

D U N N E

P A R T T W O

Jon Spaihts explores the sands of time

By Jeff Goldsmith and Jeff Bond



Jon Spaihts

Jon Spaihts is no stranger to epic science-fiction tales. His first film, *The Darkest Hour*, follows Americans in Moscow dealing with an alien invasion; he co-wrote Ridley Scott's *Alien* prequel *Prometheus* and the cosmic tale of star-crossed lovers *Passengers*; and he cemented his superhero bona fides with co-writing work on the MCU's *Doctor Strange*. But it's safe to say tackling Frank Herbert's sprawling novel *Dune* with director Denis Villeneuve dwarfs all of those prior projects, as its enormity has long beckoned and confounded moviemakers from Alejandro Jodorowsky to David Lynch. Lynch's version managed to gain a dedicated following and cult status, but the filmmaker deferred to the Alan Smithee alias (used when filmmakers remove their names from a film) after Universal released a four-hour version of his 1984 theatrical adaptation for television. A flat three-part miniseries version in 2000, *Frank Herbert's Dune*, on then-branded Sci Fi didn't fare well, although the channel's *Children of Dune* a few years later had a bit more life to it.



Writer-director Villeneuve's 2021 *Dune*, co-written with Jon Spaihts and Eric Roth, found the epic scope and action lacking in previous adaptations to lock in multiple Oscar nominations (including Best Adapted Screenplay), although its box office suffered slightly as it debuted simultaneously in theaters and on streaming in the midst of the COVID pandemic. *Dune: Part Two* cleared \$80 million domestic, along with strong critical and fan raves, during its first week in theaters in early March. Villeneuve had always known he would have to break the story into two movies in order to do it justice—the big question was in where to make that happen. The first film ends with its nominal hero, Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet), and his mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), a priestess of the Bene Gesserit order, fleeing into the desert of the planet Arrakis (called Dune by its nomadic inhabitants, the Fremen) after the decimation of House Atreides on Arrakis by its archenemies, the Harkonnens. Upon encountering a band of Fremen, Paul proves himself to the nomads by fighting one of their men, Jamis (Babs Olusanmokin), to the death. *Dune: Part Two* opens with Paul and Jessica living among the Fremen and Jessica pregnant with the daughter of her late husband, Duke Leto Atreides (Oscar Isaac). While the daughter, Alia [voiced by Anya Taylor-Joy], is a mere fetus in Jessica's womb, due to Jessica's intake of the planet's precious spice, it is sentient, intelligent and engaging in a constant telepathic dialogue with both her mother and occasionally Paul.







The novel offered Spaihts and Villeneuve an obvious juncture to split the story, but it had its pitfalls and ultimately they saw it required a different approach. “There is this seductive target in the novel,” Spaihts says of the source material, “because there’s a time jump in the late middle of the novel where a few years go by and we come back and everyone is living a new life. Gurney [Halleck, the Atreides war-master played by Josh Brolin] is among the spice smugglers, while Paul is now Maud’Dib [a war leader title among Fremen] and Alia walks. Everybody has moved to new spheres, and the story picks up from there, so we had real talks on *Dune* [part one] about whether we could make it to the time jump in our film. That would mean the movie would have ended with Jessica becoming a Reverend Mother, unknown to be pregnant by the Fremen Reverend Mother, and Paul having an ecstatic response to the Water of Life. That ceremony would show him the future, and he and Chani (Zendaya) would become lovers—and that would be the end of the [first] film.”



The full introduction of the Fremen's hidden stronghold, Sietch Tabr, and the Fremen ways (along with their various names for Paul) would have amounted to an “unwieldy fourth act” tacked onto the end of *Dune*. “At the end of the story,” Spaihts says, “what’s really happening in part one is that shadowy forces arrayed themselves against House Atreides, [and] they engineer the downfall of that noble house, but its fall is incomplete because Paul and Jessica are fantastically resourceful. They survive, they escape, they move into the desert—which itself is a killer—but they succeed in making contact with the Fremen and winning a tentative place among them, where the last seed of House Atreides finds purchase. And that’s the end of the film. The hope at the end of part one is that there will be a future for House Atreides because Paul and Jessica live.” He and Villeneuve elected to move forward the duel with Fremen warrior Jamis as a rite of passage for Paul to pass for a finale to the first film. “We left the arrival at Sietch Tabr and the engagement with the question of where [Paul and Jessica’s] place really is in the tribe and how to keep Jessica alive. And the closure of the beginning of any real romance between Paul and Chani—we shoved all of that into the second film.”





While the novel's years-long time break allows for Alia to grow into an uncanny, adult-speaking toddler, Jessica to become Sietch Tabr's Reverend Mother and Paul to establish himself as a fighter and leader among the Fremen, Spaihts and Villeneuve didn't want to be saddled with portraying all those developments in flashbacks. "Ultimately, we asked ourselves, what is the time jump in this novel for?" Spaihts recalls. "What does it accomplish? And there are really two answers. One is that it allows certain characters to settle into new existences so they can meet again. Most saliently, we see Paul become Maud'Dib, the phantom war leader and guerrilla resistance fighter of the Fremen people, and his legend needs to become established on Arrakis so that we see the Harkonnens and the Imperial house, the Corrinos, reacting to it. We need Jessica to become established as the Reverend Mother of Sietch Tabr and begin to be able to wield influence and machinate behind the scenes. And we need Gurney to go native among the smugglers and get dirty and criminal in the hideout with a bunch of outlaws while he plots revenge against Rabban [Dave Bautista]. So in all those ways, we needed some months to go by for those people to enter new existences." What the filmmakers decided they did not need, on the other hand, was the novel's "abomination"—the precocious toddler Alia. "We grappled with two things. One is realizing that [the] talking toddler is fraught with cinematic peril. The digital tools to create such an effect are everywhere present now, so we definitely could have done a thing that looked like a photoreal toddler talking. But it could easily have become a tremendous distraction inside the film. It could have been unintentionally funny [and] the source of a million memes."



Spaihts and Villeneuve also realized that moving the action ahead four years as the novel does could cool the hatred for the Harkonnens, the fresh wound of Duke Leto's death and Paul's thirst for revenge. "We want the death of Duke Leto, his murder by darkness, to be fresh and hot as an injustice and a goad to our characters," Spaihts says. "We want the crime of the Harkonnens and the Corrinos in engineering the destruction of House Atreides on Arrakis to be fresh and dangerous as a political truth. And if four years have passed, then people will have moved on a little bit politically, personally, emotionally, in a way we didn't think served the story. So the shorter gap gives you people who are still grieving, people who are still hot with anger, people who are still desperate for revenge. It gives you a scandal that is still bubbling under the surface, and everything is much more alive. And giving an Alia who is sentient in utero as a late-stage fetus provides a Jessica talking to someone who isn't there—the ghost within her that allows her to seem a little feverish, a little half mad to the Fremen around her as she walks around having conversations with an unborn creature imbued with the consciousnesses of 1,000 matrilineal forebears. So we loved that effect, the transformation of Jessica and how it really let Rebecca Ferguson, who for my money is as good as anything in this film and who gives just a transcendental performance, let us represent in many ways both halves of that conversation."







Another character who might have been introduced earlier in a more literal adaptation is Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler), psychotic nephew of Baron Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård), who ultimately duels Paul for the hand of Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh), daughter of the Galactic Emperor (Christopher Walken), at the end of the film. *Part Two* introduces Feyd-Rautha in a Leni Riefenstahl-style scene as he entertains the baron on his birthday with a rigged gladiatorial display in front of a huge crowd. “We felt that Feyd-Rautha, the other contestant for the Imperial throne and Paul’s in some ways nemesis and dark doppelganger really was the business of the second film,” Spaihts says. “Paul faces real danger and growing pains in *Part Two*—the first sand[worm] ride he attempts could easily have killed him. And he finds himself picking his way through a cultural minefield in finding a place among the Fremen. He is a game piece upon which powerful forces are pressing the Fremen people and the Bene Gesserit to begin with, and then, in revealing himself as the surviving duke of Arrakis and heir to House Atreides, the entire Imperium comes to bear on him as well. But the biggest hazard pressing on Paul across this film is a moral hazard. He is on a philosophical precipice and in grave danger of making wrong decisions, decisions that cast very long shadows.”

