

A Dune Companion: Characters, Places and Terms in Frank Herbert's Original Six Novels



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Donald E. Palumbo. *A Dune Companion: Characters, Places and Terms in Frank Herbert's Original Six Novels*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 189 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 9781476669601.

DONALD E. Palumbo's *A Dune Companion: Characters, Places and Terms in Frank Herbert's Original Six Novels* is number 62 in the *Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy* series, of which Palumbo is a co-editor. The book offers less of a new critical commentary on the *Dune* series and more of an updated version of Palumbo's arguments from two previous articles published in 1997 and 1998 and a book published in 2002, followed by a compilation of information from the series in an encyclopedic format.

The book is divided into two sections: a long introduction on ecology, chaos-theory concepts and structures, and the monomyth and their presence in the series, and a companion of characters, places, and terms. Both sections achieve their aim: the former to prove the existence of aesthetic integrity through consideration of chaos-theory concepts and structures present in the novels, and the latter to remind readers of characters and events. However, the two parts lack cohesion, which perhaps is unavoidable when including a type of glossary that is not intended to offer commentary or analysis.

For the reader wondering about the mention in the title of the original six novels, the introduction immediately addresses the reason for this focus: they have an "extremely-high level of aesthetic integrity" and an "unusually deep interrelationship between form and content" derived from the relationship between the ecological theme and fractal structure that other texts based in the same universe do not (1). The introduction proceeds to present a persuasive argument with ample evidence, examples, and direct quotations to show how these novels contain myriad elements of chaos theory and the monomyth. It is divided into two sections, the first on the ecological theme and chaos theory, and the second on the monomyth as fractal pattern, with a short conclusion that brings all of the arguments together.

Although the introduction explains key terminology and theories before showing how the series aligns with them, some of the concepts could have been made more accessible to readers. Chaos theory is presented as the idea that, despite real-world systems being irregular and complex, there are laws that govern phenomena like populations, weather,

and biological systems, and that complex dynamical—or nonlinear—systems are made up of interlocking feedback loops. Feedback loops are explained as a process in which the behavior of one element affects the behavior of others, such that when part of the system's output returns as input, this then affects the output, and the process keeps continuing. Palumbo offers fractal geometry as the best-known manifestation of chaos theory, wherein a geometric procedure can be used to generate images that replicate similar structures but are not necessarily identical. The use of examples such as snowflakes—which may look identical but have tiny differences—and the branching that occurs in nature—which can be found in circulatory and bronchial systems as well as in plants—helps make the ideas more understandable, but it would have been helpful to have further explanation of them. Having introduced these concepts, Palumbo then states that the *Dune* series contains a fractal architecture and a fractal reiteration of plot structure, themes, and motifs, which ultimately serves to represent its universe as a dynamical system. Through this, Palumbo argues, the series' key theme of ecology and its core concept of chaos theory are then reinforced. Palumbo makes an important note that Herbert published his first *Dune* novels before chaos theory was identified in the 1970s and 1980s. This shows not only that Herbert was ahead of his time, but also that science fiction authors can extrapolate scientific concepts before they are formally articulated by scientists.

The introduction then proceeds to analyze the many variations of the fractal structure or images in the series, which readers can see signaled by the repetition of the fractal metaphor in phrases like “plans within plans,” “tricks within tricks,” “wheels within wheels,” and others (8). It examines the occurrence of this structure in the series as a whole, in each of the novels individually, and in characters, and how this structure reiterates Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth. It also discusses how the repetition of themes such as metamorphosis into the Other, secrecy and disguise, and death and rebirth are subsumed into the monomyth structure and further reinforce the fractal structure. Each aspect of the argument contains numerous examples from the series and interweaves concepts from chaos theory and ecology for additional support. There is also attention and detail provided for lesser-studied characters like the Tleilaxu, which makes for a balanced discussion.

The section on the monomyth examines the recurring elements of the monomythic hero as evidence of the existence of a clear fractal structure. It provides a brief overview of Campbell's monomyth and the stages of the archetypal hero's adventure, and then traces their appearance in the series. It notes some of Herbert's unusual choices, including at times having the monomythic hero be a secondary character rather than the protagonist, and enabling female characters to share in the hero's role. Palumbo's attention to female characters again shows an ability to create a balanced discussion inclusive of a variety of

characters and groups. Overall, although an analysis of fractal structures may be a dry topic, readers interested in the series can expect to find a new appreciation for Herbert's writing craft based on Palumbo's insights and extensive use of detail.

The companion / encyclopedia section of the book provides a useful reference guide to the series. It does the at-times challenging work of compiling the few details or clues Herbert gives, which offers a helpful consolidation of information as well as a reminder of characters and terms the reader may have forgotten about. Particularly valuable is the note about which book the information is derived from for each entry. An unfortunate issue is the presence of dozens of typos and other errors in spelling and tense consistencies in the entries. In addition, some entries seem overly brief in relation to their importance; for example, the entry for Voice consists of only 22 words, while the entry for krimshell fiber consists of 38 words. Reading it straight through shows the repetitive nature of some entries, but it is unlikely to be read this way when consulted as a reference work. It would be good as a reference source for researchers, especially those without access to digital copies of the texts.