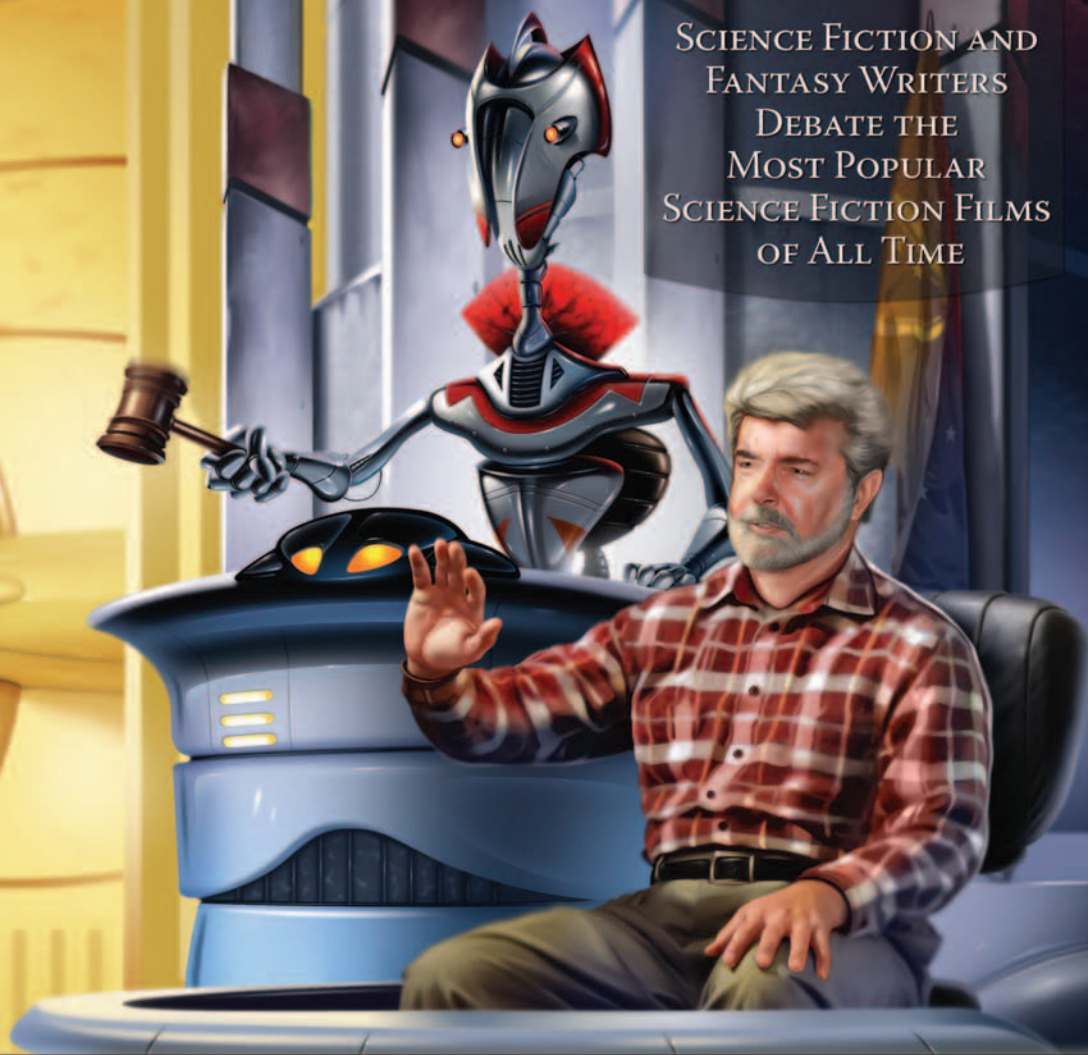


STAR WARS ON TRIAL

SCIENCE FICTION AND
FANTASY WRITERS
DEBATE THE
MOST POPULAR
SCIENCE FICTION FILMS
OF ALL TIME



For the Prosecution:
DAVID BRIN

For the Defense:
MATTHEW WOODRING STOVER

SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM *STAR WARS ON TRIAL*

DAVID BRIN: Your Honor, I am a recognized expert on the politics of Star Wars. I refer you to my infamous Salon.com article published June 15, 1999—

MATTHEW WOODRING STOVER: Recognized by who, the Imperial Sith Show-Trial Fake Certification Committee? Five Kowackian monkey-lizards on a six-day spice-binge? Hey, this reminds me of a joke—a kid, a Jedi and two droids walk into a bar in Mos Eisley—

—

DAVID BRIN: Only demigods need apply . . . and only those demigods Yoda likes. But more about the nasty green oven mitt, anon. . . .

—

MATTHEW WOODRING STOVER: I would like to take this moment to apologize to you personally for not putting some brutal torture of Princess Leia on-screen . . . I'm sure we'd all feel better about her character if we could have watched her screaming in agony.

DAVID BRIN: Objection! That's not a question—he's just abusing the witness.

—

MATTHEW WOODRING STOVER: Shameless padding? “Show, don't tell”? Is that all you've got? No wonder you're an editor instead of a writer. That's the most pathetic excuse for a personal insult I've ever heard. As trash-talk goes, Mr. Hundreds-of-Manuscripts-per-Year, yours barely makes it to the level of a stuck-out tongue.

—

DAVID BRIN: For the record, I never declined a saber duel with Mr. Stover. I'm likely twice his age, yet my rusty skills from the Caltech fencing team should suffice. Bring it on, smart mouth.

*Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers
Debate the Most Popular
Science Fiction Films of All Time*

STAR WARS

ON TRIAL

FOR THE PROSECUTION:

David Brin

FOR THE DEFENSE:

Matthew Woodring Stover



BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.
DALLAS, TEXAS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION By David Brin	1
INTRODUCTION By Matthew Woodring Stover	7
OPENING STATEMENTS	15
FOR THE PROSECUTION: David Brin	17
FOR THE DEFENSE: Matthew Woodring Stover	55
CHARGE #1: THE POLITICS OF STAR WARS ARE ANTI-DEMOCRATIC AND ELITIST	81
FOR THE DEFENSE: Keith R. A. DeCandido	83
CHARGE #2: WHILE CLAIMING MYTHIC SIGNIFICANCE, STAR WARS PORTRAYS NO ADMIRABLE RELIGIOUS OR ETHICAL BELIEFS	97
FOR THE PROSECUTION: John C. Wright	99
FOR THE DEFENSE: Scott Lynch	121
CHARGE #3: STAR WARS NOVELS ARE POOR SUBSTITUTES FOR REAL SCIENCE FICTION AND ARE DRIVING REAL SF OFF THE SHELVES	135
FOR THE PROSECUTION: Lou Anders	137
FOR THE DEFENSE: Laura Resnick	151
FOR THE DEFENSE: Karen Traviss	159
FOR THE DEFENSE: Kristine Kathryn Rusch	169

CHARGE #4: SCIENCE FICTION FILMMAKING HAS BEEN REDUCED BY STAR WARS TO POORLY WRITTEN SPECIAL EFFECTS EXTRAVAGANZAS	183
FOR THE PROSECUTION: John G. Henry	185
FOR THE DEFENSE: Bruce Bethke	199
CHARGE #5: STAR WARS HAS DUMBED DOWN THE PERCEPTION OF SCIENCE FICTION IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION	217
FOR THE PROSECUTION: Tanya Huff	219
FOR THE DEFENSE: Richard Garfinkle	233
CHARGE #6: STAR WARS PRETENDS TO BE SCIENCE FICTION, BUT IS REALLY FANTASY	245
FOR THE PROSECUTION: Ken Wharton	247
FOR THE DEFENSE: Robert A. Metzger	263
FOR THE PROSECUTION: Bruce Bethke	279
FOR THE DEFENSE: Adam Roberts	287
CHARGE #7: WOMEN IN STAR WARS ARE PORTRAYED AS FUNDAMENTALLY WEAK	303
FOR THE PROSECUTION: Jeanne Cavelos	305
FOR THE DEFENSE: Bill Spangler	329
CHARGE #8: THE PLOT HOLES AND LOGICAL GAPS IN STAR WARS MAKE IT ILL-SUITED FOR AN INTELLIGENT VIEWER	341
FOR THE PROSECUTION: Nick Mamatas	343
FOR THE DEFENSE: Don DeBrandt	357
CLOSING STATEMENTS	369
FOR THE PROSECUTION: David Brin	371
FOR THE DEFENSE: Matthew Woodring Stover	379
THE VERDICT	383

INTRODUCTION

Do Myths Teach Us? If So, What Have We All Learned from Star Wars?

David Brin

WELL, IT'S DONE. The sci-fi legend of our generation is now complete. Our parents had *Dr. Strangelove* and *1984*. Their parents were transfixed by H. G. Wells. The generation before that had Jules Verne.

And we got Star Wars, the biggest, most lavish, most popular and by far the most lucrative sci-fi drama ever. George Lucas's grand vision gave us resplendent vistas and a spectacular sense of wonder, while portraying a vivid range of possibilities that science, technology and forward-thinking might eventually bring about—inspiring us and drawing our eyes toward a far horizon.

But *what* horizon?

After all the dazzling explosions and lightsaber duels, all the spaceship chases and cryptic-guru Yoda-isms, all the droids and special effects and obscure political story lines, did we—did anyone—*learn* anything?

George Lucas certainly claims that he's been doing something more important than simply pushing eye candy. More valuable than

just diverting the masses with some cash-generating entertainment. In various locales, spanning three decades, the Star Wars creator proclaimed that his epic teaches important lessons. For example, in a famous *New York Times* interview, he said: “Movies have a big voice, and what we filmmakers have to do is to set a good example.”

So, after tens of billions of dollars—and human hours—spent watching the films, playing the games, buying the toys, reading the books and buying even more toys, have we come away enlightened, even inspired?

Inspired to do what? To *be* . . . what?

Science fiction has never been modest about its aim to take on important issues. Beyond just “good versus evil” or “boy meets girl,” there has always been a notion that SF is the true descendant and heir of Gilgamesh and Homer, of Virgil and Murasaki, of Dante, Swift and Defoe. Liberated from the constraints of day-to-day existence, it provides a canvas wide enough to portray and discuss real issues. Things that matter over the long run.

Take those stories that Jules Verne created during the latter part of the nineteenth century. In his words, you can hear and feel the spirit of Verne’s time—an era of ebullient, *can-do* confidence. Even as the age of earthly *terra incognita* was coming to an end, readers hungered to lift their eyes skyward, seaward—or even *into* the planet itself—certain that new frontiers would soon unfold before a humanity that knew no bounds.

Of course, this surefire naïveté had to crash, or at least grow up a bit. And H. G. Wells was just the man to throw on a little cold water, while taking science fiction to new levels, appealing to the concerns of worried adults. Always the contrarian, Wells told wild-eyed dreamers to grow up and smell the dangers . . . then berated cynics who refused to hope. Technology can *bite back*, he warned, and the universe owes us no favors. On the other hand, he deeply believed that honest men and women might yet pick up tools and make a better world. Wells never stopped using stories to help make that happen.

Indeed, one of civilization’s greatest tools has always been mythology. Legends and songs. Stories and dark lore. If George Lucas and I agree on anything, it would be that civilizations turn—they veer or

rise and fall—depending upon the inspirations and goals that common people share. In part, this happens through stories, heard and told, then retold, whether around a campfire or a widescreen digital display.

Take the period that followed H. G. Wells. After the calamities of World Wars I and II, we needed something special in our legends. Something potent. We needed *problem solving*. Humanity faced some serious tasks, important maturity issues, like how not to destroy ourselves. And sure enough, science fiction stepped up to do its share.

Rolling up its sleeves, SF gave us the *self-preventing prophecy* . . . the most serious and frighteningly plausible subgenre of science fiction. Tales about every possible or far-out way that things could go wrong. When they are effective, such stories have the uniquely powerful effect of *ensuring that they do not come true!* They do this by offering up stark and compelling warnings that worry an audience, and make millions think. Warnings that even stir at least a few citizens to take action.

How else can you describe *Dr. Strangelove*, *Fail-Safe* and *On the Beach*, which not only exposed specific failure modes, but also drove home the threat of losing it all to spasmodic nuclear war? Or *Soylent Green*, *Silent Running* and *The China Syndrome*, which prodded millions to join a newborn environmental movement. *The Andromeda Strain* was cited by delegates signing the treaty against biological warfare. *Gattaca* prepared us to wrestle with issues of genetic determinism. Even a spoof like *The President's Analyst* warned, with eerie foresight, about a steady, tech-driven decay of personal privacy.

Or take the greatest self-preventing prophecy of all, the one cited by *every* faction whenever it perceives some creeping tyranny, *1984*. Millions shuddered at George Orwell's terrifying thoughts, words and images, coming away determined to struggle against Big Brother ever becoming real.

We will never know whether any of these specific warnings—or general morality tales, like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*—actually made a crucial difference. But we *can* say that, unlike those ill-fated Trojans, we do give our Cassandras some attention. Occasionally, we pay them well to scare us into getting a bit better.

Ah but then, at other times, we simply pay them to *scare us*, pe-

INTRODUCTION

Star Wars and Truth and Why We Even Bother, and Why It's Worth Your Time to Bother, Too

Matthew Woodring Stover

UNLIKE SOME FOLKS 'round these parts, I'm only going to make one Star Trek reference.

Dammit, Jim, I'm a storyteller, not an essayist.

So:

Saturday afternoon, June 1977, Danville, Illinois. Danville is a little industrial town buried in a tangle of railroad tracks and cornfields three hours south of Chicago; in those days it had a GM foundry and some meatpacking plants, a sheet-aluminum producer and some big grain elevators and a fifteen-year-old me, a week out of ninth grade with five bucks lawn-mowing cash in my pocket and a blue Schwinn English Racer, and some goofy flick called *Star Wars* playing at the old Fischer Theater a mile and change downtown. A kid named Jeff Masters showed up at my front door a little after one o'clock with his own bike (also a Schwinn—an Orange Crate, I think) and asked if I wanted to check out this goofy flick, and I'd seen a grand total of one commercial for it (on late-night TV out of Terre Haute, Indiana),

but it had lots of shooting, a guy swinging over a chasm with a girl in his arms, spaceships, Peter Cushing and Alec Guinness, and the temperature was already over ninety and our lone window-unit air conditioner was on the fritz, so I said, “What the hell.”

That’s an exact quote.

I’m not here to talk about the experience of coming to Star Wars on the big screen entirely by surprise. I’ll leave that to your imagination. Suffice it to say that even the memory of putting the words “A novel by Matthew Woodring Stover, based on the screenplay by George Lucas” on the title page of *Revenge of the Sith* is still enough to give me a bit of the shakes.

I’m here to talk about the experience of Truth.

By the time I found myself in that Saturday matinée in 1977, I was already an experienced SF geek, though that term had yet to crest our common horizon. My brother Tom, ten years older, long gone to college and off into his career, had left behind a huge library of paperback SF that I had started reading about the time I learned to read, and so when *Star Wars* rolled around, I’d been through just about every then-published work by Heinlein, Asimov, Anderson, Williamson, Pohl, Niven, the various Smiths (I could fill my word count just with a list of all the authors) . . . as well as the Big Old Guys like Verne and Wells. Tom—an engineer by temperament as well as by profession—had a prejudice in favor of the hard SF guys, as well as the space opera types; Leiber and Zelazny, Disch and Moorcock and PKD showed up mostly by accident, in magazines or collections he’d bought for other people’s work.

This is relevant because of my experience during one particular scene in what is now known as *A New Hope*—the scene in Obi-Wan’s cave, after he has rescued Luke from the Sand People, where he gives Luke what we all now know is Anakin Skywalker’s lightsaber, and begins to tell him of the Jedi Knights. . . .

I sat in the dark, in that theater, breathless, blinking, trying to listen harder, to hear more than was being said—

Because I knew, then, that here—not just in this moment, but in this story—was something True.

This was not a literal truth. Not factual truth. This was not a delusional moment that blurred the line between fiction and reality.

THE COURTROOM

DROID JUDGE: Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, clones, droids and other sentient organisms. You all know why we are here. A series of charges have been made against the multimedia empire known as Star Wars. These charges are as follows:

CHARGE #1: The Politics of Star Wars Are Anti-Democratic and Elitist.

CHARGE #2: While Claiming Mythic Significance, Star Wars Portrays No Admirable Religious or Ethical Beliefs.

CHARGE #3: Star Wars Novels Are Poor Substitutes for Real Science Fiction and Are Driving Real SF off the Shelves.

CHARGE #4: Science Fiction Filmmaking Has Been Reduced by Star Wars to Poorly Written Special Effects Extravaganzas.

CHARGE #5: Star Wars Has Dumbed Down the Perception of Science Fiction in the Popular Imagination.

CHARGE #6: Star Wars Pretends to Be Science Fiction, but Is Really Fantasy.

CHARGE #7: Women in Star Wars Are Portrayed as Fundamentally Weak.

CHARGE #8: The Plot Holes and Logical Gaps in Star Wars Make It Ill-Suited for an Intelligent Viewer.

(Noise in the courtroom grows as the charges are read.)

DROID JUDGE: (*hammering his gavel*) Quiet down, quiet down. I intend to run this courtroom in a fair and disciplined fashion, and that means no outbursts from the gallery. Yes, I'm looking at you, Wookiees. Now, to begin, counselors will make their opening statements.



OPENING STATEMENTS



OPENING STATEMENT
FOR THE PROSECUTION

I Accuse ...
...or Zola Meets Yoda ...

DAVID BRIN

IT CANNOT BE SAID often enough. We are here to have fun, tossing ideas around, pretending that they matter. Nobody, on either side of the coming argument, contends that the fate of Western civilization will hang upon a literary analysis of the epic and epochal Star Wars series! A series that deserves respect at many levels, if only for the marvelous artists it has employed and the raw pleasure that it has given hundreds of millions.

In fact, though some people may find it surprising, let me make clear that I never interfere when my children request—or demand!—the next Star Wars merchandising gambit. A Lego Death Star or Darth Vader mask? Another Obi-Wan Happy Meal? I only grit my teeth a little over the merchandising cash flow going to an empire that (in my opinion) could have been a lot more meaningful, a lot more helpful in making a better world. Certainly, my protective instincts don't get all fired up, eager to shield vulnerable young minds from inimical memes!

Why not?

Because what youngsters—and millions of others—mostly see in movies like these are the simple surfaces. The top layer of lavish, goofy, earnestly preachy and even somewhat noble-minded fun. Out-

numbered heroes bravely taking on the odds. Going with your feelings, tossing logic aside and blasting away! It is the innocent spirit of the first movie (*A New Hope*) that seems to have spread and captured the hearts of millions of people, young and old.

If you ask them about the “moral messages” of Star Wars, most people tend to recall that—

- *Mean people suck.*
- *It's good to be brave.*
- *Mean people get yucky-looking.*
- *Defend your friends.*
- *Watch out for mean people playing tricks and telling lies.*
- *Don't let nasty old mean guys goad you into losing your temper.*

Hmm. Well, there may be some problems at *this* level. In fact, entirely on their own, my kids are starting to glance with skepticism at the details in even these simple lessons (e.g., “If something happens to my looks, will I turn into a bad person?”).

Still, for the most part, children can take all this in without much harm to their values, or souls. Anyway, who am I to spoil their fun, by yattering on about deeper meaning and symbolism?

But that's the point. I have no intention of spoiling *their* fun at all.

Yours, on the other hand . . . well, you have already paid for this book. So don't pretend that you're not interested.

After all, there are many levels other than the superficial, and George Lucas would be the first to say so. Keeping faith with the teachings of famed mythology maven Joseph Campbell, Lucas claims that storytelling is a central ritual that both describes and helps to shape the way that people picture themselves in relation to society. So, shouldn't we take him at his word?

Moreover, many of the trends that we see in the Star Wars universe have also manifested elsewhere in a society that's undergoing change. For example, take the rise of *feudal and magical fantasy*, once considered an offshoot of science fiction, but now pushing its high-tech cousin off the bookstore shelves. Even within sci-fi, stories seem increasingly to feature “chosen ones” or demigod-like heroes, often set in structured, aristocratic cultures.