

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Without a doubt, the single most requested topic I get is Dune. And after a while I thought, I should really read this book. It's a classic and I had never read it.

I did know a few things about Dune. I knew it was written in the mid 1960s by Frank Herbert, who is American. He also wrote several sequels before he died in the 1980s. Most of the books are centered around a planet called Arrakis but its nickname is Dune because the planet is a desert.

Dune has only one natural resource – a spice called Melange that everyone in the galaxy wants because ~~it can fuel spaceships~~. People can also ingest Melange like a drug and have mind-altering experiences. Harvesting Melange is dangerous because it's surrounded by monstrously huge sand worms.

The other thing I knew about Dune is that there's never been a good movie made of it. The version that David Lynch directed in 1984 was a box office bomb. Lynch himself was really unhappy with it.

Even stranger – in the 1970s, the filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky tried to get a version made that would've starred Mick Jagger, Orson Welles and Salvador Dali -- with music by Pink Floyd. It's such a crazy story, there's actually a documentary about his failed attempt.

By the way, Dune is back in development. Denis Villeneuve, who directed Arrival and the new Blade Runner sequel is attached to direct Dune – so we'll see how that goes.

In the mean time, I decided to finally sit down and read the book. At first, I couldn't understand what the fuss was about. The main character is a 15-year old boy named Paul Atreides. That's the character Kyle MacLauchlan played in the movie – even Kyle MacLauchlan was in 26 at the time. Paul is the son of a Duke. His father's arch nemesis is a Baron from a royal family called the Harkkonens.

A hundred page in I'm thinking, is this just a futuristic soap opera with a good royal family fighting a bad royal family? Then – spoiler alert -- the

story gets really interesting when Paul's father is murdered by the Harkkonens, who are in league with the evil emperor. Paul and his mother are left for dead on the planet Dune. They survive with the help of the Fremen, a nomadic tribe who believe that Paul is their messiah.

Now Paul has been genetically bred to have mental powers so he can see how every choice that he could make in the present moment will play out in the future. And he sees that they're right, he will become their messiah. And he's going to unleash a jihad that will consume the galaxy.

And when I saw that word – jihad -- I did a double take. And it comes up again and again. We learn thousands of years earlier, there was something called a Butlerian Jihad, where humans fought machines. After the humans won, artificial intelligence was banished from the galaxy. That's why the far future feels so ancient.

By the time I got to the second book in the series, Dune Messiah, it was clear that religion is going to be the dominant theme in the series. Frank incorporates a lot of different religions into this fictional world, but Islam is clearly the religion he's borrowing from the most.

Which was interesting to me because I had always heard Dune is a great ecological story, or it's a great hero's journey about self-discovery.

Which made me wonder: does this book resonate differently with Muslim readers? And what can we learn from hearing their perspective?

SAMI: Well I'm a geek from Pakistan, that is my back-story that kid in Pakistan, who really got into sci fi and fantasy.

Today, Sami Shah is a writer and comedian living in Australia. He may have liked Dune as a kid, but he didn't realize why it resonated with him so much until he took a sci-fi literature course in college.

SAMI: And so for me to read Dune and see that Frank Herbert was aware of Muslim mythology and Islamic culture was a big deal, it meant a lot to me. It felt like the first twinkling of representation in the genre.

And even the part about that spice, called *mélange*, rang true for him. A lot of people think *mélange* is a metaphor for oil in the Middle East. But Sami took it literally.

SAMI: I was thinking ways in Europe, after Renaissances import spices from middle east, sent explorers out onto the world and like cumin, saffron was highly valued and entire colonized natures were wiped out for things like that.

In searching Salman Sayyid is a professor at the University of Leeds. When he was growing up in the UK, he liked Dune more than Star Trek because in Star Trek, religion was more likely to found on planets that we were supposed to think of as primitive. But that wasn't the case with Dune.

SALMAN: And the intriguing thing for me reading Dune the idea that future is so colored by Islamic influence you couldn't find the idea that Europe would expand, the Federation of planets is US in space.

That's interesting, I always thought the Federation in Star Trek is lovely utopian vision of the future but I can see how you'd find it condescending – even the idea that there's this prime directive where they're not supposed to interfere with the development of these societies.

SALMAN: Also prime directive constantly being broken! Not a bad analogy for American foreign policy at the time there.

So he was ambivalent about Star Trek. But from his perspective, Star Trek was at least better than Star Wars.

SALMAN: In SW you're less likely to encounter recognize a non-European elements not to be despised or denigrated. And I think the thing that Dune does is give you the idea that it might be cool to be involved in a future that is not simply a rationalist technological understanding we have today, that you might imagine a different world order.

In my research on Dune, I also found this blog post that categorized all the Arabic and Islamic references in the Dune series. The article was so popular, it gets re-posted all the time, even though it was written 14 years ago.

The author is Khalid Baheyeldin. He grew up in Egypt. And now he lives in Ontario. He wrote it in 2003 because during the invasion of Iraq he wanted put something out there that was positive about Islam.

KHALID: The interesting part is comments, all sorts of reaction, some deny that Herbert would borrow from the evil Islam and some would try to say no, you should focus on ecology, on the self improvement and Zen but it's all of that, he incorporated all of that.

I was surprised to learn Khalid has never actually read the books. He first discovered Dune through a 1992 video game you played on your PC, where you strategized battles between the clashing royal families.

KHALID: But it was an enjoyable game, it was mainly sci-fi there was nothing about the backstory of the mythology.

Then he saw a mini-series adaptation from 2000, which was pretty faithful to the book. That's when he started noticing all the Islamic references.

KHALID It just jumps at you, words like Maud'dib, jihad, jabbar, even proper names of people like Alia, Farrock, they'll just straight Arabic.

Even the name of the planet, Arrakis.

KHALID: The name means trotting camel, when it's trotting they say it's dancing.

The Freman tribes on Arrakis are also called the Fedakeen, which is similar to the Fedayeen -- guerilla fighters from the Middle East.

The Fremen or Fedakeen believe the main character Paul is their Mahdi – which is Arabic for “the guided one.” And when they accepts Paul as their leader, they give him the name Usul, which means principles in Arabic. And Paul asks the tribe to call him Maud'dib -- M A U D apostrophe D I B. In the book, the Muad'dib is the name of a mouse-type creation on Dune. But in Arab history:

KHALID: Muad'did was a tutor, 12,000 years ago

Growing up in Pakistan, Sami Shah understood a different meaning of Muad'dib.

SAMI: And in Shi'ite Islam, the Muad'dib is chosen one who will return, God send him down end of times, save humanity from anti-Christ, it's very much the

messianic hero. The first time I saw that in Dune is this is the same character, is that a thing? You realize he's using jihad almost in more accurate than currently used on CNN, MSNBC and FOX.

Although it's hard to read the book now and see that word jihad over and over again and not think of Al Qaeda or ISIS.

SAMI: The Arabic word Jihad means struggle, not war, not kill white people, not fly planes into buildings, it literally translates into struggle. The way it was used throughout most history was something – I'm not brown-washing history – many times used as justification for invading other lands because empires build by invasions, banded about by Ottoman Empire and preceding to invade India and Hindu territory and others along the way. But at the same time for Muslims on personal level also meant literally things your struggling with, I will have a jihad against carbs, a jihad against watching too much Netflix so I can get my work done – it was as innocuous as that as well.

KHALID: He is using jihad original sense prophet Mohammad, he was born in Mecca and he started message there for 13 years, people oppressing him and followers, flee to Medina and then started jihad fighting oppressor stopping him following him, blocking trade routes, alliances so Herbert using this in this context, Harkonen oppressed and Muad'dib lead them and that's what jihad used to be.

Although the jihad in Dune is not so black and white.

Paul Attretres – the main character who has been renamed Muad'did -- wants to overthrow the emperor who is responsible for his father's murder, and the Fremen definitely want to help him because the emperor has oppressed them and exploited the natural resources of the desert planet.

But Paul has the foresight to see that his jihad will kill 60 billion people, and wipe out 40 other religions. So he keeps trying to make choices to avoid that fate, but eventually he accepts that this cannot be done. If he was to die now as a martyr they would carry on the jihad in his name. He can only chose the least bad option.

And Khalid says that's not out of sync with the true teachings of Islam, when the religion isn't twisted by fanatics.

KHALID: The other thing is A which is saying of prophet (says it) it's an exact verbatim of Prophet Muhammad, support brother oppressed or oppressor, we know how to support when oppressor, stop him when oppressor? Stop him from doing oppression, that's how support him. It's human nature, look at guy in Turkey, started as democratic leader, he moved like Putin from being a Prime Minister, now changed constitution, so he has turned exactly 180 as what he started as, power does that to people! Whether it's dune or succession or Prophet Mohammad it always happens.

This is actually how Frank Herbert himself put it, in a 1983 interview:

FRANK HERBERT: Leaders amplify by numbers follow them without question charismatic leaders built up followers, I don't think old saw about power corrupting is accurate I think power attracts the corruptible.

I have to say I found it surprising to me to hear these guys speak so highly of Frank Herbert – a white American man using Islamic and Arabic terms to tell his story. Isn't he guilty of cultural appropriation?

Sami Shah doesn't think so.

SAMI: Cultural appropriation is a problem only because the white writer writing about Pakistani or Muslim culture if you will is more likely to get his book published than Paki writer writing about the same thing. And I speak from personal experience that was a major issue for me. If an American writer who is white wrote about Jinns oh my god cross culture, whereas brown guy writing about Jinns, people won't get it, so I had to go with an indie publisher because no one wanted to touch it.

Salman Sayyid also comes at this subject from personal experience, but as a professor who writes about colonial narratives in fiction, he sees it a little differently.

SALMAN: I don't think it's cultural appropriation and that's the problem with Frank Herbert. What you have is an attempt to simply read the non-European through European lens.

In other words, he thinks Frank Herbert treated Islam with great respect – but he also brought unconscious bias.

For instance, Paul's journey of leading the nomadic tribes to freedom is a classic white man's fantasy, like Lawrence of Arabia or even James Cameron's Avatar.

SALMAN: It is noble savage tradition, they don't have ability to understand tech to understand or be innovative or cunning. On familiar things is how easy for Western character to go native but native can never become Western always spotted, it's never quite right and they can never do it.

Okay, so let's say Frank somehow travels to Dune and takes mélange himself and have this incredible moment of enlightenment and realize he's fallen into all these clichés of colonial narrative – how should he then re-write Dune?

SALMAN: I'm saying how he would've done it differently if possibility to imagine why does Paul have to be from the house Atredis? Why couldn't someone like Stilgar be the leader?

That character he's referring to, Stilgar, is the head of the Fremen tribe. He becomes a true believer in Paul and a very loyal right hand man. So if Dune had been the story of self-emancipation – then Stilgar himself could've been the Mohammad type figure.

SALMAN: It could've been of Islam transforms world and destroy half of Roman empire of reconstructing more egalitarian society more cosmopolitan than anything before at the time.

But that would've been a happy ending, and Frank Herbert had no interest in happy endings.

In a moment, we'll look at Dune from the other side of the jihad. That's just after the break.

BREAK

While I was researching this episode, I discovered there's another podcast host here at the Panoply is obsessed with Dune. And when he was a kid, he found the book at his local library as a kid, and he couldn't believe how much Dune resembled the world around him.

But Liel Liebowitz was growing up in Tel Aviv.

LIEL: And then all the sudden read things like oh here's a tribe of middle eastern dessert folk the Fedayeen and my grand daddy fought against actual Fedayeen this made a lot of sense to me, ripped from the headlines.

Novels have a funny way of playing with your perspective. Reading Dune, he identifies with the Fedayeen and their struggle in this fictional world, even though in the real world, he would be on the other side of that war.

LIEL: Yes, even as Israeli identify with Freeman, their religious belief that is amicable to me as a person, and my country, is deeply embodied, it is a real and profoundly meaningful religion, you understand why jihad is launched and you support it, you believe it is real, meaningful and reason, which is the genius of the book.

Which lead Liel began to wonder, who is Frank Herbert? How did this American writer come to imagine a world like this?

Originally, Herbert was a journalist. The inspiration for Dune came from an article he worked on about dunes on the West Coast of Oregon. Researching the story sparked his imagination, which eventually led Herbert to become an environmentalist. He gave a speech at the first Earth Day in 1970.

LIEL: I think he possessed the newspaperman obsession with the tale and really understanding the culture in which he set his novel, which shows. The thing that attracts me to Dune, the thing that was so obvious to me as a child, it feels so real! The world when you read about it, no problem imagining mélange, giant worms, understand reality, finely observed.

Also, it helped that Frank Herbert took a lot of LSD in the '60s.

But Herbert's fascination with religion went way back. Growing up, his eight maternal aunts were devout Catholics who tried so hard to instill religion into young Frank, he eventually rebelled and became a Buddhist.

And there is a lot of Christian imagery in the series too, like the Bene Gesserit, a cabal of sort of nuns who manipulate politics behind the scenes and follow something called the "Orange Catholic Bible." In the books, Paul's mother Jessica is one of the Bene Gesserit and she eventually becomes a "Reverend Mother" with supernatural mental abilities.

That's why when Liel reads Dune, he feels like Frank Herbert understands the thinking of the Middle East.

LIEL: The key point to understanding I think he was drawn to that region he understood religious belief in which he was reared flourishes, region of fundamentalism, zero sum conflict for a reason.

For a reason?

LIEL: The way our religious experiences are shaped and lived, I think it's true of many although not all Islamic some but not all Jewish zealots, a reality that allows very little breathing room and is deeply steeped in this messianic urge to purge the Earth of your enemies and inherit your kingdom.

What do you think of Paul? He rights wrong but unleashes tyranny sees future different choices to avoid jihad, thoughts on that as kid and as adult?

LIEL: I think that is question I will never stop asking myself the answer is answer to everything, core of it is deeper answer what extent do you believe in free will? Great saying in Hebrew, everything is for ordained but permission is given, motto of Paul, what does it mean? Why do you need permission? Your struggle, the jihad within to try and live out best destiny you can and the lesson here and that is lesson, perhaps the great unifying universal force of Dune is that the capacity for great disaster is innate in the best laid plans, such a complex, complicated, engaging, horrifying notion which draws us to this character and to this book.

But I think that's what sets Dune apart from a lot of other science fiction. It doesn't just focus on the power of religion, but what happens when you mix religion with the power of the state. Because if the zealots take over, religious power can corrode the very faith it's trying to protect -- and the art of statecraft -- until you end up with the giant sandworm God emperor of Dune, and it's hard to see the spark of humanity behind the raw struggle for power.

That's it for this week, thanks for listening. Special thanks to Khalid Baheyeldin, Salman Sayyid, Sami Shah and Liel Liebowitz. Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook

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