

“Inevitably, the myths
woven by us, though they
contain error, will also reflect
a splintered fragment
of the true light.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien

STEALING INDIANA JONES

I don't know if you can read thoughts
or if I have to speak out loud
but if you can hear me
I would like to know it.

PART I

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

Peru: 1954

Nocturnal screeches and howls fill the Incan jungles.

The moon casts a pale glow across the ruins of Machu Picchu, amid which are the white tents of the archeologists.

The invaders.

Under cover of night, one shadowy figure sneaks past a tent and heads alone to the Tomb of Manco. Only once inside does he dare to ignite his flashlight, which reveals his identity:

The man has a serious gaze and a square jaw shadowed with stubble. He wears khaki slacks with a brown leather jacket and a matching felt fedora.

It's the fedora that gives him away.

From the pouch slung over his shoulder, the hero pulls a stone with strange symbols carved into the face. He looks carefully at it and then shines his flashlight around the tomb's antechamber till he finds the symbol of a sun carved into the stone high overhead, the center of which is made of quartz. He squares up to this mark and points his flashlight directly at the quartz, which causes a beam of light to bounce to another wall inside the tomb. Positioning his flashlight to maintain the beam, he leaves it and follows the shaft of light to a circular indentation in the wall. From his pouch, he then pulls a second artifact, a metallic disk, which fits perfectly into the indentation. As he replaces that missing piece, the beam of light continues, shooting across the room onto a third location.

As recognition crosses his face, he lets slip a lopsided grin.

He proceeds to the spot and pries loose one of the ancient stone bricks from the wall. He squints and sees a faint sheen of gold hidden behind.

It's the Sunburst.

Many would kill to get their hands on it.

As he starts to remove the priceless artifact, a noise startles him.

He whips around to face the door of the tomb.

Another man is now blocking the entrance, a shadowy and bedraggled figure, and his intent to steal the artifact is more than clear. The dim light glints off the revolver in his hand.

The intruder points the weapon with deadly aim...



MY FIRST ADVENTURE

Rural Idaho: 1990

I was a first grader.

Six years old.

Tev and I wandered to the neighbors' house all the time.

He would play with a kid named Zach, who was two grades older, which required Tev to move up in maturity.

I'd play with a kid named Danny. We were a month apart. He was the youngest of six kids, and we were usually ignored, which made that a lawless place. I remember eating sugar cubes whole.

We climbed the huge tree in their front yard, with bark so old and gnarly I'm sure it housed spirits inside. Probably a little dangerous, looking back, to climb so high. They had a triple bunk bed too, which we also climbed, the top of which nearly touched the ceiling. I tried a Nintendo for the first time at their house. Videogames were basically illegal at mine. We also played with Zach's Ninja Turtle action figures—he had Bebop and Rocksteady and even the van, some pretty hot commodities, and I think the only activity where we had to be supervised.

Danny and I also sneaked into the family room where his older sisters were watching *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, which had just been released on VHS. With wide eyes, I watched Indy use his dad's Grail Diary to find clues in the old library—X marks the spot. I also saw the boat brawl through the canals of Venice against a guy with a clue tattooed on his chest. Then they kicked us out, and I didn't get to see the ending.

But the magic of that Grail Diary stuck with me. Indy's dad had filled an entire book with clues leading to a secret.

When I got home, I mentioned *Indiana Jones* to our parents, and they said I'd better not watch any more because it was too violent and not for kids, but I'd seen a decent amount of it, and I didn't think so.

A few days later, Danny and I sneaked into their family room again, and I saw Mola Ram tear out a guy's heart.

Eesh.

So maybe it was too violent.

By this time, the big sisters were tired of defending innocent youths from the PG rating, and I got to watch basically the whole rest of *Temple of Doom*. I couldn't believe Indy had discovered a literally underground cult, and I loved how he outsmarted the badguys by cutting the suspension bridge. But it was more than just the action. Those movies had magic in them, an appeal that was *and still is* hard to put into words.

Something about them called to me, even as a child.

As if Indy's stories concealed a vital secret.
And if I were truly penitent, I might discover that secret in real life.



Danny's family had an old Gideon Bible kicking around.

Nobody seemed to care about it, which I couldn't fathom, because it was so similar to "Dad's Grail Diary." It felt like the magic of the movies had been transferred, at least in part, to real life, along with the secret contained inside. That book felt like the first clue in an epic quest—one that might conclude with a grand discovery.

Perhaps the secret of everlasting life.

They let me play with it without any supervision.

My kid brain couldn't find any route to acquiring something like that legitimately, and not having it didn't seem like a reasonable option.

So I took the Grail Diary home without asking.

I stole it.

And hid it in the carport closet, which smelled like engine oil and wood.

I knew better than to take it. I know that for sure.

Because I usually told everything to my big brother Tev.

And I didn't dare tell him what I had done.

FAMILY CHAT

Online: 2020

Jax

May 12, 2020, 9:32 am

The activity was pretty fun last night



J

May 12, 2020, 9:42 am

No way! Man, looks like Mom has a pretty unique controller gripping style.

Sioux

May 12, 2020, 9:44 am

nah mom's doing the classic "try to get your car to move by moving the whole controller and your body"

Jill

May 12, 2020, 10:20 am

Pray hard for Tevya right now. He's having seizures and an ambulance is coming

Mom

May 12, 2020, 10:23 am

We will pray. Keep us posted... Was he feeling bad....

Sioux

May 12, 2020, 10:28 am

What the????? What happened???

Michal

May 12, 2020, 11:09 am

Oh gosh Jill! Sending prayers!

Mom

May 12, 2020, 11:19 am

Jill just called and said Tevya passed away at the bottom of their driveway with the paramedics working on him... His heart just stopped...

Shawnee

May 12, 2020, 11:19 am

What ?

Mom

May 12, 2020, 11:20 am

They tried for 20 mins to get him going

She is in despair and crying and I am too.

The children don't know yet

She's still at the bottom of the driveway

Someone please call Tanner he won't check this till tonight...

J

May 12, 2020, 11:23 am

I'll call him.

ADVENTURE DOES HAVE A NAME

Hollywood: 1981

In *Treasure of the Sierra Madres* (1948), Humphrey Bogart wears a hat almost identical to the one worn by Indiana Jones. Aside from that, there's little else in similarity. Just one small yet dashing feature of a costume.

Not so with *Secret of the Incas*.

The opening scene of this essay—Peru 1954—is simply a description of that movie. It feels exactly like Indiana Jones.

But it's not.

Although the main character is the spitting image of Indy, it's actually Harry Steele, played by Charlton Heston. Yet he's wearing khaki pants, a brown-felt fedora, a leather jacket with a pouch slung over the shoulder, and he's hunting ancient tombs for rare artifacts made of gold. It's uncanny how closely the two match. Charlton Heston even has similar features to Harrison Ford, and the occasional shot makes them seem like they could be brothers. These similarities are enough to make fans of Indy at least confused if not uncomfortable, and that's not even all of them.

They have similar personalities. Although Harry isn't a professor of archeology, he is an expert on the particular treasure that the story is about. Both are resourceful and solve puzzles that others failed to unlock. And, of course, both are eager to adventure in exciting foreign locales.¹

Harry is an unscrupulous rogue. For example, he makes it clear that he's not above stealing things, and every time someone calls him Steele, he asks them to call him by his first name instead, as if maybe he doesn't want to be associated with the word. Indiana Jones makes a similar impression when he sneaks out his office window rather than confronting his students. Although there are other examples of Indy being devious, the most egregious is that he had an affair with the underaged Marion Ravenwood sometime in the backstory before the first film—not exactly a white knight.

Secret of the Incas premiered in 1954, nearly three whole decades before *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was released in 1981. It is absolutely certain that Harry Steele staked his claim first.

He's the original.

And even if the genre tropes and personality traits are not unique, the outfit certainly is. It's his by rights.

Yet somehow it no longer belongs to him. Even though Harry Steele's movie

¹ Also, *Harry* is the nickname for *Henry* just like *Jim* is for *James*, so one can't help but wonder if both Harry and Indy even have the same given name: *Henry*. George Lucas originally called his character Indiana Smith till he was convinced to change it in pre-production, so it was almost Henry Steele and Henry Smith.

came so many years ahead, anyone who sees it now will think he took it from Indy. As Mark Hamill joked, “It’s an homage, which is a kind word for stealing.”²

Actually, it’s called plagiarism.

The definition of which is to take someone else’s ideas or work and pass it off as your own. That’s precisely what the filmmakers did. They stole an idea—a unique character costume—without permission, duplicated it, and never gave an ounce of credit.

They plagiarized Indiana Jones.

How did this happen? And how did they get away with it?



In 1966, a movie starring the insanely cool Steve McQueen came out. Its titular hero was named *Nevada Smith*.

Around 1974, George Lucas posed for a photo with his female Alaskan Malamute, a big, fluffy, black and white dog he’d named Indiana³—which,

² See [Cambridge Union 2016](#).

³ In 1976, Lucas completed a draft of *Star Wars*, at which point the “furry visage and loyal demeanor” (*LIFE* magazine, May 2021) of his dog inspired the character of Chewbacca, the co-pilot. “I had an Alaskan Malamute when I was writing [*Star Wars*], a very sweet dog. She would always sit next to me when I was writing, and when I’d drive around, she’d sit in the front seat. A Malamute is a very large dog, like a hundred and thirty pounds and bigger than a human being and very long-haired” (George Lucas, Denver Art Museum).

incidentally, is also the name of Steve McQueen's home state. Roughly five years later, Lucas and Lawrence Kasdan collaborated on the first draft of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and they named their hero Indiana Smith. When Spielberg joined the project, he said *Indiana Smith* was too similar to *Nevada Smith*, and he convinced Lucas to call the hero Indiana Jones.⁴

Nevada and Indiana both follow the pattern of a U.S. state used as a nickname and attached to a common surname. Many others fit this tradition, of which the following are just a few: Alaska Young,⁵ Arkansas Dave Rudabaugh,⁶ Minnesota Fats,⁷ Nebraska Hooper,⁸ Tennessee Williams,⁹ Texas Jack,¹⁰ Virginia Otis,¹¹ and Wyoming Knott.¹² A book titled *Steve McQueen: The Race of His Life* (2015) boldly claims that "The name 'Nevada Smith' was the original inspiration [for Indiana Smith]." It's not a huge stretch of the imagination that George Lucas borrowed from Steve McQueen, but the author doesn't cite a source, making the story apocryphal.

So the question remains: Are the similarities deliberate or coincidental?

When the credits of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* scroll, the sixth name that appears on screen is Deborah Nadoolman (Landis), listed as the costume designer. Obviously, she was intimately involved in making Indy look like Harry. In an interview with TheRaider.net, she said,

We did watch [*Secret of the Incas*] together as a crew several times, and I always thought it strange that the filmmakers did not credit it later as the inspiration for the series.¹³

She also joked that *Secret of the Incas* is "almost a shot for shot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," which is an obvious exaggeration, but it gets the point across. She's

⁴ A timeline in *Star Wars Year by Year* (2021) says, "Because the hero's name remind[ed] Spielberg of the film title *Nevada Smith*, Lucas later change[d] it to Indiana Jones."

⁵ *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, 2005

⁶ *Young Guns II*, 1990

⁷ Real-life pool shark, 1913-1996

⁸ *Objective: Burma!*, 1945

⁹ Real-life author and playwright, 1911-1983

¹⁰ Real-life soldier and cowboy, 1846-1880

¹¹ *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde, 1887

¹² *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* by Robert Heinlein, 1966

¹³ See [Wikipedia's article on *Secret of the Incas*](#).

basically saying they took someone else's idea and tried to pass it off as their own (which, again, is the very definition of plagiarism).

It's ugly.

Seems wrong somehow.

Yet if it is indeed wrong, it's not wrong legally, at least not to certain extents within the United States.¹⁴ The U.S. Copyright Act of 1976 says, "In no case does copyright protection for an original work... extend to any idea... concept, principle, or discovery."

In simpler terms, this means one can't legally protect an idea.¹⁵

One can, however, protect *the expression* of an idea, a nuance that doesn't seem too surprising coming from the legal system. This idea-expression concept¹⁶ seems simple enough, but it's complicated in practice, which is why specific examples are often brought before the court.¹⁷

An adventurer risking life and limb to rescue ancient archeology before the badguys do is a cool idea, and being an idea, it's up for grabs. Indiana Jones, Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*), Nathan Drake (*Uncharted*), and even Harry Steele are each expressions of this idea, and they are each protected by copyright.

Yet if someone were to copy Indiana Jones as closely as he himself copied Harry Steele, a lawsuit would be certain.

It would also just feel wrong.

So why was that copying okay the first time but not a second?

¹⁴ I'm not a lawyer, and in no place herein am I offering legal advice.

¹⁵ I cannot reiterate this enough: I'm not a lawyer, and in no way am I suggesting you should take my interpretations of the law as legal advice.

¹⁶ See also [Wikipedia's article on US Copyright](#).

¹⁷ Copyright law also leaves room for parody, which means you mimic a work but alter it to make a critique, often through comedy. This is why *Spaceballs* can do what it did. (It can also do what it did because George Lucas gave its director his blessing, meaning he wouldn't or didn't take them to court over it.) Other *Star Wars* parodies include two episodes by the *Family Guy* team, and a brilliant little piece called *Thumb Wars*.

THE YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES

Suburban Idaho: 1992

My stolen Grail Diary Gideon Bible was a deep red.
Almost the color of blood.

It was pretty tiny, just right for a kid. It included the New Testament and the Psalms and said so in gold lettering on the cover. In the bottom corner, it had a lamp inscribed inside a circle.

That seemed like a clue.

The promise of illumination maybe.

Indy's mother died when he was twelve—surely a pretty traumatic event for him. At that point, his dad, Henry Jones Sr, focused his energies on finding the Holy Grail, the greatest of all quests, which encapsulated the secret of everlasting life, and he collected the clues he found inside a diary.

My little Grail Diary was the closest thing I had to that.

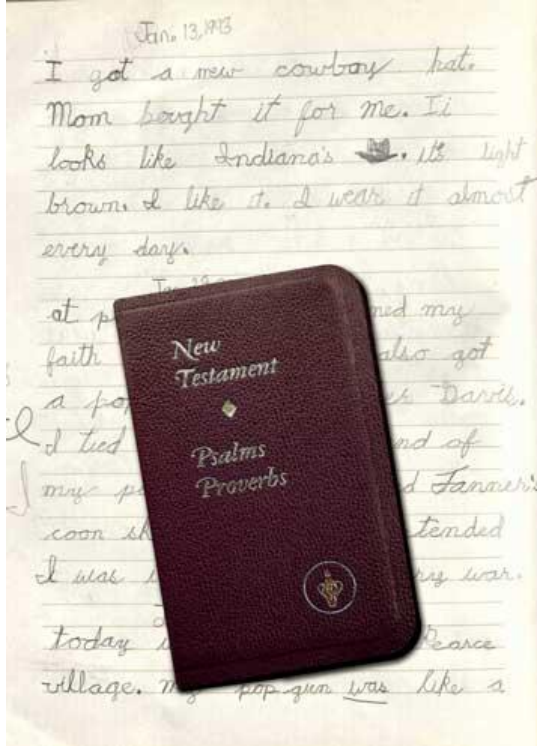
Unfortunately, I wasn't able to ever play with it. Too afraid of being caught.

But I didn't like keeping secrets from Tev, so I rehearsed a confession in my mind and wanted to confide in him. After all, "only the penitent man shall pass." (I had to ask Tev what that word meant.) It seemed too scary though. Tev was very honest, even as a boy, and I apparently had not kept pace.

I agonized over what to do—that's a clear memory. Strangely, though, I can't remember what happened next. If I'd confessed, I would've remembered. It's possible I stole the diary in reverse, sneaking it back to the neighbor's house without anyone knowing. More likely I just left it hidden till the carport was demolished in the renovations. I just know it was *lost*.

That's another clue.

I do, however, remember committing to never again getting my conscience caught in such a vicious trap.



Having not been caught, though, relations with the neighbors stayed strong. At some point, Tev and I both got to see all three *Indiana Jones* films—from Satipo getting skewered alive to Donovan drinking from the wrong cup and aging instantly into a corpse.

All without telling Mom of course.

Our grade-school wherewithal couldn't explain the deeper truths to her, that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* taught humility in the face of higher powers, that *Temple of Doom* showed the monumental value of human life, particularly of children, and that *Last Crusade* gave a glimmer of hope in traversing the chasm of grief. Instead our arguments amounted to something like “the gore isn't that bad,” which proved unconvincing.

Just so you know, that tactic won't work on me either.

We'd been fans of *Star Wars* since forever—an interest our Mom encouraged because of the spiritual themes. Our Indiana Jones fandom went underground but stayed just as strong. We agreed that these two franchises were the greatest of all time, and it blew my mind when Tev explained that George Lucas had created both.¹⁸ Soon Tev brought home a copy of the *LucasFilm Fanclub* magazine. That's where we learned that Indiana Jones was born on July 1st, 1899, a fact that became so deeply important that I could put it in this essay without having to look it up. Aunt Jen gave us a *Last Crusade* puzzle, which we assembled together

¹⁸ Although directed by Steven Spielberg, each Indy movie says “Story by George Lucas.”

then glued to a piece of cardboard. To this day, it's hanging in the Man Cave with one piece missing.

Somehow that never struck me as grim foreshadowing.

The summer that I turned nine (1992, having just completed 3rd grade) was the summer *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* aired on TV.¹⁹ This time around, Tev's arguments became more sophisticated. He explained to Mom that this was about Indy fighting in World War I, where he met great historical figures like Winston Churchill, Pancho Villa, T.E. Lawrence, and Albert Schweitzer.²⁰ It taught kids history!

Plus it wasn't gory.

That finally got Mom on board with Indy.

She still wasn't, however, keen on television. We had a TV and a VCR, but our antenna couldn't pick up Channel 6. That left us scrambling every Wednesday at 7:00 for a place to watch. We only actually caught two episodes that I can remember.

One was at Dad's office, but the reception was bad, making the picture mostly static, so it was more of an audio drama. Lucky thing too, since it was the *October 1916* episode, where Indy heads to Paris to find women with Remy and falls in love with the temptress Mata Hari, an exotic dancer, courtesan, and German spy—an embarrassing one to watch with Mom looking over your shoulder.

We caught our second episode at our cousin Mitch's house. Indy was a spy in Italy and used his leave time to compete for the love of a local named Juliet against his rival—none other than Earnest Hemmingway.

They pulled the series after two seasons, and our chance to watch seemed lost forever. (In reality, we had to grow up 6 years into the future till the series was released on VHS in 1999.)

Despite almost never having seen the show, Tev and I remained obsessed.²¹ We found a pair of Young Indy compasses at a yard sale and wore them on leather strings around our necks. Mom got us Dixie paper cups with Young Indy on them, which we tried to never use. At my request, my parents bought me a safari pith helmet on their trip to Africa, one like 9-year-old Indy wears when he meets Teddy Roosevelt. I used that helmet to become Young Indiana Jones for

¹⁹ Before the *Chronicles* ever existed, Tev and I borrowed the *Young Indiana Jones* novels from our friend Davey. On the covers, Indy looked like he was twelve, yet he still wore the hat. Tev read them—he was a voracious reader. I read maybe one, capable with words but not with staying on task, another way in which I wasn't keeping pace.

²⁰ Incidentally, this is almost the exact same reason that I like the *Assassin's Creed* franchise as an adult—it makes history fun and accessible. And by the way, the whole concept of having your ancestor's memories locked inside your DNA—they stole that from *Dune*, in which it is a major plot point. More on this to come...

²¹ Though, to be fair, not as obsessed as this guy, who made [an insanely detailed study of all of Young Indy's adventures](#), not just the *Chronicles* but the books too, including the French novels that were never officially published in English!

Halloween of 1993.

Tev borrowed a comic book of Young Indy's Egypt adventure from Gary on the hill behind us. It featured a ghastly mummy on the cover which we made sure not to show Mom, fearing it would remind her of the gore from the movies. Reading that comic was almost as good as having seen the first episode. We also read the books—novelizations of the episodes. I still remember the back cover from *The Secret Peace*. "Wanted: Spy to cross enemy lines. Requirements: Speak French and German. Work and play well with others. Must be cunning, fast on feet, good driver. Strong nerves a definite plus." After the Grail Diary incident, I wasn't sure I had strong nerves.

But I sure wanted to.

The main thing, though, were the trading cards. You know the ones.

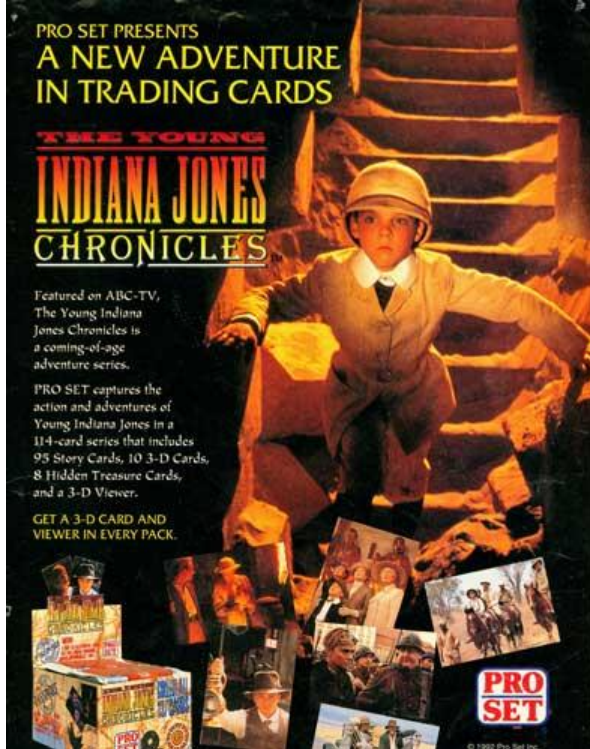
At the beginning, we had to convince Mom to drive us to King's department store. We'd skip the baseball and basketball cards, which even then we realized was nerdy, so we were discreet. One pack cost 99¢ plus a nickel for tax, paid out of our lawn-mowing money. These came with a random set of 7 story cards, a hidden treasure card, a 3D-image card, plus a pair of 3D glasses. When we discovered that the 7-Eleven near Mitch's house carried them too, we became all the more eager to visit our cousins, and we walked down to that store every chance we got.

Together, Tev and I eventually collected almost the entire set of 114 cards—but we were missing one story card (#93) and one hidden treasure card (Verdun).

More missing pieces.

Then as I grew up, I forgot about the cards.

And they too were lost.



For Tev, the Indy obsession drew him deeper into historical research. He was always reading historical fiction and nonfiction, which allowed him to personally meet some of the same figures as Indy. This later became the focus of Tev's bachelor's degree, though he was truly an expert even as a boy. You could say that he was literally walking in Indy's footsteps,²² becoming Professor Henry Jones, Jr, digging deeply into history to find its most valuable hidden treasures.

While Tev was reading, I was writing.

I stole the Grail Diary because I needed more Indiana Jones. His stories inspired me, and I felt a constant need to find more of that. As I obsessed over this quest, I created Grail Diaries of my own where I would write things like "Only the penitent man shall pass" and copy down symbols and clues, which I found in the real world, from the flourishes in the hotel carpet to the single and double daggers used in the Bible's footnotes († and ‡).

All along, I hoped this series of small secrets would lead to some grand secret, perhaps the Grail itself, whatever that might mean.

At the time, I hadn't the foggiest, but I can tell you now, looking back.

²² Here's a funny memory my cousin told about walking in Indy's footsteps. Tanner was in his Sunday clothes, slacks and suspenders, and someone was teasing him, and so he wanted to go wrestle or get in a scrap, and then I chimed in and told Tanner that *that* isn't how Indy would do it. He'd first pull down his suspenders off his shoulders, and so Tanner did it. Chase witnessed this whole scene and wondered how I knew what Indy would do.

Ultimately, I aspired to be George Lucas. I didn't want to be a filmmaker, per se, but I did want to create stories as exciting as his.

That was the ultimate secret.

To create stories that inspired kids to be heroes.

Yet it felt like all the good ideas had been taken. Unable to come up with anything original, I copied the stories I loved.

I wrote very short fanfiction.²³ I did a lot of drawing too, a skill Tev modeled. I leveraged Mom's lightbox to do this more efficiently. You could place a source drawing on the glass surface and then put a blank paper on top. Once you flipped on the light underneath, you could see the source coming through, which made it easy to trace onto the new page.

I showed all my work to Tev, and he approved.

Sometimes I made small alterations to these tracings and gave the characters new names, trying to make them more my own.

But after one of the neighbor kids said the word *derivative* with a sneer, I felt pretty deflated. He was one of the smart kids, and I knew he was right.

When my youngest brother, an infant at the time, scribbled all over my sketches, ruining most of them, I almost didn't care. It seemed fitting. I tucked my diary under a box in my closet and didn't show the drawings to anyone outside of the family.

It was true: Nothing I came up with was at all original.

I was no George Lucas.

I was just a dumb kid who knew how to trace.

²³ I started one story about Indy finding Noah's Ark—which Rob MacGregor also did in his fourth Indy novel, *Genesis Deluge*.

DEATH

Phone Call: 2020

I wish you could've met him.

When he died, I was alone at home.

I read what Mom posted in the family chat.

I screamed NOOO—a pitiful Luke Skywalker. Honestly, it seems stupid now, and I feel embarrassed to write it, but I just didn't know what to do. Didn't know how to feel something of that size. I imagine the downstairs neighbors heard me.

In a stupor, I called Tanner, as I had promised.

He answered on the first ring: "Hello?"

I didn't respond. I couldn't.

He waited patiently, while hearing me cry.

I finally said, "Tev passed away."

He waited for me to cry more.

I pulled myself together just enough to say that it had something to do with his heart and a blood clot, that Mom had posted it in the family chat, and we didn't yet have further details.

He then asked if Tev was really gone.

I said yes.

He said, "Okay, thank you."

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too."

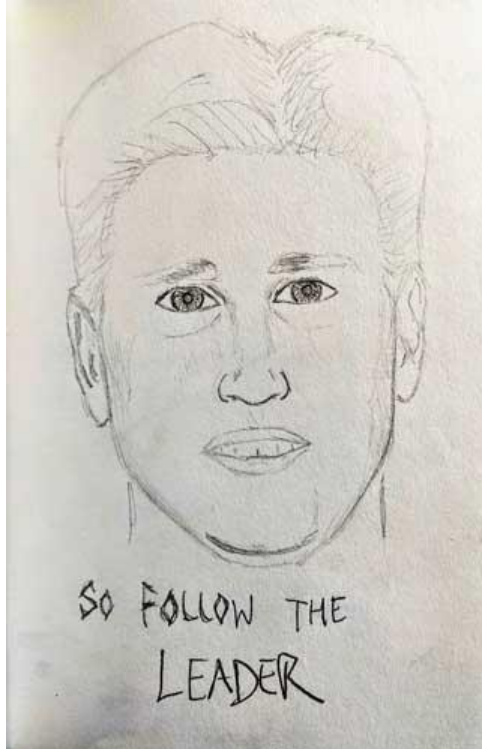
After hanging up, I kept sporadically breaking into crying.

My body temperature is usually too hot, but I crawled under the covers, freezing. I felt sick, not quite enough to throw up. After a few hours, I listened to "It's Quiet Uptown" on repeat. My chest started to hurt that evening, right under my sternum and all the way up my spine. Literal heartache. I breathed very deeply to try to relieve the pain. And I'm just his brother. I can hardly imagine what it would be like for a wife to lose her husband.

Or a kid to lose his dad.

Never before had I felt farther from the whimsical adventures of Indiana Jones. This was real life. It was gritty and harsh, and people who died stayed dead. There was no secret of everlasting life.

And no cup of Christ could revive him.



I almost hate to tell you all of this.

I want you to understand—you of all people have a personal stake in this, even more so than your siblings. For you to understand, you need to know who he was and what he meant to me. And if I pull that off, so you really get it, then you're going to feel the awful hurt. Feel it along with me.

I feel conflicted about that. Why should I try to share my pain?

Tev is buried on a hill overlooking a beautiful rural valley—a pattern of green and yellow farmer's fields stretching in a patchwork. You haven't been there yet, but I'd love to take you sometime.²⁴

On the day of his funeral, I saw a bird of prey gliding on the wind near the crest of that hill. I wanted that to mean something. Maybe an eagle carrying a message from Zeus, or a hawk bringing word from Apollo. I wanted the Gods to tell me my brother was still out there—that his soul had transcended, unlocking the secret of everlasting life.

It was Morpheus who came to me instead, visiting in strange dreams.

²⁴ On December 24, 2023, roughly six months to a year after this writing, depending on the draft, you and I and Mom drove out to the Melba cemetery around noon, after going to church with Grandma and Grandpa. It was bright, gently overcast. As we drove up the hill, we saw two hawks floating on the aggressive winds. After arriving at his graveside, you were eager to leave—tired, hungry, and ready for naptime. We left in enough of a rush that I'm not sure you even touched the gravestone, but you walked in the grass as a toddler, a year and half old.

In one dream, September 12, 2020, Tev was younger again, pre high school, and he and I were in Mom and Dad's front yard. The space was strangely larger than in real life, and there was a huge hole in the lawn—

Like a 10-foot drill bit had borne straight down forever.

All the way to hell.

We couldn't see what was down there—just darkness. It was dangerous and scary, gaping at us ominously, but we couldn't do anything about it, so we tried to ignore it, even though it was always there next to us, waiting, staring back at us.

Tev was swinging his Indiana Jones bullwhip around his head—the ten-foot leather one from our aunt's trip to Mexico.²⁵ He'd always been so good at cracking it—which required a big brother's strength—but this time he couldn't get it to make a sound. He gave up and asked me gently, “Do you remember how to do it?”

He handed me the whip.

I'd never been good at it, but I took it and really heaved to get it going in a circle over my head, against some unseen resistance, like something was missing or broken. I jerked it back as hard as I could, and only barely made a pop.

I turned to Tev's oldest, who was standing next to us, and felt like I needed to offer some kind of excuse: “Tev used to be so good at this. He could pop it so loud. I think the lash is just too worn down.”

It seemed important that Tev could still crack that whip, and if he couldn't, there needed to be a legitimate reason, a valid excuse.

But I struggled to find any justification.

That wasn't the only dream.

On October 25, 2021, I experienced this:

I didn't think I was even asleep, and yet I thought I heard Tev's voice call my name, trying to wake me. I did wake up and looked toward the bedroom door where the sound had come from.

But he wasn't there, and it wasn't my wife either.

On New Year's Day of 2021, I wrote in my journal, “It's like this miniature horror movie every time I think about it.”

That is still true.

Every time I think about it.

Death itself hangs over my head and stalks in my footsteps.

I hate to say it, but you'll face something similar yourself one day.

Death comes for us all.

While writing this essay, I went to find the chat transcript from the day he died. As I read through it, I broke down crying, unable to keep it in, just sobbing.

²⁵ In real life, Tev and I proved Indy wasn't so unrealistic: With the right lash, we learned to whip a branch and swing with our full weight on it. We could kind of do this on the rafters in the barn too.

Emma, eight years old at the time, saw me, saw my anguish, and asked why I'd write about it if it was so painful.

I couldn't choke out an answer, but this is what I need to tell her:

In college, Tev got me a job at the Writing Center, a place in the library where students could come to be coached on their writing by their student peers (including me and Tev). Sharon Morgan ran the operation, and once a week she'd hold a seminar to teach us instructors how to be better writers. She didn't focus on academic writing, though, which she loathed. Instead, she taught us how to write a type of creative nonfiction she called "Blood Essays," and she taught us the following creed:

The hardest things to write about are the most important things to write about.

I want you to know that *that's* why I'm writing this.

Because it's painful.

When I started, I intended to write about where creatives get their inspiration. Just that. I had no intention of writing about Tev. Somehow, though, it became necessary.

As if the pain that had been kept secret needed to be brought to light.

As a child, I walked in his footsteps. No, that statement's not strong enough. I literally spent all of my formative years emulating my older brother. Same schools, same friends, same sports, same shoes, same exact Eagle Scout project. All of these were me following him. It's captured in a picture of us together circa 1991 wearing matching jeans and striped polos.²⁶ He shaped nearly every aspect of who I was becoming.

He was not only a mentor but also a peer and friend. He was my pattern to follow into the world of adulthood.

And then he was just gone.

²⁶ In the background of this photo on the right side, you can see the door of the carport closet where the stolen Grail Diary was hidden. Our little sister seems to be acting as sentry, guarding a secret she never knew about.



PART II

BYE BYE THIS HERE ANAKIN GUY

Hollywood: 1999

In 1995 (just before 7th grade for me and 9th for Tev), we got *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*, a 16-bit point-and-click graphic adventure for PC.

Same year we got the internet.

This began a social revolution at the Washburn home, in which videogames began to be not exactly accepted but reluctantly tolerated, an effort spearheaded by Tev and me (and the younger kids benefited from our crusade—which culminated in the Mario Kart noted previously). For better or worse, that's why you live with a different paradigm.

Tev and I tag teamed *Fate of Atlantis* through the path of wits. Sometimes the puzzles were obscure and nonsensical, but we stuck to it till one of us figured it out. Eventually, we solved all three story branches. (If online walkthroughs existed, we weren't aware of them—but we did compare notes with one of our cousins.) The gameplay was fun, the story excellent.

After that, we played anything and everything from LucasArts—the game studio founded by the practically divine George Lucas. That included *Day of the Tentacle*, *Monkey Island*, *Full Throttle*, *Rebel Assault*, *X-Wing*, and *Dark Forces*. These latter three took us deeper into *Star Wars* fandom—

We learned the names of obscure *Star Wars* characters like Ponda Baba. We collected the old-school action figures—the ones where you'd shove Kenobi's lightsaber up his forearm to make it seem to appear in his hand. In high school, we made lightsaber videos, with Tev as the director, i.e. George Lucas, and me and Tanner as Mark Hamill and Harrison Ford. This was back when you had to draw VFX on each frame manually, four clicks of the mouse per frame, and 29 frames per second of footage—extremely tedious and requiring tremendous patience.

Yet it was a small price to pay to hold a lightsaber.

Like with *Indiana Jones*, our devotion to *Star Wars* ran deep, something almost spiritual. I can't speak for Tev, but I literally tried to develop Force powers through physical training and concentration. Luke Skywalker was practically Jesus—the perfect example to follow, at least if you were trying to be a hero. Studying the Force changed my relationship with anger, which is to say that it had an impact on my emotional intelligence, kind of a big deal for a whimsical space opera.

The original trilogy came out before I was born, so I grew up with them but had never seen them in theaters. Oddly enough, you were born after essentially

everything I've discussed here (except for Indy 5,²⁷ which is just weeks away...).

In 1997, Tev had just completed his sophomore year of high school, and I was starting as a freshman in the fall. That summer, George Lucas put the *Star Wars Special Edition* trilogy in theaters, each launching a month apart. Tev and I planned to see all of them on the first day. We went to *A New Hope* together and were wowed by the changes—which we recognized easily.

We got in an argument on the day of *Empire Strikes Back*, and I ended up going to the theater alone the next day. I lost more than my first-day bragging rights. I don't remember what the fight was about.

Here are two of my journal entries from the time:

8 September 1998 - "Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace comes out in a few months. I can't wait."

22 September 1998 - "I downloaded the Episode I trailer off the internet. It is too awesome for words. Of course, by the time you're reading this it's probably history (right?)."

In May 1999, Tev was graduating high school and aimed at college. I was halfway through high school, pretending on occasion to be growing up, but doing my best to avoid it on the inside. The comic book of *Phantom Menace* leaked

²⁷ On June 29, 2023, I had an interesting dream, one which kept me tossing and turning all night: I was frantic to finish my own manuscript of Indiana Jones 5 so that I could publish before the landscape was tainted by the Disney version (which came out the next day, June 30). First, my manuscript explained in detail the right look for the white hair and scruffy beard—what an aged adventurer ought to look like, and it certainly wasn't the same as his younger self. The opening scene took place in a library, with Indy reading about a gunfight in almost perfect silence. The scene then changed, in shocking contrast, to a very loud and very real gunfight in the formerly quiet library—emphasizing the difference between reading and actually experiencing. This scene had an interesting MacGuffin that I couldn't remember upon waking. Next was a car chase, and I found not Indy but myself hanging onto the spoiler of my blue 2004 Honda Accord with one hand and firing a Glock at the pursuing bad guys with the other—hard to be accurate and actually stop the bad guys before they caught up. Thrilling though too. So maybe I was standing in as Old Indy's stunt double. The final scene of the story had Old Indiana Jones standing alone on the top of a hill. The bad guys rode up toward him on horseback. He could hear them but wouldn't see them till they crested. He knew he was too old to successfully make a run for it. They'd capture and kill him. So he stood his ground, taking this test of bravery with a stoic expression, ready to die, but not going down without a fight. As they appeared over the crest to run him down, he aimed his pistol. One steady shot took down the first rider. The rest came at him faster, firing unsteadily from their speeding mounts. A second shot from Indy, and a second rider crashed down. Bullets whizzed past him on all sides, but he held firm. The third rider was nearly on him. The two opponents fired, one standing on two feet, one jostled on horseback. The third rider fell, skidding right to Indy's boots, which still hadn't budged an inch. The commotion fell quiet. After the three meanest riders had fallen, the others now retreated, leaving a trail of dust and Indy standing on that hilltop alone, the wrinkles on his face positioned in an unmoving frown.

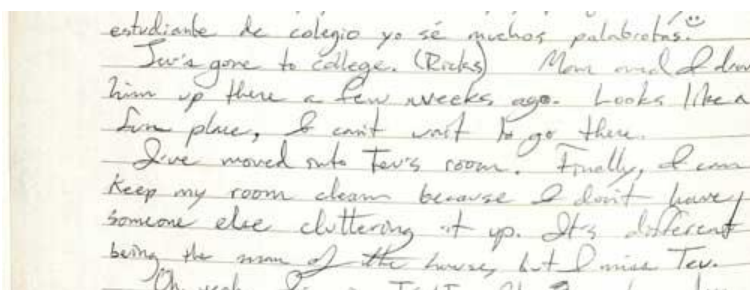
online days before, and although I knew it would spoil the ending, I looked anyway. That's another secret I didn't tell Tev—that I already knew someone died in the end.

My friend Steve's uncle stood in line and bought a bunch of tickets for the premiere of *Episode I*. This was a week or so before the big day, so I put my ticket inside a plastic case meant to hold a single Indiana Jones card, which was too big for a ticket, and somehow the sliding around almost completely rubbed off the ticket's ink. I panicked about this vanishing ticket for days, hoping that I could make an argument based on what was barely visible in one corner. While standing in line on the big day, the anxiety almost crushed me, but once the nerds started flowing into the theater, the usher tore my blank ticket without a second glance, and I walked in.

It was another *Star Wars* premiere that I saw without Tev.

My friends made fun of the movie, particularly such a goofy and childish character as Jar Jar Binks, though they admitted that the podrace and Darth Maul were pretty good. All the same, I stayed obsessed²⁸ and kept it to myself that I saw it nine times in theaters.

Tev and I did end up seeing it multiple times together, and he understood the magic of it much better than my friends did.



I had just finished my freshman year of college when *Attack of the Clones* premiered in 2002. Tev was living in California, and I went again to the premiere without him. By this point, I was mature enough to shudder at some of the dialogue and acting, which seemed not quite as smart as what I hoped for. I also

²⁸ I even coded and published a website called LUCASNEWS, though it never really got any traction.

started to notice ways it didn't line up with the original trilogy.²⁹ Sadly, around this time, I first started to think of myself as more of a *Lord of the Rings* fan (as Peter Jackson's *Fellowship* had come out months prior).

In 2005, I went to the *Revenge of the Sith* premiere with Tev and our three younger brothers. I only saw it once in theaters and twice total (record lows).³⁰ I kept up on some of the videogames and the *Clone Wars* TV series, but my enthusiasm for *Star Wars* was on a collision course with the ground.

And a void had begun to form.

I wanted to be as enchanted as I had been as a kid, wanted to experience that same wonder all over again, and I expected to get this fix from great stories—as great as the old ones from *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*.

I didn't get what I wanted.³¹

²⁹ Many things in the prequels seemed like non-sequiturs with the original trilogy. The technology for one—all these smooth spaceships with advanced screens turn into junk with arrays of buttons. I realize there's a story reason, but surely some of the smooth tech would've survived. Why not give the prequels even older tech? This seems like an oversight. Another is that Leia remembers her mother, so the twins had to be older than literally just born. Third, the Jedi were from a more civilized age (not a more civilized decade), basically forgotten, unrecognizable when walking into a public cantina, and surely a lot more distant than 19 years. Han calls it an ancient religion, which doesn't at all sound like something he saw all over the news when he was 10 years old. Fourth, Vader doesn't seem to recognize the two droids he used to own and love. I could go on, but it's a topic for another footnote.

³⁰ I hate that Kenobi left Anakin to die. If he truly believed the injuries were fatal, which the story suggests, he should've given Anakin the *coup de gras*. That is what a kind friend would've done. That is also what a noble Jedi would have done. If Kenobi believed the injuries weren't fatal, on the other hand, he needed to proactively decide between mercy and justice, either helping his friend to a medic or finishing the execution. "I will leave my friend in excruciating pain so I can go cry about his loss while fate decides the outcome." I don't think so. Walking away was the last thing a Jedi would do.

³¹ Jar Jar and a dead Chromebook (freaking Google) faced a firing squad together in 2018—which passes for entertainment in rural Idaho. Speaking of Jar Jar, [Ahmed Best gave a moving speech](#) about the undue backlash he faced for having played that role. He nearly committed suicide. It's a terrible thing we do when we critique, both individually and *en masse*.



GEORGE LUCAS RIPPED OFF DUNE

Arrakis: 10,109

In 1965, in Frank Herbert's *Dune*,³² the mother of Paul Atreides said, "If you rely on your eyes, your other senses weaken."

In 1977, Ben Kenobi said, "Your eyes can deceive you. Don't trust them."

Star Wars could've copied *Dune*, but looking at just this example, it's a hard case to make. In fact, if this were the only similarity, one could write it off as a coincidence. The same goes for C-3PO's line, "We'll be sent to the spice mines of Kessel," or Luke saying his father was "a navigator on a spice freighter." The movie never explains these references, but both could be homages to Spice Melange, which is so prevalent to the world of *Dune*. Then again, maybe not.

It's only as more examples pile up that the trend becomes suspicious. *Dune* was published a full twelve years before the *Star Wars* debut, and the novel had seen a massive spike in popularity before and leading up to the time that the *Star Wars* script was written.

First, here's a look at the similarities of the *magic systems*.

In *Dune*, Paul has a mystical ability called the Voice, with which he can command others aloud and they obey. Ben Kenobi does this same trick in *Star Wars* when his famous line "These aren't the droids you're looking for" is obeyed by the stormtroopers. The Force and the Voice are both nouns special enough to

³² I read *Dune* for the first time in January 2016, a stressful and confusing phase of my life. I'd just published *Song of Locke*, my second novel, and was job searching so my SCVs could start hauling income again. I liked some of the concepts in *Dune*, but the story didn't quite do it for me. I had expected and wanted *The Hobbit*. It hadn't yet clicked that Frank Herbert gave us something between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, which are great in a drastically different way from *The Hobbit*. After reading, I felt like I'd checked off the box, and I moved on. When Dennis Villanueva announced his epic film, I decided I ought to give this classic sci-fi novel another try. Realizing the fault might be with the reader and not the book, I decided I ought to commit a little more to it. So I studied wikis and listened to podcasts, making sure I had a good grasp on the intricacies of Herbert's vast universe. I read the graphic novel to make sure the characters were distinct and clear. Then, when I read *Dune* for the second time, now in 2021, I was sucked in, and I continued through the whole series. Instead of being a deep character study, which is generally my cup of tea, *Dune* wrestles with some deep philosophy, including the vastness of time, the complications of prescience, and, most profound to me, the study of godhood. It also builds a complex world, one that in my estimation stands with peers like Middle Earth and Westeros (but in space!). In short, *Dune* earned a special place on the bookshelf of my heart, and I have a deep admiration for it.

be preceded by a definite article—*the*.³³

Herbert also preempted the conflict between the light and dark sides of the Force.³⁴ Paul says, “We’re shaped by [these] forces... When you look inward and confront the raw force of your own life unshielded, you see [... it] could overwhelm you. The greatest peril to the Giver is the force that takes. The greatest peril to the Taker is the force that gives.”

The *settings* match as well.

Dune takes place on the desert planet of Arrakis, which bears no subtle resemblance to Luke Skywalker’s sandy home world of Tatooine, but Lucas, perhaps in an attempt to make his story more unique, decided to have two suns instead of the two moons that Arrakis has. The stories have moisture farmers (*Star Wars*) and dew collectors (*Dune*)—not quite the same name. They both have sandcrawlers—the exact same name. Both stories are about overthrowing a tyrannical Empire (*Star Wars*) or Imperium (*Dune*), two words that come from the same Latin root.

While the next two examples don’t apply to 1977’s *Star Wars*, they must be mentioned because they’re so egregious: 2019’s *Mandalorian* TV series seems to have made famous the phrase “This is the way.” This sentence and belief is woven into a society of warriors, a reclusive and religiously self-loyal culture. Yet the Fremmen, a reclusive native tribe from *Dune*’s Arrakis, repeat similar phrases, including, “It’s the way,” and “That is the way,” suggesting, with a similar cult-like devotion, that certain things should be accepted without deviation. *The*

³³ The universe of Warhammer 40,000 (1987) seems to have copied one of these two with its “the Will.” More directly overlapping, *The Witcher: The Last Wish* (1993) calls its magic “the Force” (with a definite article and a capital F!) and includes lines such as “I swear by the Force,” “the Force hidden within her,” and “use the Force.” Speaking of the Witcher, Geralt of Rivia is a long-haired albino with scary eyes, expertise in swordplay, and skills in magic. He’s a mercenary traveling with a money-hungry bard. He’s nicknamed the White Wolf and wrestles to maintain political neutrality in a morally ambiguous world. What’s more surprising is that he shares all of these characteristics with Elric of Melniboné, the hero of the Elric Saga (1972) by Michael Moorcock. Both works lean thematically on chaos, destiny, and even a “conjunction of spheres” (which is not only the same terminology but also the same exact concept).

³⁴ Frank Herbert (*Dune*, 1965) did his own copying too, some of which included taking direct quotes from *The Sabres of Paradise* (1960), a historical novel about a tribe in the high deserts of the Caucasus Mountains resisting the onslaught of the Russian Emperor (sound familiar, Baron Vladimir?). Herbert wrote, “Killing with the tip lacks artistry,” but *Sabres* says, “To kill with the point lacked artistry.” That’s not a lone example of a phrase appearing in both novels. Herbert wrote, “Polish comes from the cities, wisdom from the desert,” which comes from *Sabres*, except the original said “hills” instead of “desert” (and was written in past tense). And *Dune*’s “O you who know what we suffer here, do not forget us in your prayers” is a word-for-word copy from the earlier book, only the punctuation is slightly changed. Along with a few other phrases that I won’t mention here, Herbert also borrowed specific words, including “Chakobsa,” “Kanly,” “Sietch,” and “Siridar,” all of which appear in both novels and have the same meanings—although at that point you could say Herbert was stealing from history rather than from another author.

Mandalorian also blatantly steals the giant worms of Arrakis that can travel through sand with the same ease as whales through ocean waters (though it's not the first time this concept was hijacked in popular culture). In 1983, *Return of the Jedi* did some less direct copying with its sarlacc pit buried in the sand having a mouth that could swallow people whole.³⁵

Some *characters* in *Star Wars* bear strong resemblance to ones from *Dune*.

The similarities between Paul and Luke are undeniable (e.g. both with simple Biblical names, both train with melee weapons³⁶ while having access to handguns that shoot lasers, and both have the potential to become superhuman by devoted training in their respective mystical forces), but they're also not particularly unique, as shown in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, so no attempts at tight arguments will be made here.

Others, however, are easy to pin down: In *Children of Dune* (1976), Herbert wrote about a hybrid being who is half worm with a long tail and a somewhat human face and arms. This hideous creature becomes the God Emperor of Dune and wields massive political power despite being constricted by his strange and cumbersome form. He even rides on a moveable dais. Visually, Jabba the Hutt is a dead ringer for this God Emperor, but Jabba didn't make his first debut till 1983.³⁷

The idea of a chosen one coming to save everyone is thematic in *Dune* and in *Phantom Menace* (1999), but this is also too generic to bolster the case. *Dune* introduces a Princess Alia (pronounced uh-LEE-uh, and, by the way, in 1977, before the Death Star run, General Dodonna pronounced *Leia* as LEE-uh). The villain in *Dune* turns out to be Paul's grandfather, a big surprise, which is pretty darn close to Vader turning out to be Luke's father. Sorry, those should've come with spoiler warnings. As a final example of character similarities, but without giving too much away, there's a significant heroine in *Dune* who dies after giving birth to twins, one boy and one girl. Obviously, a similar event is the setup for the

³⁵ In *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the second Death Star is under construction in orbit around a moon of Endor, which the Emperor calls the Sanctuary Moon, and all three of the final climactic battles take place in this vicinity, which has at least two interesting relatives in its family tree, one from long before and one from long after: In the Bible, Endor is the name of a village where King Saul visits the "Witch of Endor" to summon the spirit of the prophet Samuel—communicating with the dead. And *Sanctuary Moon* is the name of a melodramatic television show that the Murderbot (2017) likes to watch in the eponymous novels by Martha Wells—a subtle nod to a beautiful phrase that hadn't yet gotten its due.

³⁶ *Dune* comes up with a clever plot point that requires the use of melee weapons, which is that body shields stop fast-moving projectiles, and so only a weapon moving at the speed of a hand is of any use.

³⁷ You might argue that Jabba was filmed in 1976 in a scene that was cut from *A New Hope*, and which was too early in the timeline to have been inspired by Herbert, and yet the Jabba from that scene was simply a human, and he didn't have a long worm-like tail, a fact that became problematic in the *Star Wars Special Editions* because Han Solo walked in a circle around Jabba.

entire *Star Wars* saga, a plot point deeply embedded in 1983.

When piled one atop another, these similarities stack quite high.

And these are just the ones copied from *Dune*.

Star Wars also copies a plethora of other sources, some of which are even more exact matches than the ones mentioned above. These imitations are so ubiquitous, in fact, that the plagiarism starts to look less shocking.

Almost commonplace.

As if all great stories do this.

And the evidence says that in fact they have.



EULOGY SPEECH

Country Cemetery: 2020

You weren't at the funeral.

But because of your namesake, you in particular ought to hear the speech that I gave, so here it is, transcribed in full below:³⁸

I get emotional when I talk about deeply meaningful things.

That means this speech might be ten minutes of me standing here weeping in mournful silence, so I brought my new wife up here with me, and she's going to read whenever I can't. Losing Tev has been hard, and I'm grateful to have had her companionship and support while suffering through this loss.

Now let me tell you about my big brother Tevya. He was born on July 4th, 1981. Ever since, that holiday has been extra special for me and our family because it's a time to celebrate the things Tev loves, including fireworks and cheesecake.

He was the oldest of eight children and the best of big brothers. In so many aspects of life, he led the way for me and our siblings, blazing a trail through many of the difficult unknowns that life had in store.

At a Scout Court of Honor, Uncle Ted once shared a Bible verse with Tev and me: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). Even back then, I recognized that my big brother had vision. He could see a wider perspective than me.

Of course, we still got in plenty of fights along the way, often on the basketball court, and he recently told me that one of the worst insults I ever hurled at him was when I said, "You betrayed Neverland." The truth is that, if not for Tev, I never would have glimpsed Neverland in the first place, and he, with the epic scope of his vision, was one of Neverland's noblest.

He taught me most of the important things a kid needs to know, like that you

³⁸ This is the actual speech I gave at the funeral, part of which my wife did read. I was married less than two weeks before Tev died, but I did not invite him nor most of my siblings to the wedding ceremony due to COVID guidelines—to my everlasting regret. I had not seen him in months.

find the best GI Joe guys at yard sales, and how to build Legos³⁹ way outside of the specs. He was an avid reader from a young age, with a penchant for historical works, and reading had a big impact on widening his perspective. I remember him blazing through Louis L'Amour books and wishing I could keep up, which I did not, but it left me with a firm conviction that reading was important and that I could have the same perspectives as my brother by reading.

When Tev was in his pre-teens, Dad brought home an old work computer, a Tandy 1000 or something, and we'd load floppy discs into the front, click that latch down over the top, and boot DOS games like *Mega Man* and *Black Cauldron* that ran so slow they were barely playable. It sparked Tev's fascination with technology, which continued throughout his life. He was the go-to tech expert for many of us here.

He also grew into a movie aficionado and loved *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*, which became central to our sibling culture. In fact, I'm wearing my Luke Skywalker socks right now in Tev's honor. He admired Spielberg and Lucas in particular, and that led Tev to become an amateur filmmaker and media guru.

He served a church mission in California's Long Beach from 2000 to 2002, after which he resumed his college career at BYU-Idaho where he established a lasting group of friends. In fact, I got to be his roommate, and a few of my best friends I met through him. At school, he still dabbled in filmmaking while earning a degree in History, developing his love for past cultures and events.

He was named after a character from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, a man who talks to God, and Tev was that sort of man too. His name created a special place in his heart for Jewish culture and their ancient temple rites in particular. He became a scholar of Christianity and published many of his findings on SacredSymbolic.com, a site he created and through which he shared personal and heartfelt insights with friends and loved ones. He loved learning, and that passion connected him with other people. As we became adults, he introduced me to many of my favorite books, including *The Anatomy Peace*.

³⁹ A language sprung up naturally around Lego pieces as Tev and I played. A *onesie* was the most fundamental brick, which had one bump on the top. A *twosie* was double that, and a *flat-onesie* or *-twosie* was one-third the height of the aforementioned. (Only while writing this essay did I finally learn that the flat ones are officially called "plates" instead of "bricks.") A *gopher hole* was a flat twosie but had one hole on top instead of the normal two bumps. A *camera* was a onesie with a hole in the front. A *bent threesie* formed a right angle. *Foursies* were four dots in a row of course, unless it was a *square foursie*, which was basically two twosies side by side. But that's all personal history.

The public history is about Lego's predecessors. The Rubber Specialties Company launched the Build-O-Brik toy in 1934, which was basically the invention of the idea we call Legos. Competitors came quickly, including MiniBrix (1935), Bri-Plax (1939), American Bricks (1939), and Self Locking Building Bricks (1947). It wasn't until fifteen years had passed, in 1949, that LEGO actually premiered, releasing their "Automatic Binding Brick," which zoomed past the aforementioned toys by being a better product. (Wikipedia says, "The machines that manufacture Lego bricks have tolerances as small as 10 micrometres.") In short, Legos were a stolen idea that became "the original" through substantial innovations.

While at school in Rexburg, Idaho, he met Jill, his lovely wife. He'd always been shy and often spoke candidly about his struggle with social anxiety. That meant he hadn't gone on a ton of dates before meeting Jill, but he quickly won her over with his sincerity and goodness. In fact, he surprised some of us by finding such a catch as her on what almost seemed like his first try. There was certainly some daring, some courage required to pursue her, but I'm confident he could see the victory beyond the struggle, and that drove him forward. After a few months of courtship, they were married on December 29, 2007, in the Boise Idaho LDS Temple.

Together they began adventuring, moving a few times between Utah, Idaho, and Washington. Tev often talked about a book called *Essentialism*, which he lived by, and that made the vagabond lifestyle a lot easier. He and Jill loved the outdoors, and together they saw many beautiful hikes across the US. They also prioritized relationships with their immediate and extended family, making lasting memories with all of them.

I mentioned Tev's vision.

It's something I've always admired about him.

He never let his perspective be constricted by what was plausible or by what could readily be seen in front of us.

As kids, he and I built *Star Wars* Legos long before there was such a thing officially.⁴⁰ We built X-Wing starfighters with pieces that had never been designed to sit at an angle like that.

One day he got this big idea that he pitched to me: "I want to build a Y-Wing," he said, "one that is to scale for our action figures." That was much bigger than a Lego guy.

I immediately responded with practicality: "Won't that make it almost as big as our bedroom?"

"It won't be quite that big," he said.

And with that, he and I got to work, putting it together with cardboard, Bic pens, and duct tape. Although we never finished the project, his vision left a lasting impression.

It didn't matter if something was hard.

What mattered was whether you had the vision to pursue it.

He maintained that same creative vision throughout his life. To me, being an entrepreneur always seemed ideal but much too risky. Not so for Tev. He had too much imagination to be halted by fear. He built several successful online businesses, including one called wpXPRESS, where he created, maintained, and serviced websites for clients around the world. It was not an easy feat, which made his victory all the more impressive, and he got that business to fly. This pursuit pushed him out of his comfort zone in many ways, socially in particular,

⁴⁰ We were building off-spec *Star Wars* Legos as early as 1990, but Lego didn't release their first official *Star Wars* set until 1999, coinciding with the launch of *Phantom Menace*.

and he became a poised, graceful guest on podcasts and other forums. Having struggled with social anxiety made this another especially noteworthy success. He earned the respect and admiration of his partners, employees, and clients.

For years he dreamed of living a Tim Ferriss lifestyle and having the freedom to work from anywhere in the world. It was another epic dream that most people might consider unrealistic and out of reach, but Tev went for it. In 2019, riding the wings of his entrepreneurship, he became a “digital nomad,” and he took his family on an unforgettable adventure across MesoAmerica for nearly a year. It is another example he set that I will never forget and another way I have been inspired to be like my big brother.

Tev’s most important role in life was that of a husband and father.

As the oldest of eight kids, he’d gotten lots of practice with children. When he was a young father, I watched him interact with his newborn son, and Tev was the most tender and kind parent I have ever seen. He taught his son to be the same kind of caring big brother that he had been.

Tev was and is proud of who his kids are turning out to be.

Then abruptly, unexpectedly, suddenly, Tev was called away.

And we’re left with the grief of seeing a hero depart.

Since that dark day, the words of an Irish folk hymn keep coming to mind, and they feel like they are Tev’s own words: “But since it falls into my lot that I should rise and you should not, I’ll gently rise and softly call, ‘Goodnight, and joy be to you all.’” I keep thinking about him constantly, and I feel heavy sorrow in the void of his absence.

It’s scary.

I used to get scared at night when I was a kid.

I’d be down on the bottom bunk, with the covers pulled tight around my face, leaving only a small hole so I could breathe.

And my big brother’s voice would come from the top bunk, a voice from above, telling me it would be okay. He’d tell me I didn’t need to be scared.

To be honest, I didn’t believe him. The monsters in the darkness were too immense. I couldn’t imagine eventually getting over it as he told me *he* had. I felt sure I’d be just that scared forever.

He turned out to be right. I stopped being scared when I got older.

Now that same thing just happened again: I feel scared.

The void left by his absence seems like a monster in the darkness, too immense to escape. From my perspective, my small, mortal, hurt perspective, I don’t see how I’m going to be okay with him gone. I’m sure that same feeling is amplified for his kids and especially Jill. It feels like it’s going to hurt this bad forever, that life will be just this scary forever. Because all we can see from here is that Tev is gone.

But he taught me an important lesson during our epic Lego⁴¹ battles as the light side and the dark side went head to head.

He said, “The good guys always win.”

It usually gets pretty dark in every story, and it seems for a moment that all is

⁴¹ Someday I hope to turn this into something more than a footnote, but here’s the LEGO STORY in long form:

On May 5, 1992, Tev, 10 at the time, wrote in his kid journal, “We (Travis and I) have been building pirate Lego’s. We built a castel somewhat like Eldorato Fortres, a pirate Fort kind of like For Biden Island, and the Caribien Cliper. Here are my three most favorat gyse.” (And he drew a picture of the guys. He’s referring to Lego sets #6276, #6270, and #6274 respectively.)

Most of our Legos were Christmas or birthday presents from Mom, but there was at least one exception to that. On October 26, 1992, I, having just turned 9, wrote, “Tevya & I bought a BIG Lego set! It a castle with to knights. It has four seckret paseges and they are neat. The part that look lik this opens up It is the hardest secret door to find out about.” (This misspelled journal entry had an accompanying drawing of the secret door. It refers to Lego set #6081, King’s Mountain Fortress, which unopened now goes for \$3500.00.) In 2024, I was actually surprised to re-read this entry for the first time in a long time and rediscover that we had bought that particular set ourselves. Shows gumption.

When I was 19, I left home for Phoenix Arizona to do some church service. While I was gone, my Mom’s sister got divorced and moved down the street with her kids. To help my displaced cousins, my Mom generously took our apple box full of Legos down to their house for them to borrow. But our cousins somehow understood this loan as a gift, and when they moved, they took the Legos with them.

At age 21, I returned from Phoenix to find my childhood gone along with the Legos. I started having nightmares about it. Over and over.

Literally for years, from 2004 to 2020, I had frequent dreams of Legos being lost, stolen, or sometimes simply abandoned outside in the dirt. In these dreams, I would scramble to collect them, one piece here and another piece there, gripping them tightly in my palm. I was always afraid to let the other kids know, afraid they might claim ownership and demand them back only to then discard them again, so I kept these finds secret, and no one ever noticed anything had gone missing. Basically, I was stealing the Legos from other kids in order to take care of them—though maybe it wasn’t stealing if finders-keepers is legally binding.

My wife was surprised when I told her this was a strong recurring nightmare. Then Tev died in May 2020.

About two months later, my wife and daughter were searching the toy aisle for my birthday present. Emma suggested getting me a Barbie (a beach Ken, in fact, that I took with me on my next business trip), but Michal decided to get me a Star Wars Lego set, a mini snowspeeder that came with a rebel pilot and a snow trooper (#75268).

Still in mourning, I was shocked and overjoyed when I opened the Lego gift, and I kept asking, “How did you know to get this?” I assembled the set that day, and we watched *Empire Strikes Back* soon after (Emma’s first time seeing it).

The timing was almost miraculous. In that moment, I became a little more whole just after another part of me had been irretrievably lost.

Little did my wife know that she, with that one small Lego set, had created a landslide. In all those years, I’d eyed Lego sets many times, almost never going to Walmart without at least swinging by the Lego aisle for a quick moment. I looked but didn’t touch, feeling somehow that these toys were lost along with childhood.

Yet that snowspeeder from my wife proved that neither were lost.

A couple months later, I bought our daughter a creative set for her birthday (#11011). I started getting myself Legos too, buying around ten sets by 2023, including an X-wing

But Tev was right. The good guys always win.

And if we could see things from where Tev is now, we would see that.

As mentioned, he loved studying ancient Israel's temple rites. He taught me that the ceremony represents a path leading upward. In the ritual, one crosses through a veil, leaving one place behind, and entering the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. This place was meant to represent heaven, the very place where God abides. If you're thinking that means a cloud of white or a pyramid of gold, you're not thinking big enough. You need vision like Tev's. Think of Gondor from *Lord of the Rings*, a massive structure, and multiply that by the mythological Greek Emyrean and Valhalla of the Vikings. He's in a place so grand and so epic we can't conceive of it. From there, his perspective is different.

He can see all the way from one end of eternity to the other.

And I'll close with what I think he would say to his family if he could speak from there to here:

I know it hurts. A lot. And it's okay to feel that pain. I'm feeling it with you. It's going to be hard for a while, the hardest thing you've ever faced. It will seem like a long time too.

But if you could see what I see, if you could only read the whole story like I can now, you would know that it's going to be okay in the end. The good guys win in the end. They win. I can see it from here. Everything will be okay.

And in the meantime, I'll be with you, like Obi-Wan, guiding you on your hero's journey, till you make it here too.



THE LAST OF THE JEDI

Hollywood: 2017

There's a certain author who I admire.

She has even mentored me.

Which is why it's awkward that I think she's not very good at writing characters—which, if I had to pick, would be the single most important part of a novel. At least personally. I'm not saying *world* and *plot* are not important too, but if I had to choose...

So what do I do with this fact—an admiration and friendship mixed with an authentic dislike of this person's art?

Well, for one, I try not to talk bad about her. I only share my honest opinion of her art in very private settings. I would certainly never post these opinions on social media. Mostly, it's because I really do admire her, in spite of her not exactly writing the types of books that I love.

I focus on the things I appreciate, like the elaborate worlds she creates. At the same time, I try to only say things that are exactly true, which means I don't say I absolutely loved the latest book. Instead, I say something like, "another spectacularly elaborate world," or "an author whose worldbuilding skills drastically exceed my own." These are all true statements.

In short, I try to be diplomatic.

Publicly in particular.

If our roles were reversed, I would deeply appreciate the same courtesy. It's nice to not be blasted by your peers. Criticism is hard, especially when it's uninvited and delivered to the broad public.

Even when it's not meant to be personal, it still is.

To be fair, this goes against the essayist's creed, which requires you to write about everything—and secrets most of all. Yet it seems honorable to me.

After *The Last Jedi* came out in 2017, Mark Hamill, the man who played the heroic role of Luke Skywalker, sat through many interviews where people asked pointed questions about the movie's controversial nature.

He responded candidly, explaining that when he first read the script, his reaction was, "Really? That's what they think of Luke? I'm not only in disagreement—I'm insulted."⁴² He admitted to having told the director, "I hate what you've done with my character... [He] represented hope... now, he's sort of... *demoralized*."

Hamill went on: "I said, 'Jedis don't give up.' I mean, even if [Luke] had a problem, he would maybe take a year to try and regroup, but if he made a mistake, he would try to right that wrong, so right there, we had a fundamental

⁴² See [Esquire 2017](#).

difference... That's the crux of my problem. Luke would never say that. I'm sorry... I almost had to think of Luke as another character. Maybe he's Jake Skywalker. He's not my Luke Skywalker... Listen, I still haven't accepted it completely, but, it's only a movie. I hope people like it. I hope they don't get upset.”⁴³

Another problem was Luke Skywalker's screen time: Bad enough that he'd been almost entirely excluded from Episode VII, and now he was slated to die during VIII, giving him only one movie out of three! So he asked, “Can't we push this [death] off until IX?” But his protestations fell on deaf ears. In the end, Hamill was humble, and said, “I have to put aside *my* feelings and try to realize *the director's* feelings the best I can.”⁴⁴

The director proceeded with what became *The Last Jedi*.

Hamill went on: “They say it in the script, ‘Forget the past; kill it if you have to,’ and they're doing a pretty good job!”

As the movie neared release, he said, “I *hope* people are happy,” and he emphasized the word in a way that made him seem quite doubtful.

In another interview, he said, “Remember, kids, it's not important if it's high quality... only if it makes money... [Just] because *The Force Awakens* made a lot of money, it's not [necessarily] ‘ergo it's good...’ And oh my god I just realized this is all on film. I shouldn't have gotten that specific.”⁴⁵

This moment on Cambridge campus exposes the conundrum Hamill faced and still faces: He's active on Twitter and seems like a kind and good person. He's also friends with George Lucas, Kay Kay, and many of the other important people who have been involved with the latest *Star Wars* content. So if he were, in theory, to feel disappointed with some of the creative decisions made by someone on this team, what is he supposed to do?

Clips of Hamill's reaction to his role were viewed extensively on YouTube, and a Reddit thread⁴⁶ cited dozens of times that he'd said things similar to those above. Yet there seems to have come a turning point at which he realized how potent even his vaguest comments were, and he started saying only positive things, complimenting the director and others for all the things he truly considered to be good. Yet some hints of disgust still leaked through, including this: “What I wish is that they had been more accepting of [George Lucas's] guidance and advice... Because he had an outline for VII, VIII and IX, and it is vastly different to what they have done.”⁴⁷

He's not the only one who wishes this.

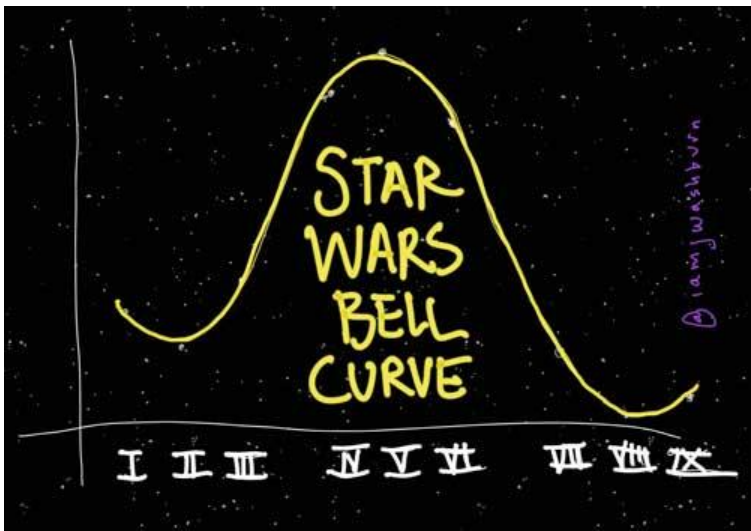
⁴³ See [ComicBook 2017](#).

⁴⁴ See [IndieWire 2018](#).

⁴⁵ See [Cambridge Union 2016](#).

⁴⁶ See [Reddit “It's irrelevant”](#).

⁴⁷ See [CinemaBlend 2017](#).



At the start of 2015, as *The Force Awakens* neared release, I famously told my brothers, “There’s no way it can be worse than the prequel trilogy.”

In the immortal words of Obi-Wan, “I was wrong.”

Tevo and I saw *The Force Awakens* together with his son⁴⁸ and our Dad and siblings on opening night, and we sneaked hamburgers into the theater. It was a fun outing, but the Washburn critics gave conflicted reviews.

Han Solo, in the original trilogy, had the coolest character arc, transforming from a selfish, money-grubbing lone wolf into a person who puts the needs of others above his own. He also becomes General Solo and takes some of the galaxy’s problems on his own shoulders. This is beautiful progression.

After *Return of the Jedi*, Han Solo spends decades off screen. In *The Force Awakens*, instead of having continued his trajectory and becoming still wiser, a more reliable husband, father, and general—the sort of mentor Kenobi had been to Luke in the original movie—Han apparently reverts to the irresponsible delinquency of *A New Hope*. He’s even wearing almost the exact same outfit!⁴⁹

A few years later, *The Last Jedi* did the same thing to Luke. As Hamill himself⁵⁰ explained, the hopeful almost Messiah becomes a deadbeat recluse who lost all of his former attributes, particularly his unrelenting hope in human

⁴⁸ I love my daughter, yet I didn’t meet her till she was three, which was after *The Last Jedi*, and she didn’t adopt me as her father till she was five, which was after *The Rise of Skywalker*.

⁴⁹ In *Lightyear*, I love how Buzz’s suit morphs over time, a simple and effective way to show development and the passage of time.

⁵⁰ Mark Hamill’s original Twitter handle was @hamillhimself because someone had already taken @markhamill, which fits perfectly with our theme. Later, Twitter took the handle from the copycat and gave it to the original.

goodness. In other words, instead of showing the trappings of more development and many good stories we'd missed, we just find these broken and pitiful creatures who seem to have no connection to the trajectory we left them on before.

I'm fine with a fall from grace (in fact, I've written these myself). Everyone loves Darth Vader, but Vader's fall wasn't just a flashback. It spans three whole movies! A fall needs to be well justified by the story itself, and these weren't, especially not two in a row, and not while flippantly trashing two of the most well beloved characters of cinematic history!⁵¹

As an author who writes character-centered stories and a teacher who's given lectures on this topic, I feel like I'm somewhat qualified to comment on this.

It's bad writing.

These certainly weren't the inspiring stories I'd been questing for since boyhood.

I almost entirely rewrote one of my novels because it didn't do well with beta readers. If I had published that early version, I would've had no room to complain if people didn't like it. It would've been my fault for not carefully watching the canary. Instead, although it was an immense amount of work, their critical feedback helped me make something better, hopefully a lot better. This same feedback process is critical for every book I write—

You have to listen and pivot.⁵²

When Mark Hamill read the script of *The Last Jedi*, he clearly had an adverse reaction. That gave the filmmakers a choice: Be humble and have the patience to delay till we can get a decent script—or don't.

In the end, whether the *Star Wars* sequels are terrible is a matter of opinion, not fact. What is a fact, though, is that I felt deeply disappointed with them, shockingly so—worse than the prequels. By 2017 when *The Last Jedi* came out, that emotional void had expanded to monumental size and threatened to swallow everything.

Movies are a big deal in my family, and we spend lots of time critiquing and debating them. Tanner, maybe the only one of us with any sense, refused to see

⁵¹ My critique here of *The Last Jedi* targets just one specific facet. I could go on and on about many other points, but I'll leave that job to the YouTubers.

⁵² Incidentally, I'm rather proud of the editing process I've come up with. I'm a decent copyeditor myself, and a couple of my amateur copyeditor friends help me polish my drafts too, resulting in a product superior in that respect to many traditionally published books. For content editing, I have a militia of volunteer beta readers who read my drafts and give feedback on what they do and don't like, which results in significant changes to the stories. The reader can decide on whether that aspect is superior. Finally, I soft launch my ebooks, almost like software, an industry I worked in, so people are buying and reviewing my books while I'm still making tweaks and improvements. Incidentally, there's a precedent for this, as George Lucas is known for having re-edited his *Star Wars* films several times after their initial release, although these edits were arguably not what beta readers or fans had asked for. Theoretically, my books are locked into final form when I publish the audiobooks. We'll see if I have more self restraint than Lucas.

The Last Jedi altogether. Most of the rest of my family agreed with Mark Hamill and me.

But Tev, who was away for Christmas, said he liked it.

And I didn't know what to do.

I was shocked, to say the least. I didn't want to alienate him or gang up on him with the moral majority, so we called an armistice.

I held my tongue for eighteen days.

That was all the way through Christmas break and until January 2nd.

Then I couldn't take it any longer.

I just couldn't believe my own big brother didn't hate the worst movie of all time, so I unleashed my word hoard. We debated, sometimes heatedly, and shared YouTube links that bolstered our opinions.

Neither of us budged an inch.

I'd fallen more than a decade behind Tev on starting a family, and I maintained all the perspectives adjacent to bachelorhood. My lens was that of a disenchanted fan and a critic (or cynic). Tev, on the other hand, had gained insights from his distinctly different perspective. He had a son who was almost eight, which meant Tev watched this movie as a dad. That's a drastically different lens, as he explained:

If you can watch *The Last Jedi* with a little childlike wonder, it's a heck of a movie that does a great job of keeping you guessing. I got chills and laughed and nearly cried. It was the most fun I've had watching a Star Wars movie since I was a kid, and I feel bad for anyone who couldn't watch it that same way.

After Tev died, one of my biggest regrets was that I hadn't accepted or forgiven his love of *The Last Jedi*. I still don't like that movie, and yet it is now an everlasting part of my dead brother.

I'm conflicted to this day.

I wish I could tell him sorry and that it doesn't matter and that I shouldn't have made such a big deal of it and good for you for maintaining your childlike wonder and I'm sorry that I was the one who betrayed Neverland in the end.

At the least, I wish I could've been more like Mark Hamill and learned to hold my tongue. So many of our last interactions were wasted arguing about that movie.

I just didn't know they would be the last.

RIP / SPIN OFFS

Los Angeles: 1781

Zorro's Fighting Legion (1939) takes place during the days of the Californian frontier. At the end of "Chapter 7: The Fugitive," Zorro races on horseback after a speeding stagecoach.

In a moment of daring foolhardy, he leaps from his mount and lands on the yokes of the horses pulling the stage.

Now he's riding on the narrow rail between four massive beasts that are panting through their nostrils and glistening with sweat. Their steel-shod hooves strike the desert floor, sending sparks off the stones that fly beneath at a terrifying pace, and the sound makes a powerful beat that roars like thunder.

The man driving the coach aims his flintlock at Zorro's back.

Zorro shoots first, and the driver crumples to the side.

At the sound of gunfire, the horses stampede out of control, racing wildly across the desert.

Hearing the shot, Comandante Manuel leans out the side of the runaway coach, aims his own pistol at Zorro, and fires.

In a desperate dodge, the hero drops beneath the yoke, hanging by his arms as his boot heels drag across the galloping ground.

But it's not enough to escape.

The villain aims and fires a second time.

Zorro's body tumbles, curling and twisting against the ground's terrible momentum.

The screen goes abruptly black:

"Next week: Chapter 8: Flowing Death."



Zorro's black mask hid the vigilante's true identity.

And did so long before Batman.⁵³

About twenty years before, to be precise.

In fact, the first Zorro novel, *The Curse of Capistrano* (1919), stands as a precursor to *all* the superheroes of American comics and pulp fiction. The book takes place near *el Pueblo Los Angeles*, when America was a newborn and California was a colonization of New Spain. A year after publication, the novel was made into a silent movie called *The Mark of Zorro*.

Next, this caped crusader rode across TV screens in *Zorro Rides Again* (1937), which focuses on a descendant of the original Zorro and takes place during the 1930s, which means cars, trains, and planes—same decade the Indiana Jones trilogy is set in.

This version trades out the hero's sword for a pair of pistols. He also carries a bullwhip coiled at his belt, which he uses often, swinging across chasms or into unreachable windows, a tool Indy seems to have picked up after Zorro put it down.

In the very first episode, when the badguys invade the Vega home and are about to burn it down, Zorro enters while their backs are turned and whips a weapon from one of his enemy's hands. When another henchman turns to attack, Zorro fires his pistol, and his bullet hits the weapon. Anyone familiar with

⁵³ In 2022's *The Batman*, Falcone mocks the titular hero by calling him Zorro.

Raiders will recognize this as a point-for-point map of how Indy rescues Marion at the Raven Saloon in Nepal.

The eleventh episode of this series features what has been called “one of serialdom’s most memorable stunt scenes,” in which Zorro rides after a convoy, and at a breakneck speed leaps from horseback onto the running board of a big truck with a covered back. “One miscalculation by [the stuntman], the driver of the truck, or the horse could have been disastrous but, as executed, the stunt was a thing of beauty.”⁵⁴ Again, one can recognize substantial similarities to the convoy sequence from *Raiders*.

Clearly Indy borrowed from Zorro, Harry Steele, and a variety of other sources.⁵⁵ George Lucas also apparently borrowed from people he knew and worked with.⁵⁶

He hired Rob MacGregor to write the first official Indiana Jones spinoff novels (1991-1992), which are fast paced, fun, and surprisingly smart for having been written in 16 weeks apiece. These six novels take place about a decade before the movies, starting with Indy as an undergrad, which puts him in his early twenties instead of late thirties. Indy attends the University of Chicago, gets involved with Chicago jazz, and has a run in with Al Capone. Indy falls deeply in love and then tragically loses the girl. He goes up against the Bolsheviks. He has a boot fitted with a knife. He goes to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and also sees whirling dervishes. He goes on a quest to find Percy Fawcett in the Amazon.⁵⁷

When Lucas later directed the *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* (1992), he included all of the items mentioned above. MacGregor rightly deserves credit for blazing the trail, but he seems to have never gotten any,⁵⁸ which one can deduce from a story he told on Reddit:

⁵⁴ *In the Nick of Time: Motion Picture Sound Serials* by William C. Cline, p.41

⁵⁵ Indy’s scene on the bridge in *Temple of Doom* (1984) strongly resembles the epic finale of *The Once and Future King* (1967), starring Sean Connery and Michael Kane. That particular film, however, seems to have taken its bridge-scene inspiration from *Gunga Din* (1939), starring Cary Grant.

⁵⁶ This is getting a bit meta, but the original draft of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* included the diary of Abner Ravenwood as a thread throughout the plot (but it still appears in the novelization). After being removed from the first movie, the same device then showed up in *Last Crusade* as Dad’s Grail Diary. *Temple of Doom* included several sequences that were drafted for its predecessor as well. In other words, the Indiana Jones films steal from themselves!

⁵⁷ For the third season of YIJC, Lucas planned but never produced an episode where Indy meets Percy Fawcett in the Amazon jungle.

⁵⁸ I interviewed Rob McGregor on my [START WRITING Podcast, episode 132](#), June 7, 2023, and he confirmed that he added some really cool mythology to the Last Crusade that wasn’t in the original script; he also confirmed that he was never given credit for all of the Young Indiana Jones elements that I mentioned in this essay.

I thought the *Chronicles* were well done. The stories were good and well researched. However, one thing always bothered me. When I wrote my first original Indy novel [*Peril at Delphi*⁵⁹], I began with an old Indiana Jones with an eyepatch, a cane, and a little dog. He started telling the story, and that led into the novel, and we saw him again at the end. But George [Lucas] said, ‘Take that out. No one wants to see an old Indiana Jones.’ So of course I did. A few years later, along comes the *Indiana Jones Chronicles*, which begins with an old Indy with an eyepatch, a cane, and a little dog. We see him in the beginning introducing the story and closing at the end. So I guess [Lucas] changed his mind.

And apparently never gave any credit either.⁶⁰

Max McCoy was hired to write the next Indiana Jones novels (1995-1999), which feature a crystal skull subplot that ties all four of his books together. This was long before *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* came out (2008), and Lucas never gave him props for being the first to connect Indy to that particular MacGuffin.⁶¹

This, though, was not the end nor the least of this kind of plagiarism.

⁵⁹ After reading a couple chapters, I began picturing Sean Patrick Flannery (from *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*) instead of Harrison Ford (who’s on the cover), which seemed a better fit.

⁶⁰ MacGregor gave the following response in his [Reddit AMA](#): “Like all of the Hollywood magnets, [Lucas and Spielberg] borrow ideas, adapt ideas. It’s part of the business. Yeah, writers get ripped off. I’ve never complained, but I do like to set the record straight sometimes. I’m glad that I’ve had an impact on the Indy saga, whether I’ve gotten credit or not.”

⁶¹ I interviewed Max McCoy on my [START WRITING Podcast, episode 131](#), May 3, 2023, and he confirmed that he had never once been given credit from anyone at Lucasfilm for having been the first to connect Indiana Jones to the crystal skull MacGuffin. He also told me an interesting story: He had a debate with Lucasfilm over whether the narrative should refer to the hero as *Indy* or *Jones*—essentially a debate over whether this book was for kids or not. McCoy intended to write for adults, and the name *Jones* seemed more appropriate. In the end, Lucasfilm won, and he had to call the hero *Indy*.

his beating heart from his chest for China to see. He was
about how, deep in the jungles of British Honduras, in the
lost city of Cozán, he had found a skull made of quartz
crystal.

"It was patterned after a female skull, and of the purest
quartz rock, beautifully articulated, a cult object that some
lost generation must have revered as both inspiring and
terrifying. But there was a curse, as there usually is with
such treasures. But this one was a little more diabolical
than most: that the finder of the skull would not die, but
would kill what he loves most."

"And what is it that you love most?"

"Not what, but whom," Indy corrected. "Her name is
Alecia Dunstin. Red hair, blue eyes. Clairvoyant. She was
the sister of an alchemist the fascists captured in the hopes
of turning lead into gold."

Star Wars, as mentioned, "paid homage" numerous times, in addition to the
Dune piracy above.⁶²

In fact, George Lucas literally called the original *Star Wars* his "Flash Gordon
thing."⁶³ Why would he say that? Well, he attempted and failed to acquire the
rights to make a Flash Gordon movie, so he came up with *Star Wars* instead, and
there are many similarities. *Flash* takes place in futuristic space, and yet they
often use sabers and rapiers instead of guns. *Star Wars* is known for its transition
wipes, which are almost like a windshield wiper that refreshes the scene, but the
Flash Gordon TV serial did this first (1954). Princess Leia's famous cinnamon roll
hair buns are an imitation of Princess Fria's hair in the 1939 *Flash Gordon* comic
books.

But it doesn't end with *Flash Gordon*. In Jabba's palace, Leia wears an outfit
that looks exactly like a damsel from the *Princess of Mars* book covers (1912). In
1956, a sci-fi film called *Forbidden Planet* opened with a black field of stars, and
then yellow text scrolled up and back, giving the prologue information. It looks
like a cheap ripoff of *Star Wars*, but the truth is, obviously, the other way around.
And something recognizable as a Wookiee (but not called that) was featured on the
cover of a sci-fi magazine called *Analog* in 1975.⁶⁴

The most popular toy for Christmas of 1934 was a *Buck Rogers* Disintegrator
Pistol, a metal gun that made a zapping sound when the trigger was pulled.

⁶² *The Stars My Destination* (1956) is a brilliant piece of classic sci-fi written by
Alfred Bester. It's also a not-very-well-hidden copy of *The Count Of Monte Cristo* (1844).
Incidentally, in Bester's novel, the hero thinks the phrase, "More machine than man,"
about a certain cybernetic, which was clearly later stolen by George Lucas, who had Obi-
Wan say in 1977 that the cybernetic Darth Vader was "more machine now than man."

⁶³ As related in *George Lucas: A Life* by Brian Jay Jones.

⁶⁴ Check out [the Kitbashed article](#) if you want to see the pictures.

(Though originally it cost just 50¢, it's currently going for around \$650 on eBay, and one is kept on display at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in DC).

This was ten years before George Lucas was born, and yet so many decades later Han Solo's blaster would be designed to look almost exactly the same.

*The Dam Busters*⁶⁵ is a 1955 black-and-white film about Operation Chastise in World War II, when a squadron of the Royal Airforce did a trench run on dams in Nazi Germany. Not only does *Star Wars* borrow the trench-run premise, some of the dialogue is also copied word for word, including, "How many guns?"

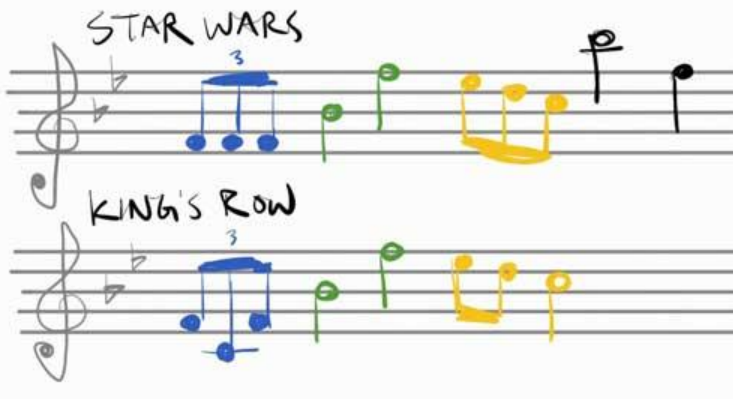
In the original *Star Wars*, a bounty hunter named Greedo catches up to Han Solo in a cantina. At gunpoint, Greedo backs Han down into a seat, and while the two of them chat, Han subtly draws his blaster under the table. He fires first, up through the table, killing Greedo, who fires back too late and misses.⁶⁶ There's a very similar scene in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1967).

Maybe the most blatant ripoff in *Star Wars* was done not by George Lucas but by John Williams. The *Star Wars* opening theme is shockingly similar to Erich Wolfgang Korngold's main anthem for a movie called *King's Row*. The first three measures of each are written below, but it's most evident if one simply gives the two tracks a listen.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Seeing [The Dam Busters mashed up with A New Hope](#) is really something.

⁶⁶ In the 2004 re-release of *A New Hope*, Lucas edited this scene so that Greedo fired first but simply missed, and then Han shot him a split second later. Die hard fans hated this change, which seemingly made Han more noble and less badass, so they put "Han shot first" on t-shirts in protest.

⁶⁷ Here's a similar incident: "I Want to Spend My Lifetime Loving You" is a song written by James Horner for *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), and it won an ALMA Award. Incidentally, it is an almost perfect melodic match to a theme from *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* (1996), whose score was written by Mark Watters and Carl Johnson just two years before and was nominated for an Annie Award—meaning it was not at all obscure to people in the musical world. If you're already familiar with the former song, listen just 5 seconds into the *King of Thieves* track called "End Credits," and you'll hear a melody that plays many times throughout the film. It has a distinct rhythm, but otherwise the two are twins! (The variation in "Wedding/Attack" might be a more exact match but is harder to find.) I came to this conclusion in my head before my wife blurted out, "This sounds exactly like Zorro!" And it does.



A fan might feel indignant upon finding that *Star Wars* copied so promiscuously, and a creative might consider it unfair that a story could borrow so much and still be so venerated.⁶⁸

But George Lucas wasn't alone.

One doesn't have to look hard to make literally any story look just as guilty. Lucas pretty clearly ripped off *The Hobbit* when he made *Willow*. But Tolkien, the uncontested King of Fantasy, copied many ideas from older legends, particularly the Norse saga called the *Nibelungenlied*⁶⁹ (*The Song of the Nibelungs*), which was written around 1200 AD in Middle High German, based on an oral tradition from half a millennium earlier. It has dragons and dwarves and magic rings. Tolkien also surely read the story of the Ring of Gyges from book 2 of Plato's *Republic* (375 BC), in which the hero takes a ring from a giant, which grants the power of invisibility. To cover Tolkien's inspirations would take another book, one much longer than the one you're reading now. Suffice it to say that it's an extensive history.

George R.R. Martin has made a decent attempt at a coup against the reigning

⁶⁸ Two additional copying incidents from the prequel trilogy are worth mentioning. First, the podrace in *Episode I* (1999) copies pretty blatantly from the chariot race in *Ben Hur* (1959), right down to the colors of the good guy and bad buy. Incidentally, Lucas paid homage to this earlier in a scene from *Young Indiana Jones and the Hollywood Follies* (1994). Second, the slaughter of the Jedi in *Episode III* (2005) is based on the real-life slaughter of the Knights Templar by the Church on Friday the 13 of October 1307 A.D.

⁶⁹ This epic poem, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, also inspired Wagner's famous, operatic *Twilight of the Gods*. And, by the way, you ought to read the graphic novel version by Alex Alice.

Another one I love is that [Tolkien took the names](#) for his thirteen dwarves—Balin, Dwalin, Oin, Gloin, Fili, Kili, Ori, Dori, Nori, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and Thorin—from “The Völuspá” (which means “The Prophecy of the Seeress”), which is the first in a collection of Old Norse poems called the *Poetic Edda*. He does, however, get credit for grouping them into their rhyming couplets and triplets. And guess what: the name *Gandalf* comes from there too! But, again, this is just the tip of the iceberg of Tolkien's burglaries.

ruler of fantasy, and his *A Song of Ice and Fire* (a.k.a. the *Game of Thrones* series) is a pretty clear ripoff of history's own War of the Roses. It's no coincidence that Lannister and Stark sound so much like Lancaster and York. And when he went to create the history of Westeros, *Fire and Blood*, he simply wrote Alfred the Great with dragons mixed in.⁷⁰

If one reads Patrick Rothfuss's *The Name of the Wind* (2007) after having read Ursula Leguinn's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), one may get a strange feeling of déjà vu. The whole concept of having power over a thing by knowing its true name comes from the earlier novel. That's a big thematic stolen artifact, but small items were taken too. In the same book, Rothfus says, "And we sang! Her voice like burning silver." A certain budding author was impressed by this simile and highlighted it, only to later find that C.S. Lewis had used the same simile in *The Last Battle* (1956): "They found showers of glittering people, all with long hair like burning silver."

Lewis, though, is guilty of his own acts—he lifted the famous wardrobe from a story published 41 years earlier. (The Lion and the Witch aren't all that original either.) Edith Nesbit, author of *Five Children and It* and dozens of other books, wrote a short story called "The Aunt and Amabel" (1909). In this story, the child Amabel goes through a wardrobe and into another world. She finds a magical train station called "Bigwardrobeinspareroom," which is exactly like the faun Mr Tumnus saying, "Daughter of Eve from the far land of Spare Oom where eternal summer reigns around the bright city of War Drobe." Lewis took this idea outright.⁷¹

All of these books mentioned are wildly popular, and yet they quietly and undeniably lifted ideas from other sources. Another wildly popular book, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, allegedly ripped off a nonfiction book called *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which resulted in a costly court battle, but Brown walked away victorious, so apparently creating fiction is a distinctly different expression of an

⁷⁰ Incidentally, a few parts of GRRM's epic seem to be direct critiques of LotR: a Samwise companion whose love of food catches up to him, dwarves who waddle and suffer for their size and shape, elves who incestually keep their bloodlines pure and pay for it mentally, oh and the streets of the middle ages are literally filled with shit.

⁷¹ Moreover, C.S. Lewis's Christianity is merely a more accessible version of his mentor George MacDonald's Christianity. This comment is not meant to cast dispersion in any way though. I am grateful for what Lewis wrote and for where he got it. Lewis acknowledged this inspiration too, by the way. MacDonald makes a cameo in Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, in which he plays the role of mentor once again.

idea than nonfiction.⁷²

It seems this has been going on throughout history too.

In 2021, Spielberg made an awesome rendition of *West Side Story*, which is a remake of 1961's *West Side Story* movie, which is based on the 1957 musical of the same name, which takes its plot beats from *Romeo and Juliet*, the Shakespearean classic (1597), which stole its beats from *Tristan and Isolde* (~1100), a Celtic legend, which seems to have stolen its plot from *Pyramus and Thisbe* (8—as in 8 AD), a much older Greek drama included in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*! Shakespeare did this with most of his stories, in fact—made updated and far more gripping versions of stories that had already been told many times before.

Circling back, *Dungeons and Dragons*, the tabletop role-playing game, originally stole Tolkien's creations outright, but the threat of a lawsuit made them change Balrogs to Balor, Ents to Treants, and Hobbits to Halflings. The remaining similarities are vast (like wizards with long white beards), but they can be traced to older sources and are hard to defend in court. After D&D's success, someone came asking to make a strategy focused spin-off. Permission was denied, so they proceeded anyway but named it *Warhammer* instead, which became hugely popular and carried the battle between orcs and humans into the distant future and space. Next, Blizzard, a software company, asked to make a computer game spinoff of *Warhammer*. Once again, the answer was no, so they

⁷² Charles Cecil, creator of the *Broken Sword* (1996) point-and-click adventure game series, has carefully said that *his fans* believe his ideas were stolen by Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). Cecil himself makes no direct accusations, apparently out of fear of legal repercussions, but the similarities include an American man being unexpectedly drawn into solving an occult murder, a sexy Parisian woman who discovers her past is integrally entwined with the killing, a sealed box that becomes her mysterious inheritance from the family Plantard, an international chase that begins on the streets of Paris and ends in Scotland, stone effigies of Crusader knights in a church floor, a cult ritual observed accidentally, a hidden religious secret that could shake the foundations of Christianity, and a trail of clues, ciphers, and codes that unravel a Templar plot! Incidentally, *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* (1999), another adventure game, is about a centuries-old conspiracy involving the Knights Templar, the Freemasons, and the Priory of Sion, and the big secret at the end is the exact same secret that's revealed at the end of *The Da Vinci Code*. To be fair, all three of these fictional stories most likely got their ideas from the nonfiction book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982).

named theirs *WarCraft*⁷³ (a medieval battle between orcs and humans) and *StarCraft* (a space opera whose Zerg and space marines look exactly like Warhammer's Tyranids and, uh, well, space marines).⁷⁴

These items listed above are just a few favorites, but the list could go on almost endlessly. One can find plagiarism in world-renowned animated films for kids all the way to the obscurest video games.⁷⁵ Examine any story and what came before it, and you'll likely find that the branching tunnels of the rabbit hole have no end.

The point of all this is that building on predecessors seems not just

⁷³ Patrick Wyatt worked as a developer on Blizzard's earliest games, including *WarCraft* 1, 2, and 3, *World of WarCraft*, *StarCraft*, and *Diablo* 1 and 2. He told the following [story on his blog](#): "Allen Adham hoped to obtain a license to the Warhammer universe to try to increase sales by brand recognition. Warhammer was a huge inspiration for the art-style of *Warcraft*, but a combination of factors, including a lack of traction on business terms and a fervent desire on the part of virtually everyone else on the development team to control our own universe, nixed any potential for a deal. We had already had terrible experiences working with [other big IPs] and wanted no similar issues for our new game. It's surprising now to think what might have happened had Blizzard not controlled the intellectual property rights for the *Warcraft* universe—it's highly unlikely Blizzard would be such a dominant player in the game industry today." And speaking of *WarCraft*'s inspirations, it takes place in a fictional land called *Azeroth*. This name, a pretty unique word, was nicked from C.J. Cherryh's novel called *Fires of Azeroth* (1979). This novel (along with its sisters in the Morgaine Cycle) features gates made of stone through which one can step in order to reach another world, an idea *WarCraft* (1994) used with its *Dark Portal*, and the *WarCraft II* manual even calls the *Dark Portal* "the Rift." This same idea is also used in the *The Rift Wars Saga* (1982) and various older D&D campaigns.

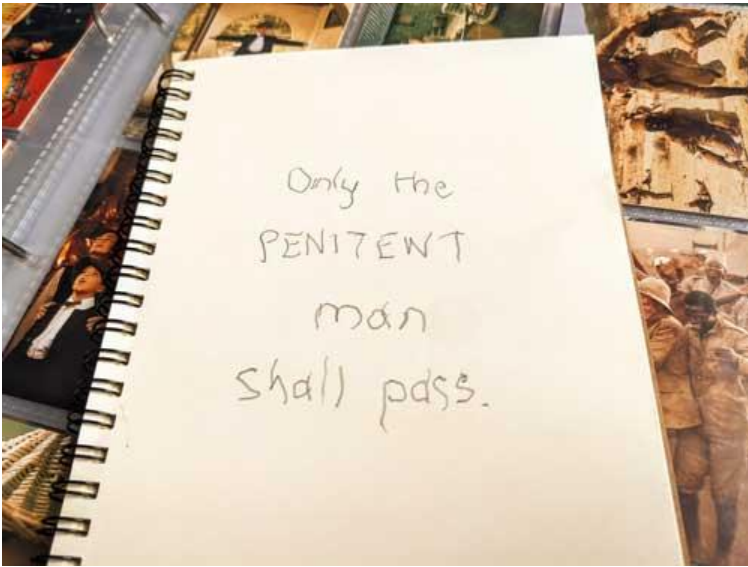
⁷⁴ The *StarCraft* team also took a lot from the movie *Aliens*, including a few direct quotes, like, "In the pipe, five by five," and, "Ready for dustoff." These are blatant enough to be respectful nods rather than slyly stolen secrets. As for the sequence related in this particular paragraph, which goes from *Lord of the Rings* to *StarCraft*, I heard this from my cousin, rather than having directly researched it like most everything else in this essay, so I personally take it with a grain of salt.

⁷⁵ *The Lion King* is said to have ripped off Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but there's a more recent and more egregious bit of plagiarism going on. In Japan, an animated series called *Kimba the Lion* peaked in popularity in the 1980s, and the similarities between it and the famous movie about Simba the lion are so strong that you might want to call it Disney's *Lynin' King*.

Using the last wish to free the wise-cracking, anachronistic genie? Kind of feels like Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) was the result of a thought experiment known as *Ducktales: Treasure of the Lost Lamp* (1990), also by Disney, which was obviously inspired by *Ducktales* season 1, episode 12, "Master of the Djinni" (1987), which was obviously inspired by Scheherazade's *Arabian Nights*.

The game *20XX* is a close (almost exact) copy of the *Mega Man X* series (which takes place "in 20XX"). Oh, and one of my favorite *Zelda* games is *Blue Fire*, which is an excellent *Zelda*-Mario mashup (slash knockoff). But they don't necessarily need to be indie titles. *Minecraft*, the bestselling video game of all time, was inspired by a shockingly similar lookalike called *Infiniminer*. (It, in turn, was apparently inspired by *Infinifrag*, *Team Fortress*, and *Motherload*, and who knows where the evolution begins.)

commonplace but inherent to storytelling and perhaps to all creativity.
And if inherent, it must be acceptable somehow.



Zorro's Fighting Legion is the second of five Republic serials—which was the old way to say TV series.

After that cliffhanger above, the next episode backs up a little ways. It shows Zorro ride after the stagecoach again, leap onto the yokes, drop beneath and drag his heels. This time, the story keeps going where last time it cut to black.

Just before Comandante Manuel's pistol goes off, Zorro lets go of the yoke. The gun fires.

The bullet misses.

On the ground, the hooves stamp just inches away from the hero's head, as his body curls and rolls between them, missing death by the narrowest margin.

As he scrapes across the ground and the stage continues forward, he travels underneath the carriage and then grabs the back footboard—a clip that happens in the blink of an eye.

Latching onto the back, Zorro drags behind for a small moment before pulling himself up and climbing onto the stage.

From there, he gets atop the coach and manhandles the wounded driver, a wrestle that ends with the badguy being thrown from the racing vehicle. In the end of the sequence, Zorro gets clear just before the coach wrecks with Comandante Manuel inside.

Considering when it was filmed, no cinematic trickery made the effect look more impressive or death-defying than it really was—other than perhaps to be sped up a little. The sequence is truly a *wonder*, particularly when Zorro goes underneath the speeding vehicle.

But it's *no wonder* that Spielberg and Lucas wanted to mimic it.

QUEST FOR THE TERRA-COTTA SOLDIER

The Ditch: 2003

I felt a stab of panic.

I was in my parents' garage. It smelled of dust and dried leaves.

Open plastic tubs were on all sides of me with books from college, drawings from kindergarten to present, and a few of the teeth I'd lost in first grade.

It wasn't here though.

A white 3-ringed binder.

If not here, then where? Had they been thrown away? While sitting amid the unpacked mess, I sent this desperate plea to my sister in law, a question regarding my minimalist older brother: "I kind of doubt Tev would have been lugging this around, but do you happen to know if he had a binder collection of Young Indiana Jones cards?"

The anxiety pressed down as I waited for her to reply.

The cards hadn't crossed my mind in years, hadn't seemed to matter. Now they mattered a lot.

Just six minutes later she replied: "I think so, actually."

I gasped as if I'd been holding my breath that whole time. But I didn't want to take the cards if they'd already been promised to his son.⁷⁶ Fortunately, she cleared me on that account too. She brought them to me sometime later.

I don't know how to explain the weight of this acquisition. I hope by now I've let you hold them, which means you've probably seen my reverence.

Tucked in the front pocket of the binder were two international envelopes, stamped with their departure countries, Australia and Greece. These were clues Tev had left behind, evidence that he'd acquired the final two missing cards on

⁷⁶ Story time! For the family reunion, I scheduled a video game activity, but it ended up just being me and Colter in the movie room. I felt bummed that the party was a bust, but Colter was unfazed. I ended up watching, commenting, and cheering as he played on the Nvidia Shield Android device that had belonged to his dad. After a bit, he launched a Mario Kart knockoff called Beach Buggy. He excitedly, nostalgically, told me he remembered playing it in third grade with his dad, who had purchased the full version, the infinity tickets, which removed some of the annoying roadblocks. What Colter didn't know was that I'd played that game obsessively myself and had been the one to recommend it to his dad so long ago. After Colter cruised through a menu of his old achievements, he started into some of the harder ones that he'd never gotten. One of these took him to a winter level where he would drive through icy caves, and he'd try over and over till he got all three stars. Then he loaded a challenge where he was racing against his old best time, and it showed a racer on the track representing that old record—like he was racing against a ghost of what happened in the past. A ghost from the past. Since he couldn't seem to beat the former score, he supposed the high mark had been set by his dad. After many attempts, he finally got a new high score, at which point he said, "That was definitely my dad." So at least three of us made it to the video game party. (Journal entry, August 8, 2024)

eBay, making it a complete set. No more missing pieces.

Reclaiming this collection was my feeble attempt to keep a shred of my brother around, a way to preserve a small piece of him and not let him slip away. Maybe that's the point of this essay too—
Though I've only just now realized it.



On BYU campus, the Family History Center is adjacent to the Harold B. Lee Library, but it's underground.

The library is literally buried.

Yet another clue.

Someday I may take you to those stone steps, which I marched down like entering a tomb, while hefting a crate on my shoulder: Inside were Tev's childhood journal, my childhood journal, two scrapbooks full of Tev's photos, and the white binder of Young Indy cards.

A row of chairs were lined up to a row of desk nooks, and each had a computer and a flatbed scanner. Most of them also had an old lady attached. I found one that was vacant and sat down.

For three hours, I sat there scanning, desperately trying to preserve the past.⁷⁷ I did the journals first, then the Young Indy cards, and then the photo albums. As

⁷⁷ For more on this particular obsession, see my essay "On the Cloud, Perhaps" in *Inklings*.

I worked, I overheard Swedish and German accents and something about Jewish ancestry being suppressed by the Nazis. Later, I put in my earbuds and listened to The Killers screaming about how you can't hold on.

When I scanned the photo of Tev and me in matching polos, I completely broke down in tears. I tried to control it but couldn't, and my whole chest locked up as I shook.

I bowed my head and blinked rapidly.

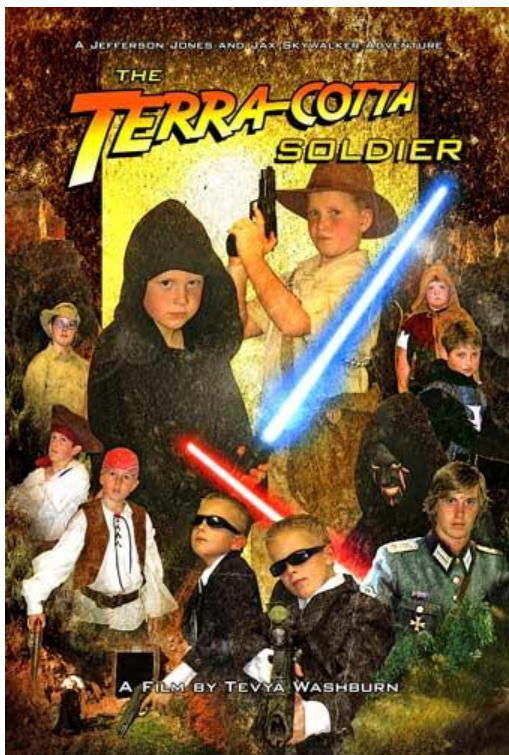
After I got it together, I glanced around furtively, making sure none of the old ladies had noticed.

In my eulogy speech, I promised Tev's kids that he would be like the ghost of Obi-Wan, a spiritual guide on their hero's journeys. This statement came from my own deep need for it to be true. It didn't seem like a huge stretch either—having passed beyond the veil of death, Tev has surely seen what lies on the other side, which means he should now know the secret of everlasting life.

He never showed up though.

At least not as a blue ghost.

He did, however, in subtler ways, begin to guide me toward the Grail.



Tev loved *Zorro*, especially those old serials.

As kids, it seemed strange that none of our friends had seen the old ones (which aired on TV during World War II), but that also meant that when Tev pointed out the similarities between them and Indiana Jones, it felt like our own

little secret—carefully noted and hidden in the Grail Diary.

Tev took a huge dare when he uprooted his family and moved to MesoAmerica. It takes guts to do that sort of thing, maybe the same sort of heroic foolhardy we saw in *Zorro's Fighting Legion*. At one point, he took his wife to Petra too, the place where *Last Crusade* ends. He had the vision to see a dream as reality and then make it so.

I feel something like horror considering an alternate universe where he'd decided to procrastinate his dreams for just another couple of years.

I'm so glad he didn't.

As kids, one book Tev and I had in our collection had the lengthy title of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles on the Set and Behind the Scenes*, which details the impressive production process of the TV show. The cast and crew did an incredible amount of work with a very small team and a very short timeline. They also shot episodes on location all around the world, a story that is inspiring on its own.⁷⁸

During college, Tev started his most serious attempt at following in George Lucas's footsteps by making a movie of his own—another undertaking that requires substantial vision.

My kid brothers were about five and seven at the time. Tev hired them to be the stars. He shot just one scene, a fight in a canal that looked like a jungle river in Xi-an, China. Jax was dressed as a Jedi in black with a cape and lightsaber and hair so blonde it was almost white. Jeff was dressed in khakis and wore a brown fedora. They waded up to their elbows in the canal water, and you can see Jax shivering. Then Tanner, the soon-to-be Marine, steps up over the hill carrying an uzi and wearing a swastika on his shoulder. The two heroes duck beneath the water just before he unloads his clip on them. Jefferson Jones pops out of the water, grabs the Nazi's foot, and a pretty good fistfight ensues.

Later Tev fleshed this out into a whole story and filmed more scenes and even added a red line traversing a map of the geography they covered: They're searching for the Terra-Cotta Soldier, a small statue with unexplained "supernatural powers"—though surely linked to the secret of everlasting life. The two little adventurers face thugs and even a Sith Lord in their quest to claim this

⁷⁸ Rick McCallum, producer of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, said, "The [Indiana Jones] films are like a fictionalization of a real person, but in the series we're doing the *real* person. The films are completely action-oriented. They have a very, very small and minor plot—something happens and Indy has to do incredible things to save the world. What can we do for the next hour and a half to move this thing at the most lightning speed? Whereas *the Chronicles* is totally about character development. There is some action, but mostly it's about a young boy who learns about life, which is unusual for global television. Everything he learns about, from his relationship to food, women, ethics, morality, to the way he interrelates with people, he learns from the rest of the world, not America." (*The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles: On the Set and Behind the Scenes*)

At the end, the scene changes, and their costumes turn out to be entirely imagined. Then Tev himself steps into the scene and says, “Hey, Mom says to come in for dinner. Is that my Terra Cotta Soldier?” And he takes away the artifact they spent so much energy acquiring. This always gets a good laugh from the audience.

Tev raced to finish this movie in the weeks leading up to his marriage. He wanted it off his plate before his next big adventure, tidying up a few last bits of childhood.

The Terra-Cotta Soldier has been watched and re-watched ad nauseam by my siblings, our cousins, Tev’s kids, and all their cousins—as by now I’m sure you know. Its legacy is important for many reasons.

On the surface, Tev stole Indy for his own movie.

Looking deeper, it is an homage to George Lucas and both of the immortal franchises he fathered. It’s therefore an acknowledgement that all stories, including the greatest ones, are inspired by the ones that came before.

The effort Tev put into this project really shows, and it earned him a place amid the fanfiction listed on [TheRaider.net](#). It is a demonstration that one can dream big and then make it happen creatively.

Thematically, it is a nod to our childhood and the imaginative games we played together.

Finally, it is a memento of Tev himself.

He poured so much of himself into it that his spirit abides within.

Perhaps that’s the secret to everlasting life.

That heartfelt creativity can spark undying magic.

⁷⁹ I need to tell this story for posterity: Tev put a particular sound effect in *The Terra-Cotta Soldier*: When Jefferson Jones is hacking into a computer, a deep, robotic voice says, “Platform initiated.” This was a pre-recorded sound that he got in a pack with a bunch of other effects. As a nod to that, I wrote those same words in *Starchild: Exile* when Kalh is activating the broadcast console, but they were just words on a page, barely similar to the sound effect. However, what I didn’t plan (which my brilliant narrator Simon Wright decided to do of his own accord) was to have those words in the audiobook be distorted into a deep robotic tone. So now my audiobook sounds like the effect in Tev’s movie—by fate or providence or sheer magic.



THE LOST SECRET

Online: 2022

There's a beautiful gem in *The Legend of Zelda: Minish Cap*.

A group of elves called the Picori steal about, spreading their magic mischievously, and only children can see them. It turns out that Picori magic is the only thing that can save the kingdom from evil, so Link is called to be the hero precisely because he's a child.

This essay would conclude tidily if I simply stated that reclaiming childish wonder was the solution. More importantly, it would agree with Tev. That's big. Problem is, I don't think it's true.

I've been searching for more Indiana Jones since I was a kid. At one point, I thought *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* would be exactly what I was looking for. I went with my friend Ashley to the midnight premiere in 2008—my first time seeing an Indy film in theaters.⁸⁰ I felt embarrassed walking out of there, though, like I'd stayed up half the night only to get pranked. To say the least, it wasn't the movie I'd hoped for, and it didn't inspire the same awe I felt watching *Temple of*

⁸⁰ On June 7, 2023, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* came back to theaters for one night just weeks before the release of *Dial of Destiny*. I went with several family members, including Tev's oldest son and my brother Tanner. Beforehand, I thought I had the movie a little too memorized to enjoy it much, but I ended up being blown away. It was so cool to see it in such high resolution at such a large scale, and I noticed so many details I hadn't before, like the almost human eyes of the Chachapoyan fertility idol. After the credits, we sat talking about how frightening it might be for a young kid, but my nephew assured us that he had seen it at least once before with his dad, around the age of eight. Then a stranger spoke up from behind, eager to insert himself into the conversation: He was old, short, a bit scruffy, with thick glasses and a baseball cap, and he stood next to his identical twin brother, and he spoke so eagerly he had to catch his breath. He told us he watched *Raiders* six times in theaters back in 1981, but each time he kept his eyes shut from the moment the ark was opened until the lid fell back closed. We laughed as we imagined this guy shouting to his brother, "Shut your eyes, Bernard. Don't look at it, no matter what happens!"

Was it just because I'm not a first grader anymore?

Part of me wishes I were. My daughter calls this part of me Kid-J. Another part of me (Dad-J) knows it would take actual magic to reclaim the power of the Picori. And yet I watched *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for the first time as an adult, and I loved it. It's a kids show, and I loved it. (Kid-J still buys himself action figures too.) So despite having grown up, I still have some childlike capabilities, which makes me think it's not that. *Avatar* encapsulated the lost secret, while so many others failed.

Why? What is it that the stories are missing?

Some lost secret.

A secret so valuable that even the forces of evil are looking for it.

⁸¹ For this essay, I watched *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* for the second time, more than 14 years since the premiere. Basically the whole second half is awful. Still hate the action sequences, which obliterate suspension of disbelief. (Not sure which offends most, the Tarzan, the crotch whacks, or Indy climbing inside a fridge that gets tossed for miles.) Lots of the humor feels forced and juvenile. The wife relationship is a great idea but mostly falls flat. Finally, I wish they'd matured Indy, made him more of a professor and less of an action hero. (At his age, he should be outwitting bad guys, not out punching them.) However—and I hate to say this—I do feel some fondness for the movie now, despite it being so dang dumb. I guess that's what rock-bottom expectations will do. (Maybe this will happen with *The Last Jedi* someday.) I think Mutt is awesome (when he's not Tarzan), and I like the idea of him inheriting the call to adventure. Ox going mad is cool and tragic, and I sorta wish he stayed that way. Mac is a colorful counterpoint to Indy and could've used a non-cliche ending. That's three decent characters! I love the idea of aliens and psychic warfare (after all, *Men Who Stare at Goats* is my fifth favorite Star Wars movie). I love the South American settings, including the Nazca Lines and Iguazu Falls. Oh and Yale standing in for Indy's Marshall College is great too. And maybe my favorite part is that Indy says he learned Spanish while riding with Pancho Villa—which is a Young Indy episode!



“We would never make Indiana Jones without Harrison Ford.”

Kay Kay said this in a *Vanity Fair* interview.⁸²

She’s implying that the lost secret lies with the actor, which is obviously not true, or *Crystal Skull* would’ve been stellar. Yes, Harrison Ford made a huge contribution to the successful Indy films, and yet Spielberg himself cast River Phoenix as Indiana Jones, while George Lucas cast Corey Carrier, Sean Patrick Flannery, and George Hall as well. That makes five actors who have donned the fedora, kind of like how James Bond⁸³ passed his license to kill from one generation to the next, which certainly hasn’t sabotaged his success.

But if the actor isn’t the secret either, then what is?

If you had asked first-grader me what secret makes the Indiana Jones trilogy so great, I would’ve said, “Everything that’s in all three movies.”

Little me first noticed there *even was* a pattern because of the varmints—snakes then bugs then rats. Wouldn’t be Indiana Jones without them. And Indy

⁸² [‘Star Wars’ Forever on Vanity Fair](#)

⁸³ James Bond also happens to be one of Indy’s predecessors, which Lucas explained in an interview: “Steven [Spielberg] was telling me how he wanted to do a James Bond film, and that he actually went to the people who owned James Bond and asked them if he could direct one, and they turned him down... So I said, ‘Well, look, Steven, I’ve got a James Bond film. It’s great—it’s just like James Bond but even better.’” This makes it all the more fitting that Sean Connery, who played James Bond, took the role of Indy’s father, Henry Jones Sr.

always finds a good excuse to swing on a bullwhip. Plus interesting world geography—highlighted by the red line crossing the map. There's a romantic interest in each, and Indy also has a contrasting companion—an ex, a kid, or a parent. Each movie has a segment with boobie traps, a daring infiltration to steal something ancient, the central prize being a spiritual artifact, and the bad guys, who want to claim the artifact first, meet a rewardingly gruesome death for being so close but not quite worthy.

Oh, and maybe most important of all, Indy always loses the artifact in the end—somehow that's essential.

The hero loses the thing he was after.

Yet for Indy, somehow that's okay, noble almost, as if losing the prize proves he's on the quest for the right reason.

As kids, Tev and I agreed *Temple of Doom* wasn't quite as good as the other two, but personally I couldn't really conceive of a bad Indy movie. (The bridge scene alone made it more than worthwhile.) We hadn't seen *Crystal Skull* either, which has all the elements Kid-J identified, and yet it didn't end up packing the same punch.

The secret to a good *Star Wars* movie is just as mysterious. I would say it's lightsabers, but the prequels have lightsabers yet no magic. I would say it's X-wings, yet the sequels have X-wings but no magic. Same can be said of the Force and basically every other element. It seems to have no correlation with what elements are used. The secret is something beyond any of the parts.

As an adult, I can't claim to know how Indy's trilogy completely eclipsed Harry Steele, but I have been seeking the secret earnestly. I have found one sliver, a chunk of rock that proves this mysterious secret does exist:

It's about the character.

Which is ironically close to what Kay Kay thought was the secret, and being so close, she probably would've had a horribly gruesome final scene.

Harry Steele is quick witted, but he's also cutting with his tongue, mean even. He's also a liar. It's hard to get around that. While being a con man can be admirable (like in *The Sting*), it isn't when you lie to those who deeply trust you. Harry Steele lies to the leading lady. He changes in the end, which is part of his character arc, from antihero to actual hero. He's somewhat likable all along, but it's mixed with some despicable too. You want him to be more kind, show more pity, not be so heartless.

None of this negativity is true about Indiana Jones. He might tell a lie in a scrape, but you don't think of him as a liar. He can also be a little unscrupulous, but there's very little he does to make you not like him.

That difference is the clue I found.

A fragment that makes up part of a huge stela.

I think I have at least one other piece, an aspect *Secret of the Incas* couldn't touch: Harry Steele is only chasing riches. It happens to be a golden artifact, but it's just money in the end. Indy's quests are about physical artifacts that are connected to the metaphysical and the spiritual—culminating in the Holy Grail,

which contains the secret of everlasting life.

So put together these two pieces—a likable hero and a transcendent quest—and we’re getting closer. Yet we’re still a long way from assembling a hieroglyphic sequence that makes sense.

Perhaps I’ve got the wrong metaphor.

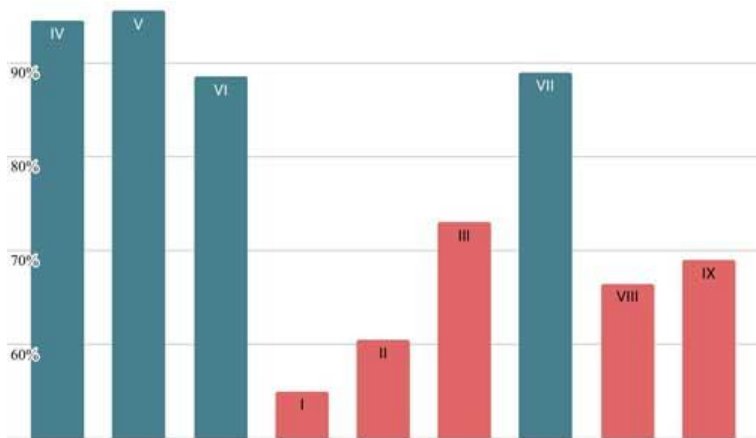
I’m pretending like I could find all the parts of the stela, reassemble it, and then I’d know how to create stories that matter deeply. Like a recipe. You take 16 ounces of cream cheese and dice eight peaches and put them into one of Mom’s famous crusts, and what comes out is reliably delectable, consistently the greatest dessert of all time (assuming it’s peach season). A recipe reduces the variables and standardizes the process to fit on an index card.

A guy named Eric Zala did this, followed *Raiders of the Lost Ark* like a recipe, recreating it shot for shot—a half second of the boulder—a half second of the look on Indy’s face—a half second of him running—and so on. It’s called *The Adaptation*,⁸⁴ and he became somewhat famous on the internet for making this duplicate, which is certainly impressive in some ways, but it is absolutely not what we’re looking for.

The objective is to create something familiar, yet it must also be *new* and *distinct*, an original adventure we’ve never seen before, yet one that lives up to or surpasses its predecessors.

A vastly more difficult venture.

And, to some, impossible.



I use Rotten Tomatoes to assign letter grades to movies.

Because I used to be an English teacher.

For example, critics gave *A New Hope* a 93, while the general audience gave it 96. Combine those, and you get 189, and $189/200$ is 95%, which is an [A].

If you look at the letter grades of the Star Wars saga over time, it tells an

⁸⁴ See [The Adaptation on Wikipedia](#)

interesting story about the lost secret.⁸⁵ It goes like this:

George Lucas managed to capture magic with his original *Star Wars* movie, an [A], creating what is (or was) arguably the most well beloved franchise of all time. He peaked with the next one, *Empire Strikes Back*, receiving an [A+] thanks to help from director Irvin Kershner. Things started to drop after that, with *Return of the Jedi* receiving a [B+]. When Lucas reclaimed the director's chair to launch his prequel trilogy,⁸⁶ he got an [F], a [D-], and a [C] for those three episodes. At least he seemed to be learning over time, but these films aren't even close to matching the glory of the original trilogy.

In the aftermath, he sold his baby to Disney.

Next, the saga showed a glimmer of hope. Fans were so excited for more *Star Wars* that they forgave many flaws in *The Force Awakens*, and it received a [B+]. This movie also had the advantage of being the first episode in a trilogy—Act I—which is only required to ask interesting questions, something JJ Abrams is good at. Finding satisfactory answers to those questions is the job of Acts II and III, and in this case the answers were far from satisfactory.⁸⁷ *The Last Jedi* earned a [D] while *Rise of Skywalker* got a [D+]. The trajectory of these movies exposes a shocking truth:

George Lucas doesn't know the secret.⁸⁸

He doesn't know why *Star Wars* was such a success, and he couldn't recreate the glory a second time.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ I don't mean to suggest that this data is the only story. Personally, the rankings are different for me, and they're surely different for you too. It's simply a way to aggregate a bunch of personal opinions and talk about them en masse.

⁸⁶ I think prequels are generally a bad idea. If the story was worth telling, you should've started there. It introduces too many problems and almost always requires you to retcon. (Yes, I'm currently writing a *Starchild* prequel. Dang it!) Second tangent, I think you should always follow the release order (or publication order). That goes for *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Starchild*, and *Star Wars*. It also goes for the *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*.

⁸⁷ Yes, I saw *Rise of Skywalker* on opening night. I saw them all on opening night—except for *Empire Strikes Back SE*.

⁸⁸ See also *Back to the Future*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Matrix*, and every other franchise that started losing steam as soon as the first one was out the door. (As a side note, I think *The Bourne Identity* actually made it through the trilogy and then dropped off pretty sharply after that.)

⁸⁹ As further proof, his knock off of *The Hobbit*, called *Willow*, which I feel fondness for, only has a cult following and never reached the same heights as *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*.

The directors of the sequel trilogy apparently don't know the secret either.⁹⁰ You know who else doesn't know the secret? Steven Spielberg, the guy who directed the original *Indiana Jones* trilogy [A+, B-, A-], and followed it up with *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* [D].⁹¹ He apparently has no idea what makes a good Indiana Jones movie.

Speaking of Spielberg, my mother in law said her favorite part of *Raiders* was when Indy pulls out his Smith and Wesson and shoots the sword-toting thug. Surprisingly, this moment wasn't in the script. As Ford explained in a Reddit

⁹⁰ Howard Kazanjian, the producer on *Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, said, "Generally speaking, I think that the filmmakers on *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* didn't understand the story... They didn't understand what a Jedi Knight was all about. That's the simplest way to put it. Skywalker's the story, and I think that's what they failed at. I'm not talking about just Mark Hamill as Skywalker. It's the overall psychological story of Skywalker, and of course, the Jedi Knights. The ardent fans know more about the storyline than the filmmakers." This testimonial for the ardent fans stood out particularly.

And then Marcia Lucas, George Lucas' ex-wife and one of the central editors on *A New Hope*, shared similar thoughts: "I like Kathleen. I always liked her. She was full of beans. She was really smart and really bright. Really wonderful woman. And I liked her husband, Frank [Marshall, who produced the Indiana Jones films]. I liked them a lot... [However,] now that she's running Lucasfilm and making movies, it seems to me that Kathy Kennedy and J.J. Abrams don't have a clue about Star Wars. They don't get it. And J.J. Abrams is writing these stories—when I saw that movie where they kill Han Solo, I was furious. I was furious when they killed Han Solo. Absolutely, positively, there was no rhyme or reason to it... I thought, 'You don't get the Jedi story. You don't get the magic of Star Wars. You're getting rid of Han Solo?' And then at the end of *The Last Jedi*, they have Luke disintegrate. They killed Han Solo. They killed Luke Skywalker. And they don't have Princess Leia anymore. And they're spitting out movies every year. And they think it's important to appeal to a woman's audience, so now their main character is this female who's supposed to have Jedi powers, but we don't know how she got Jedi powers, or who she is. It sucks. The storylines are terrible. Just terrible. Awful... You can quote me—J.J. Abrams, Kathy Kennedy—talk to me." (*Howard Kazanjian: A Producer's Life* by J.W. Rinzler, 2021)

⁹¹ If you watch the blu-ray extras, it becomes crystal clear that during filming and post production, no one had any idea how badly their movie was going to land with audiences. I wish I could write the next draft of *Crystal Skull*. I'd explore in this direction: In a heartfelt moment, Indy says he lost his dad and Marcus—that's in the current movie. I'd run with that and make it so the MacGuffin, the crystal skull, can resurrect people, so the internal and external conflicts have more alignment. Indy is skeptical yet secretly hopeful that it may be real, and he's so obsessed with this possibility, distracted and disengaged, that he isn't really seeing Mutt as a person. Mutt plays it cool and tries hard to act like he's not a huge fan of Indy, but he's subtly mimicking the whole time. In the finale, Indy gets one dose of the magic to take back to his father's grave to see if it really works. But then Mutt dies, not saving Indy but in some noble way—oh, he dies to save Oxley, stepping into the role of hero because Indy was busy acquiring the skull magic. So Indy uses his one dose of the skull magic to bring back the kid, but he realizes he's glad to do it. Thus Indy lets go of the past by investing in the present relationship instead. Whoa, that just got meta.

AMA,⁹² he had diarrhea and could hardly leave his trailer so he suggested they skip a three-day fight sequence and just let him “shoot the son of a bitch.” A similar bit of serendipity happened to Spielberg with *Jaws*. The animatronic shark malfunctioned, and so it’s hardly seen until the end of the film, but this only added to the suspense and made for a better movie. What luck. Both of these examples show greatness that came in spite of the creator’s intentions—great story that came by accident!

And while we’re turning Hollywood’s Gods into mortals, you know who else doesn’t know the secret? Peter Jackson, the man who made the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which received an [A], and who subsequently made *The Hobbit* trilogy, which earned a [C]—and that’s being generous. He’s not alone here. Amazon created *The Rings of Power*, “the most expensive show ever made,” and yet all that money couldn’t get it above a [D-].

And lest you see only proof of “toxic fandom” and don’t believe these each failed to create a great story, take a look at the *Game of Thrones* series, which got straight [A]s until the writing failed in the final season, earning an [F]. This happened because they ventured beyond the books that George R.R. Martin had finished.⁹³ Then when the prequel series, *House of the Dragon*, brought improved writing, fans forgave, and the scores rose again to a [B].⁹⁴

People just want a great story.

Mark Hamill said, “If you could figure out the formula, you could bottle it up and sell it.”⁹⁵

That’s a big *if*.

And here, inevitably, a shadow falls upon the heart of the hero. His strength fails at last, despair in the face of what appears to be a hopeless quest.

One that remains a mystery to even the ones once deemed most worthy.

⁹² See [Reddit IAMA 13 Apr 2014](#).

⁹³ If GRRM ever publishes his next book, we may finally know whether he himself ultimately knew the secret all along.

⁹⁴ The exact same thing happened with Star Wars shows. *The Book of Boba Fett* got a [D-]. *Kenobi* received a [C-]. Then *Andor*, without using a single lightsaber or X-Wing, earned a [B], a remarkable comeback thanks to a great story told well. Incidentally, each of these received harsher scores from the fans than from the professional critics.

⁹⁵ See [Cambridge Union 2016](#).

PART III

I DO BELIEVE IN FAIRIES

Second Star: Date Unknown

The story is about a boy who lost his mother.
Or who wandered away from her so that he could go on an idealized
adventure.

He's accompanied by a famous fairy who zips into the boy's pocket to hide,
and it is quite noteworthy that he has this companion.

He confronts and wrestles his own shadow.⁹⁶

The boy is a symbol both of heroism and of childish dreams of adventure. His
story is about growing up, about losing the innocence of childhood to face the
trials of adulthood.

Not there yet?

Last clue—the boy is famous for his green outfit.

If you guessed *Peter Pan*, you're right.

If you guessed *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, you're also right.

Peter Pan was published in 1904 in England. *Ocarina of Time* was published
in 1998 in Japan—not quite 100 years later. Here's what Shigeru Miyamoto, the
creator of *Zelda*, said about this connection:

Link... was designed by Takashi Tezuka. Like Mario, we wanted a
character that would be recognisable... so we thought of a long hat and long
ears and went in the direction of an elf. At the time, when you said long ears,
you thought of *Peter Pan*, and as Takashi is a Disney fan, he drew inspiration
from that.

The similarities are undeniable, and more than just visually.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ One of my all-time favorite elements of the *Zelda* series was introduced in the
second game, *The Adventure of Link* (1987). After defeating the final boss, the hero must
face “Link’s Shadow,” an obscure version of himself that counters all his attacks almost
like a mirror image. When this antagonist returned in later games, including *Ocarina of
Time*, it became known as “Shadow Link” and “Dark Link,” as if it were a separate Link of
some sort, but in its original appearance, it was simply the shadow of the hero himself.
Once again, this element echoes *Peter Pan* (1904), who upon entering the stage for the
very first time, dashes about the room in a clash with his own shadow. This trope is also
reminiscent of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), in which the hero, Duny, a young magician,
accidentally conjures his own greatest antagonist, simply called the “Shadow,” which
haunts him in a dogged pursuit throughout his life till the end of the novel, at which point
Duny finally confronts, masters, and then merges with the Shadow, allowing it to become
a part of himself once again.

⁹⁷ Speaking of *visually*, it's crazy to see how much *Zelda* stylistically copied from
Studio Ghibli's animated films.

Peter Pan, afraid of growing up, fled from his home (and his mother), orphaning himself. He then found his way to Never Never Land, where he was raised among the Lost Boys, children who never grow up. *Link's* mother delivered him to Kokiri Village and then vanished, trying to escape her soon-to-be murderer, leaving Link orphaned. He was then raised by the Kokiri, elvish children who never grow up.

Along with being so similar visually in their dashing green, both stories are centered around themes of growing up, about losing childhood and mourning that loss, as it's forcibly taken away. Both stories frame time as the ultimate antagonist, the arbiter of everyone and everything.

When asked who he is, Peter Pan says he's youth, joy, and freedom. In this reply, he's making himself an abstract concept rather than a person. Link is an avatar for the player, the symbol of a hero rather than an actual person. He has so little of his own personality that he never speaks (even when apparently speaking to others). For the most part, he simply stands in the place of the player, an abstract concept rather than a person, an almost androgynous one no less.

Speaking of which, Peter Pan is a boy in name, and yet he was traditionally played by a female on stage, giving him a small, slender form. Likewise, Child Link is a young boy who was voiced by a female.

It's hard to say who's more famous, Peter or Link. Probably Peter, but I do believe that Link is currently more popular, another case of the new surpassing the old. The bottom line, though, is that Link certainly drew inspiration from Peter Pan.

Are the creators of *Zelda* somehow lower class because they drew on this source of inspiration? If so, then is Michaelangelo also a lesser artist because he sculpted using blocks of stone that he didn't create?

That conclusion seems absurd.

Although Peter and Link clearly share similarities, the differences are too numerous to fit here. *Zelda* is quite distinct from *Peter Pan*. It's its own thing. Yet the creators admitted their inspiration, which seems like a clue.

For one, that makes it not plagiarism.

Nor is it a tribute, exactly. And it seems something more than homage. A story like *Ocarina of Time*—perhaps one could think of it as a salute.

The artist raises his hand to his eyebrow, back straight, elbow high.

No, it's more likely the sort of salute Indy might give: The artist cocks his head forward, touches his index finger to the corner of his eyebrow, and then points at his predecessor with a wide but lopsided grin.

With this salute, he acknowledges those who blazed the trail thus far.

Then with determination on his brow, his hand curls into a fist, and he marches ahead, starting where the trail ends, and blazing further into the unknown.

A salute like this, in a way, redeems some of the ugliness of plagiarism.

It transforms the imitation into flattery.

Or it could, at least.

Unfortunately, this *nobles oblige* is seldom⁹⁸ followed by those who have the privilege of the public pulpit. This makes for an interesting contrast— Imitation is common but admitting it is not.

It's hard to believe that after all these years, neither Spielberg nor Lucas has ever made a public statement of gratitude about *Secret of the Incas*.⁹⁹ As if they're unwilling to admit they stole the Grail Diary.

For some reason, famous artists and authors seem *reticent*—reluctant to openly discuss the process, to admit how they collected gems from a variety of predecessors and then assembled them into something more valuable. Maybe because the general public doesn't understand how common it is to steal from other art, and so to admit it is to let everyone down. Or perhaps there's an adult motivation behind this. Maybe plagiarism, an ethical construct, is at odds with copyright, a legal construct. Maybe admitting inspirations, which gets one out from under plagiarism's shadow, exposes one more fully to copyright's snares. If that's the case, it's a shame.

A shame to not praise the great works that led us to where we are. Or to give credit to those who contributed to our success.



Who deserves the credit for creating *Star Wars*?
George Lucas, hands down.
That's really the only way to answer that question.

⁹⁸ I just wrote "is seldomly followed," but *seldom* is an adverb, so it doesn't need a "ly" to turn it into one. You learn something new every day!

⁹⁹ Spielberg's only instructions to Shia LeBeouf before playing Mutt in *Crystal Skull* were simply to watch three movies: *Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *The Wild One* (as Shia explained in the blu-ray extras). This imitation seems to not be a secret, and so maybe the other Indy inspirations were never meant to be either.

Yet a massive team came together to create the original trilogy. For example, as the director, Irvin Kershner had tons of creative control on *Empire Strikes Back*, arguably the greatest *Star Wars* movie, and his contributions brought it above and beyond the script itself. Same with Ben Burt on the sound or Paul Hirsch and Marcia Lucas in the editing room. Many people made massive contributions that led to a massive victory, yet the world collectively gave only one man the credit—as if he’d performed this feat alone.

At that point, maybe¹⁰⁰ Lucas believed our collective misattribution. Maybe he forgot that he borrowed and built upon so many sources that came before. Maybe he thought he didn’t need to listen to his teammates this time around. Maybe he believed he was both the mastermind and the secret sauce.¹⁰¹

Whatever happened resulted in catastrophic reviews of the second trilogy, a disaster for which the world again collectively gave Lucas all the credit, a cruel irony. He was blasted by those who’d been his dearest fans. They turned on him carrying pitchforks.

In the aftermath, he departed—exited the stage with his head bowed. And left *Star Wars* for the vultures.

Hard not to see this story as a massive tragedy, one tantamount to Anakin’s own fall from grace. Seemingly the result of blindness toward a small but important lesson—

Creativity is always a team effort.

And because acknowledging that seems to be so rare, that makes the times when credit is given all the more remarkable.

C.S. Lewis, for example, candidly stated that the *Chronicles of Narnia* series was “in the tradition of E. Nesbit.” So he was not hiding what came from his predecessor. Lewis also paid tribute to a sci-fi author in the Prologue to *The Great Divorce*:

¹⁰⁰ I haven’t interviewed Lucas to get his side of the story, and aside from being a massive fan, I have no special knowledge on the subject, which is to say that this is sheer speculation on my part, so consider it a fictional alternate universe.

¹⁰¹ Earlier in his career, George Lucas said this: “The secret is hiring good people. I work with the directors and get them to agree with what we want to do, and then they go out and do it. I show up periodically. Every few weeks I go out and check on everything, but the truth of it is, there’s nothing you can do even if you’re standing there. I mean, it’s the director’s medium, and he’s going to do what he wants to do. I have the opportunity, when it comes back here, to have a great deal of control over how it’s finished [in the editing room], which I think is also where quality comes into it, but I’m taking more time to finish these shows than most people spend on television. An extremely important part of quality filmmaking is the postproduction schedule, and we’re spending extra time and money on the postproduction schedule to make sure it comes out right... This is the true life story of the man that the character was based on in the features. It’s about somebody who’s very interested in learning about things, somebody who’s had some incredible adventures in his life that really revolve more around learning and exploring various ideas than getting involved in action-adventure things.” (*The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles: On the Set and Behind the Scenes*)

I must acknowledge my debt to a writer whose name I have forgotten and whom I read several years ago in a highly coloured American magazine of what they call ‘Scientifiction.’ The unbendable and unbreakable quality of my heavenly matter was suggested to me by him, though he used the fancy for a different and most ingenious purpose. His hero travelled into the past: and there, very properly, found raindrops that would pierce him like bullets¹⁰² and sandwiches that no strength could bite—because, of course, nothing in the past can be altered. I, with less originality but (I hope) equal propriety, have transferred this to the eternal. If the writer of that story ever reads these lines I ask him to accept my grateful acknowledgement.

Lewis deserves props for saying this.¹⁰³ He didn’t have Google at his fingertips to solve the mystery, but the concept in fact came from “The Man Who Lived Backwards,” and the unnamed author was Charles F. Hall. Putting this acknowledgment in a prologue seems like the ideal salute.

Another stellar example is that of Ursula Leguinn, who did acknowledgement in reverse, praising the novel that she clearly inspired, an act of humility almost beyond measure:

It is a rare and great pleasure to find a fantasist writing not only with the kind of accuracy of language absolutely essential to fantasy-making, but with real music in the words as well. Wherever Pat Rothfuss goes with the big story that begins with *The Name of the Wind*, he’ll carry us with him as a good singer carries us through a song.

It’s also quite possible that many of the creatives who have been seemingly lambasted herein actually *have* given credit in one way or another but it wasn’t as easy to find. Or maybe it’s hard to give credit because all inspirations themselves are sitting on just as shaky ground, on and on into history until the whole thing becomes wispy, so it’s unclear who ought to be praised.

This highlights the fact that nothing is original.

It may be hard to come to grips with.

It becomes acceptable, though, through the virtue of humility, when creatives give those sincere salutes, when they pay meek credit to the members of their fellowship and to their own predecessors.

That’s an interesting word—*predecessor*.

¹⁰² *The Great Divorce* is a story about the afterlife, and it turns out that human souls are naturally too thin and wispy for the solid world of heaven, so they must acclimatize and become more solid in order to withstand the greater glory; otherwise, they are unable to abide.

¹⁰³ And for saying this: “Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).

One barely has to squint to see the etymology.
It's right there, plain as can be: *pre* and *deceased*.
It means one who died before—
Who died already.

PUTTING ON THE HAT

London: 2006

Indy dives off Katanga's ship and into the sea.

The Nazi's have just stolen the Ark of the Covenant and loaded it aboard their U-boat, which he's not about to let them get away with.

He swims desperately after the submarine.

As Indy climbs aboard the conning tower of the metal vessel, Katanga's crew spots him and cheers at his courage, while the Nazis are none the wiser.

Then the submarine starts to sink into the depths of the Aegean, and Indy realizes this may have been a bad idea...

Of course, we all know he makes it.

However, few notice that his hat didn't.

Indy lost his hat in the water.

His lucky hat.

The novelization of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* explains this scene, which was filmed but cut from the final edit: Indy lashes his bullwhip to the periscope, and by a stroke of luck the sub never dives low enough to drown him, but he gets dragged along through the ocean water over night. When they arrive at the island near Crete, he climbs ashore without the Nazis spotting him, but also without his hat or whip, neither of which are seen on screen again in that film. The novel lets us get inside Indy's head as he laments the loss of these two "treasured possessions..." "It was a day for sad farewells," thinks Indy.

The final segment of the movie then shows him wearing a different hat, and the sequels seem to brush over this fact—which the audience collectively seemed to miss anyway.

* * *

In January of 1993, I was nine, midway through fourth grade.

That's when I got my first Indiana Jones hat.¹⁰⁴

Tev already had a cowboy hat that he loved and wasn't eager to replace, but he helped me pick out my hat from Corral Ranch. He also helped convince Mom that she ought to buy it for me—since it was more than I could afford. In my little kid handwriting, I wrote in my diary, "It looks like Indiana's. It's light brown. I

¹⁰⁴ This is too meta not to share: In *The Terra-Cotta Soldier*, Jefferson Jones wears three different hats. In the first sequence, his hat has a wide top-front instead of a tight pinch. In the scenes in the Congo ditch (filmed earlier when he's younger), he wears a smaller hat with a tight pinch and tapered crown. And in the final scenes, he wears my first Indy hat, which has a tight pinch, a sheer crown, and is bleached almost green from its time in the sun.

like it. I wear it almost every day.” It wasn’t exactly a perfect replica, but at the time I didn’t know the difference.

We got the internet the day after I turned twelve. Weird now to think that it wasn’t there in the beginning. Before Google existed, they did have search engines, but I knew all my go-to sites by heart, all of which I learned from my big brother.

One was TheRaider.net.

This site had researched in meticulous detail where the filmmakers got their props, including Indy’s pouch, which was a World War II gas mask bag called the Mark VII (or MKVII), manufactured by the British and distributed to both military and police. When I later found one on eBay, I bought it with lawn money—shipped from James W of Cadole Road, CH7 5ED, UK. I opened the box to find a pouch worn through, torn and stained with rust and oil, and under the flap, faded but legible, was a particular stamp: *Hampton 1938*. I long believed it to be the same exact pouch in which Indy carries the Sankara Stones in *Temple of Doom*, but while writing this essay I learned that there were many versions of this bag, including the MKVI, a predecessor, and I’ve been unable to decide with finality whether the one I bought is an original or a copy.

Wish I’d thought to ask Tev his opinion while I still could.

Before going on a study-abroad in 2006, I drew a detailed map of the United Kingdom and Ireland in my diary. That’s where the Indiana Jones theme begins. At Glastonbury, I visited the Chalice Well, whose water is tainted red. According to legend, Joseph of Arimathea buried the Grail near this spring, which caused the water’s change in color. At one point, the stream flows out of the mouth of a small lion’s head statue made of rusty looking stone. I knelt next to this, looked the lion in the eyes, cocked my head to the side, and drank, which got a smile from a few of my peers. I also filled a water bottle and brought home the sacred water, which I still have in a vial (and which you put in your mouth the second I handed it to you).

When we got to London, I ditched my classmates and the travel-buddy rule because I had a mission: to find Herbert Johnson Hatters at 54 Saint James’s Street. This was the milliner who made the original Indiana Jones fedora and sold it to Steven Spielberg back in 1980. After jogging through crowds, darting through traffic, and making a few wrong turns, I found myself at a doorway with a golden 54 displayed on a maroon background overhead.

I walked inside the small shop and glanced around the shelves, breathing heavily from my run. A clerk approached and asked if he could help me. I humbly explained my quest, and a moment later he handed the fedora to me.

It looked *exactly* like what Indiana Jones wore.

I moved in front of a mirror and saw myself—standing in blue jeans, a dark T-shirt, and an orange backpack. I pinched the hat’s front crown in my fingers and put it on my head.

And failed to conceal my grin.

Kind of embarrassing, since the clerk was still watching.

My Dad has literally been mistaken for Harrison Ford.¹⁰⁵ I wish I could say that about your dad as well. Unfortunately, I am not exactly the spitting image of either of them, but somehow that didn't matter. The hat was the same, and I couldn't help but feel inspired.

I wiped away the smile, took off the hat, and tried to pretend I *wasn't a first grader* by asking how much it was. He said "a hundred and fifty quid"—which meant £150, nearly \$300 in American money at the time, and certainly too much for me to actually purchase, as I'd blown my funds just getting there. I asked for his card and told him I might have him ship it to the states, which was only barely true.

Still, when I stepped out of that store, I felt like I could do anything—like adventure was in the very air, and all I had to do was breathe it in.

I had donned a fedora from Herbert Johnson, which felt like literally walking in Indy's footsteps.

I couldn't wait to get home and tell Tev.



¹⁰⁵ At a Bear Lake family reunion circa 2007, Tev and my Dad were crossing the grassy park and headed past the pool house. Tev nudged Dad and motioned with his chin and lips toward three teenagers who were passing maybe 40 feet away to the right. The teens were looking at Dad, not too subtly fixated, and kind of throwing a fit, like they couldn't believe their eyes. Whether the words *Ford* or *Indiana* were overheard is unclear, but Tev and Dad both left thinking that Dad had been mistaken for the famous actor. This incident made all of his children pretty proud, to say the least. Apart from being about 15 years younger than Harrison Ford in real life, Dad's a pretty close doppelganger: same hair, same eyes and brows, same nose, and same jaw. Main difference is that my dad has thinner lips, which is hard to notice from 40 feet. And the 15 year difference isn't that surprising as Ford's younger self is always better known than his current self, no matter which era you're talking about. In particular, Dad's a dead ringer for Indy in *Crystal Skull*, with the salt and pepper coming in in the exact same way.

Rumor is that Harrison Ford once stood inside Herbert Johnson Hatters and chose the very hat he wore in *Raiders*. The model was “The Australian,” a hat with a tight pinch in the front, a slightly wider brim, and a notably tall crown. Spielberg then purchased many of this same hat model. Several were for Harrison Ford, and the rest were for his stunt doubles. When the film production ended, the costumes and props went wherever costumes and props go—and ended up who knows where.

When Spielberg came back for *Temple of Doom*, his team needed more of the iconic hats, and he made his own return pilgrimage to Herbert Johnson. Unfortunately, the hatter was no longer manufacturing “the Australian,” so they provided something similar called “The Poet.” This had a more tapered and shorter crown with a softer pinch. The differences are subtle, but anyone who really knows hats or Indiana Jones can spot them. In other words, Indy’s iconic hat changes after the first movie.¹⁰⁶ *Last Crusade* seems to suggest that Indy had the same hat throughout his career, but him losing his lucky hat in *Raiders* makes more sense, since the fedoras are noticeably different in each film.

For years, die hard fans obsessed over the nuances of these hats, including Steve Delk and Marc Kitter, owners of the Adventurebilt Hat Company. With some careful observations, they created a hat block with which they could fashion some of the most accurate replicas possible and started selling them to fans.¹⁰⁷

Their hats were so good, in fact, that they kept Spielberg from returning to Herbert Johnson. The hat Indy wears in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* was made by Adventurebilt.

That’s no small fact.

Adventurebilt copied the earlier source with such precision that it eventually replaced the earlier source! That’s almost exactly what Indy did to Harry Steele. Proof of just how far imitation can take you.

When I eventually decided to invest in a real Indy hat, I ordered one from the Australian outback, crafted by a well respected brand called Akubra, which cost \$300 instead of \$700. It came “un-bashed,” which meant it looked like a dome, and I had to pinch and shape it myself.

Shortly after this purchase, on May 21, 2016, I went on a hike with my brother Tanner and a group of old friends. Our objective was to find the hidden Professor Bus Cave in the Wasatch Mountains.¹⁰⁸

To acquire the location, my friend contacted a secret group of cave hunters.

¹⁰⁶ The hat used by Young Indiana Jones is a far cry from either of these two hats mentioned above. It’s not just slightly different; it’s drastically different. The same probably goes for anyone you have ever seen dressed up in an Indiana Jones costume for Halloween. And, to be fair, the same goes for Harry Steele. The hats in the image below are the two used in *The Terra-Cotta Soldier*, explained earlier in the essay.

¹⁰⁷ Their hats are so exact that they sell separate ones to match the styles of each of the individual movies as well as the Young Indy Chronicles.

¹⁰⁸ 40.238132939442444, -111.62005589345293

They offered to give him the coordinates on one condition: He had to promise that everyone in his group would be wearing spelunking helmets. The promise was made, but not everyone in the group had helmets to bring, even if they wanted to.

Namely me.

The point of a helmet is to make sure you don't stab yourself on a stalactite, like Indy and Short Round in the collapsing room. I decided to bring the next best thing, my almost brand-new fedora. I had never planned to make a habit of wearing the hat around, but it seemed like it would offer just enough warning before bumping my head inside a cave, so I dared to wear it in public.

Tanner didn't say anything during the hike.

But later he felt obliged to explain to me that, "Nathan Drake¹⁰⁹ doesn't walk around in an Indiana Jones hat. It's way too nerdy. A real adventurer develops his own style."

The hat now rests on the shelf next to Tev's leather bull whip and a wooden cup of the carpenter—

The one that grants everlasting life.¹¹⁰



We are on the verge of a revolution.

Artificial intelligence can write essays and write code. It can even draw book covers with tomb raiders sneaking into dark doorways carrying torches.

I've been asked several times whether these AIs will put me out of a job. Will

¹⁰⁹ This was before the movie came out, back when Nathan Drake was still respectable, no offense to Tom Holland, who is an excellent Spider-Man.

¹¹⁰ If the house were burning down and I could only grab one material possession, it would be this grail.

they soon be writing entire novels? I think the answer is yes. I feel confident of that. It's just a matter of how long we have.

ECKSDOT, my first novel, is the most original thing I've written.

It's still derivative, actually, but few are familiar with its inspirations.¹¹¹ That leaves it to stand on its own two feet.

One reviewer called it "a very original world with an ingenious set of rules." Unfortunately, it's a very hard book to pitch:

"It's about ghost robots," I say.

"What?"

"Ghost robots."

"What's that?"

"They're like robots you can see through, but you can't actually see through them."

"Okay...?"

"There's a kid who has these dreams of ghost robots. Nightmares, actually. They're from another dimension."

"The ghost robots?"

"Yeah. It's *Inception* meets *Tron*. Plus *The Sandlot*."

"I don't get it."

As I said, it's hard to pitch.

Anyone who finishes the novel ends up really liking it, but it is *very* hard to convince someone to read it. From a marketing standpoint, this is bad.

No, not bad. Fatal.

We like things we recognize. That's the reason people read in genres. They like a certain thing, and they want more of it.

Not something new.

I, for one, am constantly in search of a new Indiana Jones adventure.¹¹² In fact, that's partly why I like *The Da Vinci Code* so much. It takes us on an all new

¹¹¹ The ghost robots of *ECKSDOT* were inspired partly by *The Great Divorce*, partly by *Blackbeard's Ghost*, and partly by *Mega Man X*, along with a solid dash of innovation.

¹¹² I sat down with my cousin Chase and asked him what he does when he wants more Indiana Jones. It was a good discussion, but we didn't come up with much. Ironically, I hadn't yet explored the treasure trove of official Indy stories. Each of the movies have a novelization with additional scenes and insights. Rob MacGregor wrote six exciting novels that take place before the movies, and Max McCoy wrote another four. The Dark Horse comics are pretty fun too, my favorite being *The Fate of Atlantis*, a great story that deserves to be retold. And of course there are a few historic videogames that are a little outdated but maybe worth a replay.

Grail quest that scratches that Indy itch.¹¹³ Same with the *Uncharted* games. I like them for all the ways they're not original.

People critique AI and say that it can never replace a human because it just takes existing work and mashes it together, but that's exactly what the most successful humans do too. We pretend like Indiana Jones is a brilliant original work, but it's just a mashup of what came before.

Having said that, I'm worried your takeaway from this essay will just be that I bagged on George Lucas the whole time and said he wasn't original, but that's not the point. I admire what he has accomplished, in spite of his journey being rocky and ending in such a sad twist. To be fair, his extensive borrowing was surprising and even disappointing to me at first, but I have come to see that this is inherent.

It was a hard lesson to learn.

Originality is not all it's cracked up to be. *ECKSDOT* drove this lesson home. And when I came to this realization, I donned a hat worn by my predecessors and made my next books closer to what people expected, though not without some unique flavor of their own.

Yes, everything is stolen, and that ends up being okay somehow.

No, not just okay.

Sometimes being stolen is an essential characteristic.

One of the secrets of a good story.

¹¹³ I'm always in search of Indy lookalike stories. I read a Dirk Pitt novel called *Atlantis Found*, which was fun, particularly the beginning. Preston and Child's *Book of the Dead* and Matthew Reilly's *Seven Deadly Wonders* both underwhelmed (they're exciting and action packed but a little unrealistic and lacking historicity—so not my cup of tea—but they may scratch the itch for you and are worth looking into). Dan Brown's books, on the other hand, *are* my cup of tea, formulaic, but I like the formula. Everyone should read *The Da Vinci Code*. I loved *Excavation* and *Ice Hunt* by James Rollins and am excited to read more from him (he also wrote the novelization of *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, which may be the best way to access that story). Switching mediums, the *Uncharted* games are amazing, and the latest *Tomb Raider* trilogy is great as well (somehow I'm more okay with unrealistic in a game than a book). As for Indiana-Jones-like movies, that's a harder quest, but *The Mummy* (1999), *Sahara*, *The Rocketeer*, *Tin Tin*, and *Blood Diamond* come to mind as favorites, though these are each admittedly not quite like Indiana Jones in one way or another. *Tad: The Lost Explorer* is a fun one for kindergarteners, which takes place in Peru and features Machu Picchu and the Nazca Lines, and, relevant to our discussion, although the English version calls the hero Tad Stones, the film was made in Spain, where the character's name is Tadeo Jones.



MEMENTO MURRAY

Tech Conference: 2017

I already know the ending of my life story.

—SPOILER ALERT—

I die at the end.

Could be a blood clot like what killed Tev. Could be Parkinson's. Could be a distracted driver. Maybe when I'm eighty. Maybe tomorrow. I haven't yet read the last chapter, but someday they're going to write it on my Wikipedia page.

Tev had the Factor V Leiden gene.

"An inherited blood-clotting disorder due to a mutation of the blood's factor V protein."¹¹⁴ It caused the blood clot that killed him.

He had one copy of the gene.

I have two.

It means I carry double the risk of the same thing. I'm sorry to say that it also means I'm certain to pass it on to my kids. You probably think that sounds scary, and rightly so.

During the weeks of writing this essay, a mysterious bruise showed up on the top of my right calf. I worried it was a blood clot. Stuff like that keeps happening to me, reminders that my finale may come soon.

Even if the Diary could lead me to the Grail, the real Grail, and water from its brim could grant everlasting life—it's too late for that now. My brother is dead and buried, and the Grail would only prolong that grief for eternity.

To never die isn't enough.

Strange that the secret of immortality could seem too small a goal.

If that secret does exist, it belongs to another realm, and it seems imprudent to pursue it before I have mastered the prerequisites.

That is, the secret of mortality should come first—

How to make life meaningful while it lasts.

As I mentioned in the eulogy, I know that my brother at least found a part of *this* lost secret before he died. His daring adventure across the world was nothing less than inspired. That wasn't the only piece he discovered either.

Tev was pretty shy.

Partly because he struggled with social anxiety. Sometimes it was hard being around people. As he became an adult, an entrepreneur, and a business owner, a lot of uncomfortable situations were forced upon him, one of which was a public speech at a big tech conference. For this event, the first slide in his deck was for

¹¹⁴ [PersonalizedCause.com Bleeding Disorder Awareness Month](#)

himself, a joke, a reminder to laugh: It was a picture of a skull with the label MEMENTO MURRAY.

At a glance, this seems like the Latin phrase *Memento Mori*, which means, “Remember that we die.” (I suddenly find myself wondering if you’ll learn Latin one day.) In other words, life is short—could end at any moment—so live it well. It’s crazy that our beliefs and behaviors can be misaligned, that we can know something in our heads but not feel it in our hearts.

Remember!

Just to maintain a feeling is somewhat of a miracle.

Tev’s death sent me this *memento mori* message, only that is too gently put. His death grabbed this fact in a choke hold and pounded its head against the wall, beating a violent rhythm that in no way could be ignored:

REMEMBER WE DIE!

I never told him that I stole the Grail Diary from the neighbors.

Missed my chance.

His alteration of this Latin phrase was a joke shared between him and me. In the LucasArts adventure game *Curse of Monkey Island*¹¹⁵ (which I hope you’ll play when you’re old enough), there’s an undead pirate named Murray who loses his skeleton body in a tragic cannon accident (perpetrated by the hero, Guybrush Threepwood—makes me laugh every time). This leaves Murray as just a talking skull, a really evil talking skull.

This new phrase is obviously an homage to the Latin, and in a way it still maintains that original meaning, expanding it from “Remember we die” to also include “Remember Murray,” which in turn could be a reminder that you might lose all but your head in a tragic cannon accident at any moment.

Or maybe it’s a reminder to laugh while you still can.

For me, MEMENTO MURRAY means all of these things at once.

It also means “Remember Tev.”

¹¹⁵ When I noticed that Guybrush, the wannabe pirate of *Monkey Island* (1990), bears no small resemblance to Frederick, the don’t-wannabe pirate of *Penzance* (from the 1983 movie), visually, comically, and hairdooly, I couldn’t help but wonder about what generations came before... At a glance, you find actual pirates who lived actual lives of adventure on the high seas during the Golden Age just before and after the year 1700. Daniel Dafoe turned these into romanticized nonfiction in *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724). Gilbert and Sullivan morphed that into the farcical *Pirates of Penzance* (1879) on stage (whose Pirate King seems to have later inspired both Hook and Captain Jack Sparrow to a degree). Robert Lewis Stevenson iterated the idea into the gritty fiction of *Treasure Island* (1883). James Barrie added to the poetry of piracy in *Peter Pan* (1904). Then Ron Gilbert’s team took the farce to the next level with *Money Island* (1990), before letting us all *Return to Monkey Island* in 2022.



I started my author journey while he was still alive.

For me personally, success in this endeavor seemed like the Holy Grail.

This was before your time. I was working a regular full time job while trying to moonlight a career as a scifi novelist. Progress toward the goal was painfully slow, but I wasn't daring enough to simply quit my job and go all in.

I was afraid to risk everything even if it was the Grail Quest.

At the time, I'd not yet done any excavations or research on plagiarism, inspiration, and homage. I certainly didn't yet realize how much of my favorite stories had come from older stories I'd never heard about. And yet somehow, I felt like I had to do it anyway, something that seemed foolish at the time—I wanted to take *Star Wars* and drastically innovate on the idea, just as George Lucas had gone so far beyond *Flash Gordon*. The thing I had been dying to have could not be found, and so I set out to create it myself—now finally walking in George Lucas's steps.

I wanted to write a story for people who grew up with *Star Wars* and who wanted *Star Wars* to grow up too.¹¹⁶

Only, could I pull it off?

I felt and sometimes feel like an imposter. How dare I build on the greats who

¹¹⁶ Someone asked me if I wished I could get the rights to write in the *Star Wars* universe. That seems like asking George R.R. Martin if he'd prefer to write about England instead of Westeros. The answer is no. And I don't think George Lucas still wishes he could make a *Flash Gordon* movie either.

have come before.

Fortunately, I didn't have to do it alone.

In 2019, Tev read a draft of *Starchild: Exile*, and this was his debriefing email, which now feels like the whisperings of a ghost:

I just finished *Starchild*, and my notes are done if you want that feedback. Very good. I feel like it's a big leap forward from *Locke*. A much more whole and matured (not mature) novel. Very good character development, story arcs, pacing, and plot. It's really good. I really enjoyed it.

After receiving his email, I called him, and we chatted for an hour while I took notes in my diary, the purpose of which was to make sure I retained his ideas for the next draft. Now I'm grateful to have those notes for a different reason.

He said his favorite character was Nak.

He loved the concept of Solace—a planet whose sun doesn't rise or set.

I asked for his thoughts about the similarities with *Star Wars*. He said he couldn't help but draw comparisons, but he didn't consider that a negative. In fact, as an avid *Star Wars* fan, he was excited to get new, almost parallel adventures.

Two days before he died, we had this interchange:

J

May 10, 2020, 1:10 pm

If you're interested in updating again, I uploaded a new draft of *Starchild 2* last night, version 1.10. It has minor changes and a couple new pictures.

Tevya

May 10, 2020, 10:12 pm

K. Cool. I will and will also get reading.

The next day, the day before he died, we had one final and brief conversation about helping Mom with her email account.

None of it seemed urgent at the time.

He was 38 years old.

That was the inflection point for me, the inciting incident. After he died, because he died, I quit my job and committed my profession entirely to writing. I tossed aside the safety net in an all out sprint—toward glory or death.

Maybe glory *and* death.

One thing had certainly changed: I was now afraid to *not* risk everything on my Grail Quest.

His passing galvanized me into drastic action, helped me realize life was too short to spend on a job where the only benefit was money, showed me that the sand of my life was already slipping away and would soon be forever gone and that my chance to become a real author was slipping away alongside.

I wish I could hear what he thinks of *Starchild 2* and *3*.



Death feels much more present.

Since he died.

Makes life feel short.

The old certainties have come crumbling down. Now I'm reassessing.

Rediscovering. With completely fresh eyes. I study about the afterlife and God and Gods. All the things that might be bigger than our universe. Perhaps outside of it. Unreachable for now. Maybe always.

Once again, I've found clues but not the whole stela.

I feel open to almost everything.

I feel certain of almost nothing.

Somehow that leaves me feeling hope. Not always though.

Sometimes I feel afraid of death.

I worry about your Mom and whether you guys will be okay. I feel sad it will mean no more publishing books. I suppose that's a good sign—that I really am pursuing the right quest right now.

I die at the end though.

What happens next is a big secret. Maybe the sequel will never be written. Or maybe in book two we finally find out what comes after the dark tunnel and the bright light.

The White Shores I hope.

That's just the end of *my* book though. The story itself continues. Sometimes that thought makes me feel sad. Other times, empty.

Still others, I feel acceptance. Like no matter what, it will be okay. The inevitable harmony of all things. That's accompanied by a feeling that what I want doesn't really matter—

There's something bigger than me.

A bigger story of which I'm just a small part.

LIGHTSWORD

Faraway Galaxy: Not long ago

Star Wars features something called a lightsaber.

This weapon starts with a mechanical handle. Being mechanical, someone without any sensitivity to the Force can turn one on, which Han demonstrates in *Empire Strikes Back* when he eviscerates the tauntaun. Once activated, a lightsaber grows from the hilt, like a measuring tape stretching out. The blade that appears is simply a pole, such that when one rotates the handle, the weapon doesn't change its vantage. In fact, it's almost a misnomer to call the deadly part of a lightsaber a blade. It's more like a bludgeon (or a red-hot poker) than a sword. Finally, the light it emits is a uniform glow from one end to the other.

Starchild features something called a Singblade—

A lightsword that is both similar to and distinct from the lightsaber.

A Singblade is not mechanical. Rather, it's simply a gemstone, without moving parts, sometimes wrapped in leather or metal. It is ignited through the magic of the Song, and even some acolytes who've spent years in training have not yet mastered the art of channeling their soul into the prismatic weapon to make it come alive. That is to say, few can ignite one of these blades, Han Solo least of all. When summoned, a Singblade ignites from the point, and climbs down to the hilt, moving the opposite direction of a lightsaber, almost like a wick being lit by a match. The dangerous part has the shape of a blade: It's narrow when one looks at it from the back and wide when looking at either side, and just like a sword, it strikes fiercely from the edge and barely from the flat. This weapon glows like fire, brightest next to the hilt, where bursts a light that can visually swallow the hand holding it. The blade itself is white hot, and this shape tapers to a sharp point at the tip. Sporadic orange flames dance wildly around this solid white shape.

As the Singblade came after its predecessor the lightsaber, it might deserve the label of imitation. Readers might be surprised to realize that the lightsaber too is an imitation.

In 1952, Isaac Asimov, one of the first and greatest sci-fi authors, began to publish his YA adventure series called *Lucky Starr*.¹¹⁷ The first book was titled *Space Ranger*,¹¹⁸ and it describes a character carrying a weapon that is illegal on Mars called a force-blade:

¹¹⁷ Incidentally, before even starting to write, Isaac Asimov licensed these books to be made into a TV series, which he believed would be embarrassingly bad, so he published them under the pseudonym Paul French. After the TV production fell through, he felt confident that he could put his real name on them, which he did in later editions.

¹¹⁸ So Buzz, whose action figure sits next to me as I write, wasn't the original.

He knew it as the most vicious weapon in the galaxy. Outwardly, it was merely a short shaft of stainless steel that was a little thicker than the shaft of a knife but which could still be held nicely in the palm. Within it was a tiny motor that could generate an invisible¹¹⁹ nine-inch-long, razor-thin force-field that could cut through anything composed of ordinary matter. Armor was of no use against it, and since it could slice through bone as easily as through flesh, its stab was almost invariably fatal.

Basically it's a lightsaber dagger that existed a full 25 years before the first *Star*

¹¹⁹ The “invisible” descriptor is confusing, but there are clues elsewhere in the novel that clarify. The Space Ranger, Lucky Starr, is sitting in a cantina in the opening scene, and the tables there are made with force fields too, which means they're also invisible. Starr even grabs it, and it looks like he's gripping an inch-thick piece of thin air. Then the narrator makes this comment: “Their sheer transparency was anything but conducive to relaxation. The sight of dishes and cutlery resting on nothing could not help but leave diners tense, so the field had to be put deliberately out of phase to induce continual interference sparkles that gave rise to an illusion of substance.” Basically, a force field is invisible if not for the flickers that pulse through it, and this seems to be true for the mini lightsabers.

¹²⁰ The Lucky Starr series also uses the word *blaster* for a laser gun and talks about jumping through hyperspace, just like the Millennium Falcon.

¹²¹ *Lucky Starr and the Oceans of Venus* (book three) has this passage: “His own blaster was in his room, but he had a force knife in his belt pocket. It looked like a watch fob, but it could slice a man in two, if necessary. He fingered it intensely.” Essentially, he had his lightsaber-dagger handle fastened to a chain that one could see dangling from his belt.

In *Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury* (book four), Asimov describes a conflict, at the end of which a force-blade “stood quivering in the hard plastic table top, an inch of its waveringly luminescent force-blade in sight.” This blade

¹²² As with so many other examples herein, we see an astounding correlation (but not an undeniable causation) between the works of Isaac Asimov and George Lucas. So here, in another lengthy footnote, is the correlation between *Foundation* (1951) and *Star Wars* (1977):

First, though, it must be said that Asimov himself considered the link between his works and *Star Wars* to be causal: “I modeled my ‘Galactic Empire’ (a phrase I think I was the first to use) quite consciously on the Roman Empire. Ever since then, other science fiction writers have been following the fashion and have written series of their own after the fashion of the *Foundation* series. In fact, in the late 1970s, the Galactic Empire reached the movies in the enormously popular *Star Wars*, which, here and there, offered rather more than a whiff of the *Foundation*. (No, I don’t mind. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and I certainly imitated Edward Gibbon, so I can scarcely object if someone imitates me.)” (*Empires* 1983).

Once while appearing on a talk show, Asimov said, “As a matter of fact, if you see these pictures, *Star Wars* and its sequels, there’s a certain amount of stuff that came from my *Foundation* books. But what the heck, a certain amount of my *Foundation* books came from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. So how far back do you want to go? That’s the way things work” (Isaac Asimov on *Dick Cavett* 1989).

In his final autobiography, Asimov reiterated, “I borrowed freely from Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in planning the *Foundation* series, and I believe that the motion picture *Star Wars* did not hesitate, in turn, to borrow from the *Foundation* series” (*I, Asimov: A Memoir* 1994).

So what exactly did Asimov think Lucas had hijacked?

Where to begin...

In the *Star Wars* prequels (1999), the Jedi temple along with the Galactic Senate, the seats of government, are located on the galaxy’s most populated planet, Coruscant, which has a sprawl of city that covers the entire surface (a planet-wide city is called an ecumenopolis). In the early drafts of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (pre-1977, in which Han Solo was the Wookiee), this planet was not called Coruscant but Jhantor. Before the prequels, Coruscant appeared in name for the first time in *Star Wars: Heir to the Empire* by Timothy Zahn (1991). As it happens, *Foundation* has the ecumenopolis Trantor, the Galactic Empire’s capital, first mentioned in a short story in September 1941—an entire 50 years earlier! Asimov’s *Pebble in the Sky* (1950) speaks of the “unbearable glory of the skies of the Central Worlds” (including Trantor) “where star elbowed star in such blinding competition that the black of night was nearly lost in a *coruscant* explosion of light” (emphasis added). The word *coruscant* means glittering or sparkling, and of course Jhantor rhymes with Trantor.

In both stories, a Galactic Empire dominates a population that is spread over an entire galaxy, which, along with Trantor and Jhantor, include the planets Korell (*Foundation*) and Corellia (*Star Wars*). Ships “jump into hyperspace” to traverse these myriad stars, and they utilize “deflector shields” (identical phrasing in both). The inhabitants of the Outer Provinces (*Foundation*) or Outer Rim (*Star Wars*) are largely smugglers and scavengers. Forefront among these are Hober Mallow (*Foundation*) and Han Solo (*Star Wars*), who each become rebel agents for their respective worlds and carry “blasters” on their hips. And if you didn’t catch it, the given names Hober and Han have a parallel alliteration, while the surnames Mallow and Solo have a parallel slant rhyme. *Foundation* has an epic scale and spans many generations, so Solo’s counterparts are numerous, including Dever, who dresses like Han Solo in a “short coat of a soft,

wasn't matter, merely a thin field of immaterial force." And it is reclaimed by its owner exactly like a lightsaber would be: "He reached out for the force-knife, deactivating the blade as he seized the haft, and returned it to its inconspicuous holster on his belt."¹²³

Yet Isaac Asimov was not the inventor of the lightsaber (or even of the proto-lightsaber). *Gather, Darkness!*, a novel by Fritz Leiber published in 1943, is about a religious war between two Jedi-like factions. It takes place in the future when a dark cult rules tyrannically, and a devoted new generation of rebels seeks to overthrow it:

First came four young priests, handsome and tall as angels, each bearing before him, like a truncheon, a gleaming *rod of wrath*... One of the young priests strode with great dignity toward the house, bearing his rod of wrath above his head like a gleaming sword. Heads turned as, breathlessly, every commoner watched his approach... Like two ancient swordsmen, then, the warlock and the deacon dueled together. Their weapons were two endless blades of violent incandescence, but their tactics were those of sabreurs—feint, cut, parry, swift riposte.

The weapon in question is something like a sword or truncheon, a handle from which a "wrath ray" can be "activated" and "switched off." When the hero is hit with one of these weapons, he gets a "deep wrath-ray burn on his shoulder."

Nor was that example the first. Edmond Hamilton wrote Superman and Batman comics for DC around the time of World War II. In 1933, he published a story called *Kaldar, Planet of Antares*.¹²⁴ This passage comes from that story:

The sword seemed at first glance a simple long rapier of metal, but he found that when his grip tightened on the hilt it pressed a catch which released a terrific force stored in the hilt into the blade, making it shine with light. When anything was touched by this shining blade, he found, the force of the blade annihilated it instantly. He learned that the weapon was called a lightsword.

A lightsword!

Coincidentally, this story was reprinted in 1965, right around the time George Lucas was scouring for all the sci-fi pulp fiction he could find. Also, Edmond Hamilton's wife, Leigh Brackett, wrote the first draft of the script for *Empire Strikes Back*, so very few degrees of separation stood between Lucas and these

¹²³ This is too funny not to mention: In *Lucky Starr and the Moons of Jupiter* (book five), the hero uses a "force shovel" to incapacitate a robot in disguise. Somehow I can envision Kylo Ren using one of these shovels.

¹²⁴ Unlike the others above, I actually couldn't find a copy of this story, so I'm quoting secondary sources.

lightswords.

From these oldest examples¹²⁵ to the present day, the lightsword has been done over and over again in all sorts of media, including both before and after *Star Wars*.¹²⁶

What hadn't been done before, at least not so well, was putting one of these so vividly into a live-action film. Lucas and his Industrial Light and Magic team can be given plenty of credit for that innovation—the sound and the spectacle. They took an idea that had been done many times before—

And made it stunning.

Ultimately, that seems to be the best kind of salute one can give to his or her

¹²⁵ Even Tolkien had blades that glowed, starting with Bilbo's Sting in *The Hobbit* (1937). I can't help but think that the Bible did it first, though, in Genesis 3:24: "After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life" (NIV).

¹²⁶ My favorite examples of post-*Star Wars* lightswords are in *Spider-Man the Animated Series*, *Mega Man X*, *StarCraft*, and *Lightyear*. It is also a feature in the Warhammer 40,000 Universe: "The [power sword] device is a fine weapon, of the old kind. It has no material blade like other, cruder models I have seen. It is a hilt, twenty centimetres long, inlaid and wound with silver thread, enclosing a fusion cell that generates a metre-long blade of coherent light. The Provost of Inx himself blessed it for me, charging it to 'protect our brother Eisenhorn' " (*Xenos* by Dan Abnett, 2001).

predecessors—to take something great and make it better.¹²⁷

Thus the ugliness of plagiarism is redeemed once again:

When imitation is coupled with innovation.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ I regret that the story below has been relegated to a footnote, but I didn't discover it till months after publication of my essay, and inserting it here seemed simplest. However, it's a reminder that this particular quest may take an entire lifetime and beyond. Here's the story:

On April 16, 2025, you (not quite three years old) and I were watching the 1991 animated version of *Tintin: Red Sea Sharks*, which is a faithful adaptation of the Belgian comic of the same title, originally published in 1958 by Hergé in the French language (and which has since been published in languages worldwide). I was a little surprised when this episode featured a tank chasing a horse across the desert—it reminded me of *The Last Crusade*. This small surprise turned into great surprise when just a few moments later the heroes rode on horseback into the Canyon of the Crescent Moon!

You know the place I'm talking about: In *The Last Crusade*, the Grail is hidden inside of a beautiful and ancient doorway, several stories high, built into the side of a cliff. The scene from the movie was filmed on location in Petra, Jordan, in the ruins of the Nabataean Kingdom, in front of a specific rock-façade called *Khazneh* (meaning "Treasury"). This real-life location became internationally renowned partly because of its role in Indy's fiction and attracts a sizable tourist congregation every year, including your Uncle Tevya in May 2019.

So you can imagine my surprise when I found Petra in that episode of *Tintin*. I immediately went to the comic books and found the exact same imagery in there—published three decades before *The Last Crusade*. I jumped to the conclusion that Spielberg had been a fan of *Tintin* growing up. I was wrong.

He didn't discover it till 1981, as an adult, thanks to a French critic: "I speak very little French," said Spielberg, "[but this] review kept saying 'Tintin, Tintin' all over, and I asked my assistant, 'Will you get me a translation?'" Spielberg soon read his first *Tintin* adventure, *The Seven Crystal Balls*, before going through the rest of the books, and his children quickly became fans of the story as well. He then reached out to Hergé directly: "I spoke with him on the telephone in 1983 when I was making *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in England. He invited me and Kathy Kennedy, my producer, to come to Belgium and meet with him in two weeks' time. Then, sadly, he passed away before we arrived." (See [The Hollywood Reporter's "Titans Behind Tintin" from 2011](#).)

That same year, 1983, Spielberg began working on a *Tintin* screenplay with Melissa Mathison, but "I got very involved in other movies, so I let the option drop." Still, the project produced clear enough results. In 1989, Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* featured several items lifted directly from that same episode of *Tintin*: an oceanic freighter catching fire at night in a storm, a warplane with machine guns against a pair of heroes on foot, a horseback tank chase, and the Petra location (to be precise).

This story arc didn't conclude, though, till 2011, another three decades after Spielberg discovered the treasury of *Tintin* books, when he premiered his own animated film, *The Adventures of Tintin*, which he described as "Indiana Jones for kids" (see [NYTimes "Intrepid Boy on the Trail of Mysteries" from 2011](#)).

Personally, I'm a fan of Hergé's comics as well as each of these iterations that came next. As filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard is said to have said, "It's not where you take things *from*; it's where you take them *to*." Obviously, Spielberg took them quite far.

¹²⁸ One of my all-time favorite innovations is how Lin-Manuel Miranda read Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* (2005) and then created a musical rap version (*Hamilton* 2015) that went big on Broadway.



A BOY ON A QUEST

Hyrule: Date Unknown

In 1989, I watched Matt Brubaker's older sister play *Legend of Zelda* on NES. I can't remember ever getting a turn to play, but I went home and made a Master Sword out of a wooden slat stolen from the Russells' woodpile. (Man, that's twice I've stolen in this manuscript. First-grade clepto!) Then I started imagining my own similar adventures in our back yard.

At the time, I didn't clearly distinguish the name *Zelda* from the game's hero (Link), and to this day that's ingrained in my skull incorrectly.

That was strike one.

Not long after that, I saw one episode of the *Zelda* cartoon (1989) at Danny's house and thought "Well, excuse me, Princess!" was so funny.

Strike two.

I started *Ocarina of Time* for the first time in 2001 (a couple years after it came out), but I only barely went past the Child Link phase. I tried again in 2004 and again in 2007, but I didn't pass the Child Link phase either time. I then dabbled with *Skyward Sword* (maybe 10 minutes), nearly beat *Minish Cap* (final temple but didn't finish before losing my savegame), and did about half of *Link to the Past*.

Strikes three and more.

The point is, I was a sad excuse for a *Zelda* fan.

There's an internet tradition that takes place every November called NaNoWriMo (National Novel-Writer's Month). In 2013, I took my second stab at this ritual (the first was my unfinished novel *Kings of Persia*), and in 30 days I wrote the first draft of a novel called *Song of Locke*. I had a near final draft by 2014.

I'd learned a lesson with *ECKSDOT*—that being too original can be detrimental—so I intentionally made this next novel more recognizable. It's a salute to the *Zelda* franchise, *Ocarina of Time* in particular—or at least what I knew about it at the time. It is also inspired by *Peter Pan*, one of my all-time favorite novels. Thirdly, it echoes the life of C.S. Lewis and his jaunt into atheism. And finally, it draws at least one point from Philip Pullman's *His Dark*

As I was closing in on the final draft of *Song of Locke*, I launched a Kickstarter and got a few hundred backers on the journey with me. Although I hadn't quite published yet, I was on the cusp, and to celebrate, I decided to finally crack down and beat *Ocarina of Time*, which I did, first time ever to beat a Zelda game.

This was essentially deathbed repentance.

I was finally doing due diligence, after having already finished writing my book.

I loved the game but felt frustrated with one aspect: the story. (It made me all the more convinced that the world needed a Zelda-like novel.) As I played, I kept getting glimpses of the epic, but most of that was in subtext, and it was challenging to mentally maintain the threads of plot and world and character with so little to go on.

At some point, I got fed up.

I decided to read the entire script of *Ocarina of Time*, so that with annotation and review I might finally start to understand the story as a whole. The script means the comprehensive dialogue from the game, including all the cutscenes—139 pages long. It's as close to a *Zelda* novel as you can get. (Aside from *Song of Locke*, of course.)

¹²⁹ In *His Dark Materials*, every person has a demon, a spirit animal which is a physical and conscious expression of their soul. The Sylves in *Song of Locke* were knowingly modeled after this, yet there are many clear distinctions, starting with the fact that Sylves are nothing like spirit animals. However, there's a moment where Picke and Locke painfully separate, and I, in all honesty, had completely forgotten that Pan and Lyra have a similar moment in *The Amber Spyglass*. The P and L similarity is coincidental too, as far as I know. One I did intend, though, was this: Martigane in *Song of Locke* was inspired by Madmartigan, the greatest swordsman who ever lived, from *Willow* (1988).

¹³⁰ Another epic footnote—my favorite bit from all of *Zelda*:

The Kokiri children are warned by the Great Deku Tree that if they ever leave the enchanted forest, they will die. Presumably, this rule applies to their fairy companions as well. Conversely, if an adult from the outside enters the forest, they will be transformed into a skeleton-like Stalfos and be cursed to wander the Lost Woods forever. Thus, magic keeps the fairy children inside and the strange adults out.

One child in the Kokiri Forest has always been different: Link—because he doesn't have a fairy. The Great Deku Tree summons him and tells him that he is destined to leave the forest—which the other children can't safely do, but Link, being adopted, belongs in the outside world, and not among the fairy children.

At that point, the child who has been ostracized since infancy is finally given a fairy companion, Navi. With her, Link leaves his idyllic home and ventures out into the wide world and toward adulthood. Yes, he is forced to become an adult in order to complete his quest.

After arduous trials and once evil is defeated, Link is allowed to return to his childhood, which in this context seems like the ultimate prize, but it comes at a cost. The final shot of the game shows Navi, Link's fairy, gently sailing upward, out a shining window, and away into the sky.

On my first playthrough, I thought she was simply gliding up toward the light, pointing the hero toward beauty, just as she had pointed to so many other important objects throughout the adventure.

I would've even defended this position if not for the sequel, which opens with Child Link riding through a mirky wood, his shoulders slumped, his face downcast. When he says he's looking for a "dear friend," you then realize he doesn't have a fairy with him! So *Ocarina of Time* ends with Navi leaving Link!

This is epic tragedy. One I can't stop thinking about.

The story never gives a reason why Navi had to depart, which she seems to do willfully. Maybe spending so much time away from Kokiri Forest had finally overwhelmed her, and she went away to die out of sight. It's all speculation though, and without a clear answer, we're left to wonder. This is one of my favorite parts of the story—this tantalizing and agonizing mystery of why Navi had to go.

Yet I nearly missed this entirely in my playthrough.



I noticed hidden gems, morsels that are easy to miss amid such sprawling gameplay. In particular, I discovered connections to *Song of Locke* that I had not placed there intentionally.¹³¹

I've listed them here:

1. I didn't consciously notice that Link has a telepathic connection with Saria. That's exactly like Locke.
2. When I wrote my novel, I know for a fact that I'd never gotten to the blue fire part, yet something similar is featured prominently in *Song of Locke*.
3. Gannondorf sucked all the water out of Lake Hylia and burned Kakariko village, which is basically what the villain does to Elfland.
4. I assumed my nods to an atheistic C.S. Lewis would greatly distance my story from Zelda, and yet this is an actual line of dialogue from the game: "They say we Hylians have big ears in order to hear the voices of the gods... but I've never heard them!"
5. Only the Hero of Time can draw the Master Sword from its anvil, which is similar to Locke (but we both stole that from King Arthur).
6. Near the climax, Princess Zelda says to Link, "Now it is time for me to

¹³¹ *Banjo Kazooie* had the player collect puzzle pieces instead of coins as early as 1998. Jonathan Blow says he never played that game and isn't aware that he was aware of it, and yet he also put puzzle pieces (much more thoughtfully) into his classic platformer *Braid*, which came out in 2008. So...

make up for my mistakes... Please protect me while I do my part,” which could be placed directly into Shilohe’s dialogue and readers wouldn’t skip a beat.

7. Finally, Navi, Link’s fairy, says, “Link! I can’t help you! Because of the waves of darkness, I can’t get close! I’m sorry, Link!” These lines would fit perfectly amid Picke the Sylfe’s dialogue at one specific point.¹³²

I put homages to *Zelda* in my novel on purpose, yet none of the points above are them. Yet here appeared these extra ones, included accidentally.¹³³

I’m not sure how to account for that. Telepathic osmosis, maybe. I guess that’s one reason an author might not give credit—because it was never due. At least not intentionally.

Publishing *Song of Locke* marked a significant milestone in my author career—I was finally finding the proper blend of paying homage while still creating something new and unique. It has also been drastically easier to convince readers to read it, thanks to the fact that it fits so squarely into the boy-on-a-quest fantasy genre. (And hopefully that builds enough trust for them to try something as genre-defying as *ECKSDOT*.)

I feel proud of the way *Song of Locke* overlaps with some of my favorite stories, whether intentionally or by accident.

I’m also proud of the ways it doesn’t.

¹³² This concept also has Christian echoes in that it mimics Christ’s plea when the Holy Ghost abandons him alone on the cross.

¹³³ *Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury* (book 2) features a tidally locked planet (at the time they thought Mercury was tidally locked, but since publication they’ve found out that it isn’t), and they call its two halves the Sun-side and the Dark-side. I didn’t discover this book till about three years after I published *Starchild: Exile*, which features a tidally locked planet called Solace that features a sunside and a starside. Also, crazier still, the song “Dear Jack” by Jack’s Mannequin sounds like the perfect credits track for *ECKSDOT*, and none of those likenesses were planned either.



My friend Nate introduced me to the works of Stephen Wolfram, a CEO-Physicist who means to get to the bottom of how the universe works through mathematical models and artificial intelligence (oh, and *actual* intelligence).¹³⁴

Wolfram explains the concept of computational irreducibility, which, in short, means that some conclusions cannot be reached using a simplified calculation; instead, you have to watch the thing play out in real time in the real world. Yet within an irreducible system, there are often local pockets of reducibility—things that can be simplified into more manageable forms. These two stand as opposing sides of the same coin—the parts that *can* be predicted and the parts that *can't*.

Take the weather, for example. One pocket of reducibility—how clouds form and turn into rain—we understand and more or less can calculate simply. But if we want to know if it will be raining at Brunwald Castle on May 24, the only way to know for sure is to let the world's entire weather system play out leading up to and arriving at that day. This calculation is irreducible.

¹³⁴ Wolfram also said something that blew my mind about quantum physics. You know how each inflection point or choice splits into all the possible outcomes, and these branches form the multiverse? (Okay, quantum physics meets comic books.) He said there are an equal number of mergings as branchings in a given system. So just as a single choice splits into many outcomes, many choices can merge into a single outcome. Which to me sounds like fate. He also says that the universe doesn't work in a linear fashion. Events can be seen in different orders based on your relative position to the events. Consciousness, however, is linear, and maybe that's why we seek the sort of answers we seek.

No shortcut exists to finding the answer.

Somehow this reminded me of my own quest.

On my podcast, *Start Writing*, I recently finished a series of lectures called “A Beginner’s Guide to Writing a Novel,” in which I tried to share what I know about what makes a good story, the foundations being plot, hero, and world. Just like the tropes in Indy I could name as a kid, these are the pockets of reducibility about stories in general that I feel like I understand and can explain. They are simple formulas that lead to the makings of a great story.

Yet I’m constantly feeling like there’s something about the *Indiana Jones* movies, or the collection of all great stories for that matter, that is irreducible. There’s an aspect I can’t explain or contain in a formula. The greatness exists only in each story itself and can’t be captured in summary.

Moreover, so much goes into a story by happenstance, beyond the conscious efforts of even the author, as demonstrated in *Song of Locke*.

In short, much is in the author’s control but much simply isn’t.

Indiana Jones is great both for the ways it’s the same as *Secret of the Incas* and for the ways it innovated, and yet this greatness cannot be put on an index card or defined with bullet points and measurements. It’s non-quantitative.

The secret is made of contextual factors that interact in a messy web, much more incalculable than a three-body problem, and many of these factors are made of emotions, data points so abstract that they couldn’t be written in a whole essay, much less in a tiny bullet point. Pieces of it are explainable, to be sure, like the bullwhip, the likable actor, and the transcendent quest, and yet these explainable bits seem to be neither sufficient or necessary.

The secret is not only unexplainable—

It’s unspeakable.

The greatness of a story is not a tangible body but an incorporeal soul. This fact pushes our search beyond the material and toward the miraculous.

That’s the conclusion.

The lost secret.

Indiana Jones is great because it’s truly magic.

Not *magical*.

Magic.



TEVYE

Home: 2023

I can't hear because a white noise machine masks the sound.

The light's so dim I can hardly see.

I'm sitting cross legged on the floor in the dark, occasionally remembering to keep my spine upright like a Jedi Master.

You're lying across my crossed legs—roughly 25 inches tall.

You were born four months ago. Your tiny head rests gently on my thigh. With eyes closed, you're sucking on a bottle of milk. Your tiny fingers wrap around my left index finger, which reassures and stabilizes us both.

As a newborn, you're already wearing Yoda socks with little green ears sticking out. The notification for your baby monitor is Navi's voice shouting "Listen!" You have a lopsided Indiana Jones grin. I have, on occasion, duhn-duh-duh-duhned the Indy theme as your goodnight lullaby.¹³⁵ Can't wait till you're a first grader so we can watch *Temple of Doom* together.¹³⁶

And you will see it as a child sees.

Discovering so many inspirations for my favorite stories surprised me—that the roots are so deep and so vast. I *also* find myself coming to a *conclusion* that I did not expect: George Lucas mimicked the stories that inspired him as a child. Creating *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* seems to be his attempt to preserve his childhood—the serials, comics, and adventures that captivated him as a kid. Perhaps not just *preserving*, but expanding, giving them *more* life, and sharing them. There's something admirable about that mission. George Lucas meant to save Neverland, and for so many of us, that's exactly what he did. He fought the ravages of time, the forces that make us all grow up and turn to dust. He kept childhood alive with the stories he told—or retold.

And they became more than stories.

They became legends.

And legends are the opposite of death.

That means childhood is another part of the secret. A secret you're now revealing to me personally and daily.

I love seeing you see the world. Everything is new to you.

This changes me. Puts things in a new perspective. The sins of *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* no longer seem so heinous. My little brothers will think I turned

¹³⁵ I also sometimes sing *The Parting Glass*, which because of the eulogy speech now reminds me of Tev.

¹³⁶ Okay, I had a hard time waiting, so we actually watched *The Last Crusade* together, your first time and Mom's first time, when you were eight months old, Feb 26, 2023. See picture below.

to the dark side for saying this, but I can honestly say I enjoy the first half. The second half is—well, it is what it is.¹³⁷ Of course, these cinematic sins are the same size that they've always been, but other matters are now so much bigger by comparison. You've expanded my vision to include more than it did before. Makes me wonder whether someday I'll learn to forgive *The Last Jedi* as well, or to accept it at least, as Tev did.

Now that it's my turn, I'm trying to be as good of a dad as he was.

You're a little like me. That's already apparent.

Like everything else, you carry the DNA of your predecessors. You survive and thrive because of what came before you.

You're also something new, the next iteration of humanity, distinct from all that has come before.

This echoes a baffling aspect of evolutionary theory—which apparently applies equally to biology and books—that generations paradoxically both maintain and innovate on the traits of forebears.

Now I see this in everything.

Each draft of this manuscript is a new iteration, built on the ones that came before.

The principle also applies to individuals. I like to think the current iteration of me would not steal the Grail Diary if given the chance.¹³⁸ And I'm certainly not the same person I was before my brother died.

You're not the same either. When I wrote you into the third draft above, you were so tiny and immobile. Now, as I close in on the final draft and you're passing nine months, we eagerly cheer every time you abandon your army crawl and go up on your hands and knees. I can only speculate on who you might become. Perhaps your Grail Quest will resemble my author one, and if so, I hope we collaborate on some of the books you write. But maybe your quest passes through the jungles of finance or maybe through realms I've never heard of. I care so much about your future, yet it's only a promise right now, a hope hidden behind the mystery of time.

Perhaps it lies next to the secret of creating an epic story, which I haven't captured on paper, and yet I know it's out there, and I'll keep chasing it, even if it's only to catch an occasional glimpse of the magic.

Till I reach the end.

Another shard of the secret to everlasting life awaits down a path Tev

¹³⁷ I drew a graph representing *Crystal Skull*, which shows the audience's spirits high as the movie starts, and then the line drops drastically each time a dumb part hits. The spirits try to recover after each insult, rising a little before getting dragged down again. If you cut all these drastic drops, what's left is a pretty consistent line—spirits stay high. In other words, when you're not angry and triggered every five minutes, there's actually a lot to like in that movie. All it takes is a simple fan edit to remove some of these offensive bits. I made said chart in hopes of convincing my brothers that I wasn't out of my mind. So far, the explanation hasn't helped, ha ha.

¹³⁸ Assuming it was a Gideon Bible and not the actual Grail Diary.

illuminated. At some point, each of us must transition from hero to predecessor and gift our hat to the adventurer who succeeds us. Every quest is, in the end, accomplished by a fellowship, and when we have finished our part, we must pass the torch and trust that our efforts will contribute to something that stands out of our own reach, something, as with Indy's quests, that is larger than ourselves. So in a way, you're the end of the quest for me. You're the hero I pass my hat to.



Mom and I named you Tevya.
It's a salute.
Your name means Indiana Jones.
It also means Luke Skywalker.
It means adventure, and creativity, and Memento Murray.
It means mistakes are okay, and it means death is not the end.
Personally, I can hardly think of a more meaningful name, but the truth is that it took some time for me to warm up to it—to call you by that name. It felt like it belonged to someone else. I've come to understand that you have inherited it, like everything else passed down from our predecessors. It did, in fact, belong to someone else, and now it belongs to you too, to journey with you across the globe on whatever adventures await.
You were named after my big brother, and he was named after Tevye from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. It never occurred to me to ask why my parents chose

that name, and I just assumed they changed the spelling to make it a little more palatable in America, so when we named you, that was all I knew about your name. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I literally didn't know the meaning of your name at the time. Someone asked me if it was three syllables or two. I didn't know that either. (TEV-ee-ah or TEV-yah? It's the second one.)

Writing this essay led me to discover the generations of meaning behind your name, a cascade of inspirations. Here's the story:

At my parent's wedding luncheon (1980), my uncle sang "Sunrise, Sunset," a beautiful song from the *Fiddler* musical in which time does its incessant march. As newlyweds, my parents bought the vinyl record of the soundtrack and played it on an old turntable. A short time later, my Dad settled on the name *Tevye* for his firstborn, wanting his son to be a man who would talk to God. When my Mom was writing the name on the form to make it official, she spelled it *T-E-V-Y-A*, to mimic how she spelled her own name, *Sonya*.

I now know something of the elation they must've felt having a newborn son and getting to name him.

And I have just an inkling of how hard it might be to see that same son die.

That's the immediate history of the name. The story continues further back though. The 1971 movie is based on the 1964 musical, which held the record for the longest stay on Broadway till *Grease* came along. The musical was based on a play by Arnold Perl called *Tevye and His Daughters* (1939), which was inspired by a book of short stories, also called *Tevye and His Daughters* (1894), written by Sholem Aleichem, about a narrator protagonist from a place called Boyberik (based on Boyarka, Ukraine, formerly of the Russian Empire).

The hero of the novel was given the name *Tevye* because it was a common Yiddish name, a derivative of the Hebrew biblical name טוביה, or *Toviyah* in the Roman alphabet, whose second half contains the same *yah* as *Yahweh*.¹³⁹ (It's correlated with the Greek name *Tobias*.)

It means "God is good."

God is good.

Having lost the brother you're named after, this phrase resonates with me even more strongly than "Only the penitent man shall pass." It's another clue I have jotted down in my Grail Diary.

Maybe somehow it will help me to unlock another secret.

The final secret.

The phrase comes from the *Psalms*—which was contained within my now lost Gideon Bible. The Fallen King repeated the words often in his desperate attempt to repair the irreparable.

As if words held the key to bringing back what was lost.

I won't claim to know what the phrase means in the face of unexpected death. Or in the face of miraculous life.

In spite of my ignorance, the word remains:

¹³⁹ In Latin, Jehovah begins with an I.

God is good.



†

The Saga Continues...



**Flying an ancient alien spaceship, STARCHILD may have the key to saving the rebels. Only he wants no part of their war...
Until he meets HER.**

* * *

Tyranny rules the galaxy.

TAIBEROS has crushed every hint of rebellion. Like the grip of his cybernetic hand, he maintains a relentless hold on the populace. The power he hates most is the psionic magic of THE SONG—a force so strong it flows out as light from the eyes. People with such powers are called RADIANCES, and Taiberos's Witch Hunters kidnap any that surface.

As the radiances slowly vanish, so does the galaxy's hope.

Till Kalhette Whitesun, one of the last radiances, gives a risky speech, denouncing Taiberos and the extermination of her kind. The message spreads across the galaxy like the light of a supernova. She becomes revered as the UNCROWNED QUEEN, the one with the power to finally unite the people.

And then doom falls—

In the form of the crushing hand of Taiberos. He captures Kalhette, sentencing her to the darkest dungeons and imminent death.

All hope is lost.

Until a lone pilot appears. A pilot who wants nothing to do with Kalhette or her rebellion yet who may in fact be the galaxy's last hope. A pilot whose ship, THE SPIRIT, was created by an ancient alien race. A pilot who stole that ship from Taiberos himself...

A renegade pilot named STARCHILD.

Get it today:

STARCHILD
Episode I: EXILE

Get a Free Novella

SO WHAT'S NEXT?

The STARCHILD saga will be a trilogy of trilogies, nine central novels when it's done, along with a couple spinoff novellas. And I have a way for you to stay in the loop on their progress.

I write a personal newsletter to my readers called *The Informant*. Subscribe if you want to make sure to not miss the exciting sequels. I apologize in advance if I don't write often. The next book is always the priority. And when I do email you, it'll be something you'll care about. (It's also a cinch to unsubscribe if you ever change your mind.)

Oh, and by the way, I'm working on another project: STARCHILD ZERO. It's a novella that tells how Nak stole a Bloody Wing from one of the most powerful leaders in the galaxy and how Taiberos got his cybernetic hand! When it's done, I'll send it out to my email list. So sign up here:

theinformant.jwashburn.com



Tell Me How It Ends!

STEALING INDY IS DIFFERENT.

While most books are pushed by big corporate machines, this is an artisan book—written, illustrated, and typeset by the author, handcrafted from beginning to end. It was a ton of work. I spent a very long time putting this book together, and that story arc doesn't conclude till the book gets to your hands. When you read, that's the end of the story. For me, your reaction is the explosive finale!

But I often don't get that ending.

So I write the book, and I see that you bought a copy, but the ending is just—Silence...

Total cliffhanger. And I have no idea what you thought of it. It just kills me!

I wish I could've sat next to you, watching your reaction page by page.

Unfortunately, that wouldn't be plausible or comfortable, ha ha.

So I thought I'd invite you to drop me a line. Seriously, send me an email! If you're in a rush, it can be brief, no problem. It doesn't need to be fancy either.

(Ain't got no problem with slang.) I'd love to hear where you're from, what your favorite moments were in STEALING INDY. It would actually mean a lot to me.

And I do my best to respond to each letter.

Also, thank you for reading.

I'm glad you could join me on this adventure.



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