proves ironic. When the editors discuss the three resources used for their bibliography, they include footnotes to where each resource can be found. The URL for Tidwell's bibliography now leads to a 404 page, because the work was located on the now-defunct Frank Herbert Secondary Sources server. Several active servers and sites containing Herbert scholarship can still be found at the same domain (see “The Omphalos Umbrella” in works cited). Fortunately, one of those servers contains a copy of Tidwell's work (see “Dune Secondary Source Bibliography” in works cited).¹ In other words, the appendix's one flaw is that an earlier bibliography is now harder to find, which proves Nardi and Brierly correct. Herbert scholars definitely needed an updated Herbert bibliography (in print, where deactivated servers and other technical issues can't keep researchers from finding what they need).

To sum up, Nardi, Brierly, and their contributors have provided an exciting new volume of Herbert studies, which will benefit enthusiasts or initiates. *Discovering Dune* is well-organized, well-written, well-edited, and seems poised to play a major part in a Herbert studies renaissance.

—G. Connor Salter

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¹ I'd like to thank Dr. Sørina Higgins for connecting me with the editors of *Discovering Dune*, and the editors' help (along with William O'Flaherty and Zak Schmoll) tracking down the new URL and clarifying that a server change had caused the problem.