

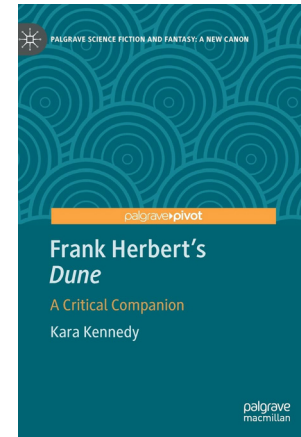
Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion, by Kara Kennedy



Leigha High McReynolds

Kara Kennedy. *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Hardcover. xi + 113 pg. \$34.99. ISBN 9783031139345.

Many of us who read and write for this publication probably have the following in common: science fiction (and related genres) helps us think through abstract ideas, including literary theory. And I'd bet that many of us also share another common experience: we learned those literary theories from instructors who were themselves not familiar with science fiction, definitely not as a field of scholarship and maybe not even as fans. Kara Kennedy's most recent book, *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion*, is the kind of book we needed, and I'm glad that now science fiction students and scholars will have access to this resource.



This companion was published as part of the relatively new series Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon, edited by Sean Guynes and Karen Omry. The series' goal is that "the books will provide an understanding of how students, readers, and scholars can think dynamically about a given text." Given the combination of *Dune's* reputation in science fiction history, broad disciplinary appeal, and allure for teen and young adult readers, offering this kind of companion text to the novel seems particularly apt.

What immediately stands out about the book is its accessibility. The writing style and language choices are straightforward and jargon-free: easily understood by an undergraduate reader, or even advanced high school students. Although it provides a comprehensive overview of the novel's themes, the book is short, less than 100 pages if you don't count the bibliography and index, making it less daunting for readers as well as more likely that they will take in the breadth of information covered. To facilitate that brevity and clarity, the book covers only the 1965 novel *Dune*, so potential readers do not feel as if they need to have read and watched a whole franchise. In addition, there are six original color illustrations by Arthur Wheelan, which lend a delightful whimsy to a discussion of a text that is often taken *very* seriously.

The structure of the book is also audience centered: it is divided into seven sections of about fifteen pages in length. Each section provides an overview of a related group of themes of the

novel and begins with an abstract and list of keywords. All of this would allow a novice scholar or lay-reader to easily read the whole text or find what might be useful to help them engage with the novel. Topics covered include: historical and biographical context, political and religious institutions, ecology and environmentalism, and women's agency. Two of the middle chapters stand out as offering attention to aspects of the novel that are under-theorized and misunderstood, respectively. Chapter Four analyzes the novel's attention to mind and consciousness, dramatized through access to hyperaware characters' interiority, in a world that, without computers, relies on heightened human consciousness. Chapter Five explores the protagonist Paul Atreides's complicated relationship to the heroic archetype and traditional masculinity. Kennedy explains that Paul's limitations and failures are part of Herbert's critique of charismatic leaders. This chapter is especially important for readers who have not continued with the series to understand one of *Dune*'s central messages. The final chapter suggests avenues for future scholarship and exploration including translation studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory: it's a call for future readers and scholars to create a robust body of knowledge that reflects the complexities and depth of the novel. At the end of the book is an extensive bibliography valuable for any *Dune* scholars, containing all significant works published on *Dune* up through 2022, and including several listed as forthcoming that were published after this book went to print.

If the book has a unifying claim, it's that *Dune* played a significant role in the science fiction genre's shift from stories driven by technology to a focus on people and the institutions they create. This is a result of the complexity of Herbert's world-building, which is unpacked through the seven chapters. Ultimately, the book highlights the continued relevance of *Dune*'s themes and world-building to current life.

Given the book's accessibility and its work to overview, rather than make an argument about, *Dune*, it's ideal for undergraduate and graduate students, and advanced high school students, preparing to work on the novel for the first time: particularly for students working with the novel outside of a science fiction studies class. However, the overview could be useful to experienced readers and scholars looking to consider the many facets of the novel and possible directions scholarship might take. Teachers getting ready to teach *Dune* could find it valuable both as a preparatory and a secondary assigned source.

Kara Kennedy's *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion* is part of an exciting larger trend in *Dune* scholarship which likely gained momentum from the 2021 Villeneuve film adaptation. This includes Kennedy's previous book *Women's Agency in the Dune Universe* in 2021; the first edited collection of academic work on *Dune*, *Discovering Dune*, in 2022; and a second *Dune and Philosophy*, also out in 2022. And we can expect another round of publications with Villeneuve's *Dune: Part 2* scheduled for release in November 2023 as the movies bring more attention to the source material. Given this revival, Kennedy's *Critical Companion* will fill an important role in bringing new readers and scholars into the conversation. While the choice to focus only on the 1965 novel is an asset, I hope we will eventually see a critical companion volume like this for the franchise, potentially including the screen adaptations.

Leigha High McReynolds, PhD is currently an Assistant Clinical Professor for the University Honors Program at the University of Maryland, College Park where she teaches classes on genetics and disability in science fiction. Most recently, she published a chapter on eugenics in *Dune* in *Discovering Dune* (McFarland 2022). You can also read her work at *LARB*, *Ancillary Review of Books*, and *Tor.com*. She offers classes on speculative fiction for the local D.C. bookstore, Politics and Prose and is a regular presenter at WorldCon. You can find her on LinkedIn and Twitter [@LeighaMcR](#).