

Redeeming *Star Wars*

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue



SPACE OPERA: *The Force Awakens* was charged with redeeming a franchise. From left, John Boyega, Daisy Ridley, Peter Mayhew, and Harrison Ford.

What was the point of that movie?" my son asked me as the credits rolled on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. He didn't ask with hostility. He knew what he'd seen was about more than what he'd seen.

Star Wars has always been about fathers and sons, good and evil, friendship and courage. But *The Force Awakens* has the added burden of righting an entire franchise.

George Lucas's original film trilogy (1977–1983) told the same story in several different ways. A young man in a desolate place longs for adventure, gets more than he bargains for, and with the help of a few friends, delivers the galaxy from evil. It was Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* combined with the best technology that the 1970s and early '80s had to offer. The result was a masterful, intricately woven story.

In a response to a positive *Century* review of the original *Star Wars* (July 20–27, 1977), one reader panned the movie as an example of the kind of simple moral narrative that was ruining America. To show clear evil, pitted against the clear, unadulterated good that wins in the end fueled a Manichaeian form of American

patriotism. America imagined as itself the good guy doing battle against the bad guy. But this reader missed the grit in the story, the longing for a more expansive life, and the romance of trying to do good with nothing but a few comrades, a bucket of bolts, and a crazy old religion.

Lucas's subsequent prequel trilogy (1999–2005) did not have the same magic. But when Disney bought the franchise and signed young director J. J. Abrams to write and direct the next trilogy, anticipation was high.

The Force Awakens does not disappoint; it has everything the prequel trilogy did not. The original cast arrives with suitably grand entrances (the audience I was part of cheered each character's arrival), and they're given things to do that they never did before. The young hotshots of the early films are now elders mulling over failure and loss, trying to figure out how to make things right. Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) have, like the disciples in John 21, gone back to their old ways of life. Their marriage didn't work; their children are troubled. Anybody who has lived a little since 1983 can relate. When the galaxy's new heroine, Rey (Daisy Ridley), hands a blue lightsaber to a member of the original cast, the message is clear. A new generation saves an old one; the child redeems the parent.

Abrams is like the kid down the block who has every action figure and toy and invites you to play. How about a super Death Star that can destroy multiple planets at once? How about a cantina with a Yoda-like character in it, or a storm trooper with a conscience who can fight with a lightsaber? Abrams has "geeked out" over the original and relaunched it with new vision and energy. It's how we should preach.

Star Wars is now a multicultural universe: the action heroes aren't just boys and the stars aren't only white. Abrams has Lucas's knack for the shocker, but also a knack for leaving bread crumbs that lead to nothing and prepare you for plot points that suddenly dart off elsewhere. *The Force Awakens* is a space opera that Disney will use to sell toys for decades, but it is also more fun than grownups are normally allowed to have.

Much fan speculation centered on when and where Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) would appear. The scene in which he finally enters was filmed on the island of Skellig Michael, where Irish monks prayed in seclusion for centuries. Skywalker wears his monk-like Jedi robe, and in his face shows every one of his 32 years since *Return of the Jedi*, revealing resignation, regret, fear, and hope all at once. Can he

train a new Jedi as he was trained? Will his gifts contribute to more good or more evil in the world?

The *Century's* letter writer was right: Lucas's *Star Wars* had some Manichaeism in it. Abrams's vision has less. Evil seeks reassurance. Good is less confident in itself. We can see Augustine, alongside Mani, in this film: he always imagined that redemption would reveal the Fall to have been a "happy fault." It's a risky teaching.

Can we say that the failed prequels were a happy fault to have brought about so great a restoration as *The Force Awakens*?

Redemption, son, the story is about redemption.