

Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures in Dune¹

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ABSTRACT: Names play a significant role in the development of the characters and cultures of the imaginary worlds envisioned by science fiction and fantasy authors. Rather than create new languages as J. R. R. Tolkien does in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frank Herbert accomplishes his world-building in *Dune* by choosing existing names that evoke a recognizable medieval, feudal setting and depict a desert planet inhabited by a quasi-Arabic and Islamic tribal people. Though names serve to juxtapose the Fremen as an exotic Other with the Western Atreides family, they also gesture toward a possible re-envisioning of this polarized relationship.

KEYWORDS: Frank Herbert, *Dune*, Edward Said, Orientalism, world-building, literary names, science fiction

When J. R. R. Tolkien published his fantasy work *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), he demonstrated that the immersive experience of reading about an imaginary world with its own history, languages, and customs could be quite powerful. A decade later, Frank Herbert proved that the science fiction genre could also accommodate engaging world-building: still the best-selling science fiction novel, “*Dune* is to science fiction what *The Lord of the Rings* is to fantasy: the ultimate created world” (Pierce 1987, 123). Yet little research has been done on the process writers go through when building their worlds, and how some succeed at creating a three-dimensional, immersive world for their readers while others fail. Nor has the significance of names—which play an important role in readers’ perceptions of characters, places, and cultures—been fully explored as a part of the world-building process.

One of the main goals of world-building is to make the new world strange and different to readers, but still believable enough that they can and want to immerse themselves in it. As Tolkien (1964) says, storymakers are successful sub-creators if they can design a secondary world which the reader’s mind can enter into and believe as true (40-41). Unlike most other genres of fiction where the general setting is a given, science fiction contains a new world that is “built with every word” (Delany 2005, 104). Thus, names must fit with the rest of the features of the imaginary world if it is to be believable. In one sense, authors who generate secondary worlds take on the role of Adam, giving a name to all of the items in their domain (Carter 1973, 192-93). This “inventing of names—the finding of ‘the Proper Name’—is of the very first importance” and can distinguish a skillfully created world from an ordinary one (192-93). Often, beginner authors overenthusiastically choose unusual names “beginning with Z’s or Q’s or X’s” without careful consideration of the alienating effect this will have on the reader’s understanding of the imaginary world (206).

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To avoid this kind of alienation and yet still develop a world different from reality, Herbert deliberately chooses names that already exist or are slightly altered and so evoke recognizable time periods, environments, religions, and cultures, and construct the illusion of a universe that exists beyond the borders of the story itself. Names help establish *Dune*'s medieval, feudal setting and its depiction of a desert planet inhabited by a quasi-Arabic and Islamic tribal people, the Fremen. Because of the strong historical link between names in the Fremen culture and real-world Middle Eastern societies, the narrative can also be criticized for containing an Orientalist perspective which juxtaposes the Fremen as an exotic Other with the Western, ruling-class Atreides family. Certainly *Dune* can be viewed on one level as another romanticized and harmful vision of Arabic societies, as Hoda M. Zaki (1994) decries in "Orientalism in Science Fiction." Or Herbert may be judged for capitalizing on "the ignorance and ethnocentrism of his American audience" by using "foreign neologisms to create exotic effects" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2008, 41). In the Fremen, though, Herbert creates an oppressed people whose values are not all that different from the Atreides'. By the end of *Dune*, the Atreides' identity is inextricably bound with that of the Fremen, just as Paul Atreides becomes Paul Muad'Dib, gesturing toward the idea that West and East might be able to be reconciled or re-envisioned beyond the Middle Eastern stereotypes that Edward Said critiques in *Orientalism* (1978).

No matter the simplicity or complexity of the world-building, it involves a certain balancing act, as features like language "must be different enough from the reader's ordinary language to suggest otherness, but near enough to still be understood" (Mandala 2010, 30). Authors must choose which aspects of the real world to keep the same in their stories, and which to change to develop their new, or secondary, world. The changes made to the real world can be divided into four realms: nominal, cultural, natural, and ontological, with most differences to be found in the first two realms (Wolf 2012, 35-36). The cultural realm involves changes like "new objects, artifacts, technologies, customs, institutions, ideas," etc., and such imagined cultures "are often modeled after real cultures, using different combinations of their traits that an audience might find familiar, but in new configurations" (35-36). In the nominal realm, authors give new names to existing objects, which "may call attention to different aspects of familiar things, or even define new concepts, since language bears an inherent cultural worldview within it" (35). Thus, the new cultures and names in a work of science fiction play a significant role in how readers understand the secondary world and its relation to their own world. If an author can produce changes in the nominal and cultural realms that gesture toward an even larger, more expansive universe than is described in the story, world-building can successfully set up the illusion of completeness and allow readers' pre-existing knowledge to fill in the gaps.

These changes need not be limited to the main storyline either. Names referencing historical, literary, or mythic figures and cultures, as well as other details, provide "background richness and verisimilitude" and may appear "outside of the story itself, in the form of appendices, maps, timelines, glossaries of invented languages, and so forth" (Wolf 2012, 2). In a similar vein to Tolkien, Herbert includes appendices in *Dune* such as the Almanak en-Ashraf (Selected Excerpts of the Noble Houses) and Terminology of the Imperium, which gloss dozens of names and items and contain frequent references to events and people not mentioned in the text. This extra information can arouse the curiosity of

readers who then desire to extrapolate beyond the text itself (61).

In the choice of names to facilitate the world-building process, Herbert relies on existing names or variations of them—each one being “chosen with care”—rather than inventing languages (O’Reilly 1981). The first names in *Dune* appear in an epigraph and immediately make clear that this world is not Earth. The names *Bene Gesserit*, *Muad’Dib*, *Shaddam IV*, *Arrakis*, *Caladan*, *Dune*, and *Irulan* set the stage for a journey into an unfamiliar time and place. However, the opening scene concerns a mere boy named *Paul* and his mother named *Jessica*. *Paul* is derived from the Latin *Paulus*, meaning ‘small,’ and carries a link with Saint Paul, the first-century Roman Jew who helped found the Christian Church through his missionary work (Knowles 2005). *Jessica* means ‘one who looks forth’ and is also Biblical; the name was popularized by Shakespeare who used it for the Jewish character Shylock’s daughter in *The Merchant of Venice* after likely finding it in Genesis (“Yickah” 2006; Hanks, Hardcastle, and Hodges 2006). Paul and Jessica’s surname, *Atreides*, recalls the mythic Greek figure of Atreus, “father of Agamemnon and Menelaus” (Roberts 2007). Such legendary figures “abound in subcreated mythologies, their deeds shaping their worlds and their histories” (Wolf 2012, 191). Although Paul’s father, Duke Leto, dies early on, his name also reinforces the link with Greek mythology: *Leto* is the name of Artemis and Apollo’s mother (Knowles 2005). The *Atreides* family thus links with Greco-Roman as well as Jewish and Christian names, and its standpoint becomes more noticeably Western when its members encounter others with different names and viewpoints, such as the villain Vladimir Harkonnen—marked by his name as Russian in the Cold War era in which Herbert writes—or the Fremen with their Arabic-based names (O’Reilly 1981). Indeed, several critics have noted the parallels between Paul and T. E. Lawrence, the British military officer who liaised with the Arabs during World War I and whose book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) and its related film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) were “immensely popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2008, 271).

The use of proper names is also a “particularly efficient way to create a sense of place without resorting to lengthy descriptions” (Ryan 2001, 127). As opposed to pictures or film, writing only “discloses its geography detail by detail, bringing it slowly into the reader’s mind” (122). Therefore, names are a type of shortcut to “capture the feel of a place” or a certain time period “without losing the reader in a descriptive thicket” (125). Herbert quickly lays the foundation for the setting of *Dune* through names and so facilitates the world-building process. In the first chapter, readers are introduced to the Bene Gesserit and the Spacing Guild, as well as the Emperor Shaddam IV. *Bene* means ‘well, rightly,’ and *Gesserit* sounds similar to Jesuit, the Order of the Catholic Church in which Herbert was raised (Morwood 2012; Roberts 2006, 235). The Order was founded at the tail end of the medieval period, with Jesuits “known for their work as missionaries” and “support of controversial theological, missionary, and political doctrines” (Maryks 2013). The first two women introduced, one being Jessica, are both Bene Gesserit—essentially, good Jesuits—so the reader can begin to interpret their behavior and speech in light of this historical religious connection. When the other woman blames her tiredness on the “abominable Spacing Guild and its secretive ways,” the name reinforces that this world is set in a feudal paradigm, when guilds were “a salient institution in much of Europe during the medieval Commercial Revolution” (Herbert 1965, 6; Ogilvie 2011, 1). The presence of an emperor recalls the

“political organization of the Holy Roman Empire” or the Ottoman Empire, also prominent features of the medieval period (Gunn 2009, 161-62; Ower 1974, 131).

Above all else though, the name that etches itself into the reader’s mind is *Dune*, the name signifying a hot, sandy environment starved for moisture. However, to be a believable part of an imaginary world, such a desert planet must have more than sand and heat. It is both the “arid terrain and its extraordinary wildlife that catches the reader’s imagination,” as well as tribal inhabitants whose culture is intimately connected with their environment (Jones 2003, 169).

The most extraordinary organism of the desert wildlife is the great sandworm with its many names: *Shai-Hulud*, *Old Man of the Desert*, *Old Father Eternity*, *Grandfather of the Desert*, and the *Maker*. It is a testament to Herbert that his world-building ability “provides firm grounding for even so unnatural a creature as a sandworm” (Miller 1980, 10). The appendix calls *Shai-Hulud* the “earth deity of Fremen hearth superstitions,” and Herbert bases its name off of the Arabic *sai*, meaning ‘thing,’ and *kulūd*, meaning ‘immortal’ (1965, 529; Wehr 1979, 579, 294). Names indicate the sandworm’s position as more than another desert creature; it is a divine being to the Fremen, who maintain a strong reverence for it even as they use it for transportation and ritual ceremonies. When the Fremen leader Stilgar urges Paul to face the test of riding a sandworm, it is clear that he is invoking a deity: “You must ride the sand in the light of day that Shai-hulud shall see and know you have no fear” (Herbert 1965, 384). On other occasions, the sandworm is referred to as the *Maker*, which references the fact that the sandworms make the spice and comprise an essential part of an environmental lifecycle that the Fremen fit into without disrupting.

Indeed, the Fremen have a distinctive culture as the indigenous inhabitants of the planet Dune. In terms of successful world-building, the construction of believable cultures is one of the most important features. Culture “not only helps to unite other structuring systems (like geography, history, nature, and so forth), but gives them a context that relates directly to the experience of its characters, and gives them meaning” (Wolf 2012, 183). It ties the world together. Often, authors invest in fictional cultures which are “constructed or cobbled together from various aspects of aesthetics of existing real world cultures” (183). This is the path Herbert chooses to take in *Dune*, using Islamic and Arabic cultures to construct Fremen society (Jones 2003, 170). Recognizing that language is an aspect of culture “that immediately gives a sense of a culture’s aesthetics and worldview,” Herbert includes a significant number of Arabic and Arabic-based names throughout the novel (Wolf 2012, 183; Touponce 1988, 26).

The strong association with real-world Arabic and Islamic societies then helps construct the Fremen’s identity as a religious people with a history of persecution, which leads to their desire for retribution and, ultimately, a jihad against off-worlders. In *Dune*, the first time the people of this desert culture are mentioned, there is already a sense that they are outside of the bounds of society: “The planet sheltered people who lived at the desert edge without caid or bashar to command them: will-o'-the-sand people called Fremen, marked down on no census of the Imperial Regate” (Herbert 1965, 4-5). Their name, *Fremen*, harkens to the surname some African-American slaves gave themselves once free and foreshadows the revealing of their historical oppression. Later, Herbert uses specific names from Islam to forge a clear connection with Islamic societies. The *Hajj* is defined as a ‘holy

journey,’ similar to the real-world pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims take (Herbert 1965, 520; Kueny 2004, 529-30). *Ramadhan* is virtually the same inside and outside the text: a time of fasting during the “ninth month of the solar-lunar calendar” (Herbert 1965, 527; Netton 1992, 211). The ritualistic words of one of the religious leaders confirm the link with Islam: “‘We are the people of Misr,’ the old woman rasped. ‘Since our Sunni ancestors fled from Nilotic al-Ourouba, we have known flight and death’” (Herbert 1965, 351). *Misr* is another name for Egypt, *Sunni* is one of the branches of Islam, and *Nilotic al-Ourouba* is a combination of ‘the Nile region’ and ‘Arabness,’ prompting readers to believe that other names must be historically based as well (Esposito 2003; Stevenson 2010; Amin and Kenz 2005, 44). In fact, the name of the Fremen’s survival handbook/religious manual, the *Kitab al-Ibar*, is the same as that of a world history book by Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth-century Arab historian (Jaques 2004, 335-36).

Yet Herbert also uses names to undercut the purity of the Fremen culture and religion, showing how heavily they have been influenced by the schemes of the Bene Gesserit organization. This serves to explain why women are given a larger role in Fremen religious life compared to real-world religions known for their exclusion of women from higher positions of authority (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Judaism). It also makes it believable that the Bene Gesserit-trained Jessica and Paul are able to integrate with the Fremen community in their quest to regain control of the planet.

The name *Shari-a* is a clear reference to Islamic law (Brockopp 2004, 618). But in *Dune*, it takes on a new meaning as part of the prophetic legends spread by the Bene Gesserit should they ever need protection. After exposure to some of the Fremen’s religious beliefs, Jessica reflects on the Shari-a spread by “a Bene Gesserit of the Missionaria Protectiva dropped here long centuries ago,” immediately conveying the fact that the Fremen religion has been manipulated by outside forces (Herbert 1965, 55). The name *Missionaria Protectiva* carries an easily understood meaning both on the surface—Protective Mission—and in relation to what readers know of the Bene Gesserit: that it masquerades as a religious organization but is actually interested in political maneuvering. The Bene Gesserit mission to the Fremen’s ancestors is so successful, in fact, that the people still retain the same names in their religious practices: “The prophetic legends had taken on Arrakis even to the extent of adopted labels (including Reverend Mother, canto and respondu, and most of the Shari-a panoplia propheticus)” (Herbert 1965, 47). Such names make it easier for Jessica to understand their culture and, ultimately, exploit it to ensure her and her son’s survival.

With the background of the Bene Gesserit’s involvement explained, it becomes easier for readers to accept the fact that an otherwise patriarchal, tribal society has such strong female religious leaders and would accept Jessica as one. Once she proves her worth to the Fremen, she is formally named *Sayyadina*, meaning a ‘female religious leader.’ This name comes from the Arabic *sayyid*, ‘to be lord over, to rule’ and can “signify a holy person” (Gleave 2004, 611). The highest religious position and name, however, is that of *Reverend Mother*, which Jessica soon assumes. Because of earlier statements, readers know that the name comes directly from the Bene Gesserit, and is also markedly different from the other Arabic-based religious names of *Sayyadina* and “*Auliya*, the Friend of God” (Herbert 1965, 294, italics added). With his choice of a name used in Catholic/Christian communities, Herbert positions the Reverend Mother as a Western influence in contrast with the religious

culture that preexisted the Bene Gesserit's missionary work. This potentially expands on the world-building experience for readers as they wonder about the extent of the Missionaria Protectiva and how the Bene Gesserit implanted such prophecies.

One problematic aspect of Herbert's creation of the Fremen culture by using Arabic and Arabic-based names is the potential for the Fremen to be viewed as a monolithic, backwards society trapped by archaic religious and cultural beliefs. Their alternative name, *Ichwan Bedwine*, carries multiple meanings. *Ikhwān* can mean 'brethren' as a general term for an Islamic group, or more specifically the Society of the Muslim Brothers, the "first modern Islamic mass movement" (Netton 1992, 118; Johnston 2004, 345). Whether or not Herbert intends to position the Fremen as imitators of the Brothers, who embrace "Western ideas and technology as a tool to advance Islam," is unclear but adds to the interpretive potential (Johnston 2004, 345). *Bedwine* allows for the association with a likely more familiar name, *Bedouin*. *Bedouin* comes from the Arabic *badawīn*, meaning 'dwellers in the desert' and describes Arab nomads who have traditionally "maintained rigorous codes of honor, revenge, loyalty, and hospitality" (Knowles 2005; Keough 2010). Use of the name *Ichwan Bedwine* distances the Fremen from other city-dwelling societies, as Otherness is "represented through the perspective of a tribal culture based on the medieval Bedouin, for whom any person or thing from outside the tribe was to be treated with suspicion and even hatred" (Roberts 2000, 43). The potential appears for confirmation of an "absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior" (Said 1978, 300). "Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of *jihad*" and the persistent "fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world" (Said 1978, 287). The Fremen thus appear as a quasi-Arabic and Middle Eastern people bent on jihad to avenge their historical oppression, unable or unwilling to think rationally and modernize their way of living. To be fair, Herbert's depiction of the Fremen is a far cry from popular mid-twentieth century views of Arabs as "terroristic, hook-nosed, [and] venal" (Said 1978, 108). Nevertheless, Paul and Jessica's manipulation of the Fremen's religious beliefs toward their own ends does show the Western rulers taking advantage of the oppressed Others.

Paul's multiple names are a powerful reflection of his changing attitudes and roles within Fremen society, and the extent to which he is willing to "go native" in order to achieve power. While Herbert ostensibly introduces Paul with his Latin name, discussed earlier, in the first sentence of *Dune*, he actually introduces him as Muad'Dib in the opening epigraph. Paul continues to be named Muad'Dib in the epigraphs that open each section, allowing the reader to speculate how and why he changes his name. When Paul first arrives on Dune, some people "recalled the legends and the prophecy and they ventured to shout: 'Mahdi!' But their shout was more a question than a statement, for as yet they could only hope he was the one foretold as the Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World" (Herbert 1965, 97). Here, two more names are added to those of Paul. *Lisan al-Gaib* is a combination of the Arabic *lisān*, meaning 'tongue' or 'language', and *ḡaib*, meaning 'invisible' or 'supernatural,' derived from the myth sown by the Bene Gesserit that an outsider would arrive to help the Fremen (Wehr 1979, 1016, 806-07). *Madhi*, which resembles *Muad'Dib*, means 'the guided one' and is the "honorary title of the expected deliverer or messianic figure in Islam" (Hermansen 2004, 421). Having someone representing the West take on these names and roles indicates a

perhaps cynical attitude toward religious savior figures, but also portrays the relationship between the West and the Orient as one “of power, of domination, or varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 1978, 5). Paul does not dissuade the people from their speculations. In fact, his father encourages him to use these names and beliefs to his advantage as a ruler when he tells him that “they call you ‘Mahdi’— ‘Lisan al-Gaib’—as a last resort, you might capitalize on that” (Herbert 1965, 105).

Paul’s choice of *Muad’Dib* as his name among the Fremen signals his transition into a position of strength and leadership. It is the name of the resourceful desert mouse on Dune, foreshadowing Paul’s ability to adapt to his environment as well as providing an additional tie-in to the aforementioned Latin meaning of his name, ‘small.’ *Muad’Dib* also means ‘teacher’ both in the text and in Arabic (Wehr 1979, 12). Herbert glosses this for readers in Stilgar’s remarks to Paul:

"I will tell you a thing about your new name," Stilgar said. "The choice pleases us. Muad'Dib is wise in the ways of the desert. Muad'Dib creates his own water. Muad'Dib hides from the sun and travels in the cool night. Muad'Dib is fruitful and multiplies over the land. Muad'Dib we call 'instructor-of-boys.' That is a powerful base on which to build your life, Paul-Muad'Dib, who is Usul among us. We welcome you." (1965, 307)

Paul’s name among Stilgar’s tribe is *Usul*, meaning ‘the base of the pillar’ (1965, 532). Yet Paul’s roles as teacher and foundation of the tribe are soon overshadowed by his role as the prophet, and the names *Muad’Dib* and *Lisan al-Gaib* become associated with violence, connecting Paul and his fighting abilities with the Fremen religion and desire for jihad. In their eagerness for jihad, many of the Fremen are portrayed with “[n]o individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences” but instead with “mass rage and misery” (Said 1978, 287). When they ask Paul if he is the one foretold in the legends, he “sensed the jihad in their words” and heard “the wildness in their voices—‘Lisan al-Gaib,’ they said. ‘Muad’Dib!’” (Herbert 1965, 350, 360). The Fremen accept him not as *Paul* but with these Arabic-based names, and he in turn accepts such names to become one of them and ultimately gain their loyalty. His reputation as a fierce leader steadily grows, and there are “stories told of Muad’Dib, the Lisan al-Gaib—how he had taken the skin of a Harkonnen officer to make his drumheads, how he was surrounded by death commandos” (1965, 417). Through the use of names, Herbert shows Paul’s morphing from a boy to a leader, a fighter, someone whose name connotes ferocity and fanatic loyalty. He essentially becomes one of the Fremen and capitalizes on the propaganda of the Bene Gesserit’s Missionaria Protectiva in order to control the Fremen and regain his rule of the planet.

Therefore, while the Fremen call him *Muad’Dib* and *Lisan-al Gaib*, he remains grounded in his identity as *Paul*. In fact, Herbert always refers to him as *Paul* in the main text; the epigraphs and Fremen refer to him by his other names. The emphasis on his identity as the ruling-class duke in exile, who must teach and guide the tribal people around him, continues the problematic dichotomy between the Atreides family and the Fremen, who must rely on “the equivalent of an enlightened American or European” for liberation (Higgins 2013, 238). Even as the Fremen’s leader, Paul does not return full ownership of the planet to

them but seeks to rule it himself. He uses his multiple identities to his advantage to keep others off-balance, allowing him the freedom to operate strategically in both worlds:

Paul promises as an Atreides Duke that Shaddam and his party will be unharmed, but as Muad'Dib sends the Emperor and his retinue off to permanent exile on Salusa Secundus. Correspondingly, as Duke Paul, he promises an earldom, a CHOAM directorship, and the fief of Caladan to Gurney Halleck, yet as the Prophet reserves the right to dispense titles and rewards to *his* Fremen. (324)

His own right-hand Fremen commander, Stilgar, remains unsure of who Paul is, voicing this uncertainty by listing Paul's many names as markers of his changing identities: "'Usul, the companion of my sietch, him I would never doubt,' Stilgar said. 'But you are Paul-Muad'Dib, the Atreides Duke, and you are the Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World. These men I don't even know'" (Herbert 1965, 406). Stilgar cannot entirely trust this many-faced person, but he is not in a position to free his people on his own; the Fremen depend on Paul in his identity as Muad'Dib and the Lisan al-Gaib to enable their jihad and freedom from oppression.

Yet over the course of the novel, Paul Atreides is fundamentally altered by his experience becoming Paul Muad'Dib, just as Jessica is significantly changed by her experience becoming Sayyadina and then Reverend Mother to the Fremen. Their identities as Atreides can no longer be separated from their identities as Fremen, and so they occupy a hybrid position where their attitudes, behaviors, and worldview are a combination of their previous training and beliefs and those of the Fremen community. Indeed, while living with the Fremen, Jessica births a daughter and names her *Alia*, which encapsulates this hybridity: in Latin it means 'another,' and in Arabic it signifies 'the Most High' as the feminine form of *Alī*, one of the ninety-nine names of God (Sheard 2011, 47; Ghazālī 1995, 50). By the end of *Dune*, the Orient and Islam no longer stand for the "ultimate alienation from and opposition to Europe," but form an important part of these characters' new fused identities (Said 1983, 6). Paul may gain power as an Atreides, but he retains two Fremen, Chani and Stilgar, in his inner circle of advisors, along with his mother. Moreover, Paul struggles and fails to escape the path of the jihad, showing his inability to actually control the Fremen or redirect their power: "He had thought to oppose the jihad within himself, but the jihad would be. [...] They needed only the legend he already had become" (Herbert 1965, 482). Thus, through the bringing together of these two cultures, Herbert seems to be indicating that there is no clear separation between the West and the East and that each has something to learn and gain from the other. Ultimately, using names as a large part of his world-building strategy, Herbert is able to create an immersive, engaging world and invite readers along for the journey, in the process prompting them to think differently about their often polarized world.

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