

SAGA
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SAGA JOURNAL

An academic *Star Wars* fan journal

The Saga Journal is a monthly on-line academic review dedicated to the in-depth study of the Star Wars saga as presented in George Lucas's six-film series. Our goal is to deliver one of the best collections of scholarly essays on the subject that the internet has to offer.

Here at the Saga Journal, we believe Star Wars is more than just an enjoyable space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. We recognize it as a modern myth, a cultural phenomenon all its own. We want to encourage the literary exploration of all aspects of the story as presented in the Prequel and Original Trilogy films.

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Contents

Saga Journal | Volume 3, Issue 3 | March 2007

<i>Star Wars</i> , Lensman and Super Heroes, by <i>Keith Palmer</i>	1
Discovering <i>Star Wars</i> stories	7

Star Wars, Lensman and Super Heroes

By Keith Palmer

Much effort has been devoted over the years to identifying the inspirations, influences, and homages folded into the Star Wars saga. The range of works pointed out, though, stretching from world folklore and myth to the Western¹ and other forms of pop culture may reflect on the varying interests of those making the suggestions. Where some film buffs look to movies from *The Hidden Fortress*² to *The Dam Busters*³ and others begin with the Flash Gordon serials⁴ and the comic strips they were based on, readers of science fiction turn to those books to find predecessors to Star Wars.

One science fiction series often mentioned is the “Lensman” novels of E.E. “Doc” Smith, first serialised in John W. Campbell’s *Astounding Stories* (later *Astounding Science Fiction*), starting in 1937. As early as 1977, an article on Smith was reprinted with the title “E.E. ‘Doc’ Smith, Father of Star Wars,”⁵ and the connection continues to be drawn today. The Wikipedia entry on Smith’s series suggests the resemblance,⁶ and there is a page devoted to it, alongside ones on Flash Gordon and *The Hidden Fortress*, on a web site attempting to identify as many influences on Star Wars as possible.⁷ At a remove from simple fan interest, an entry on the Lensman series in *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* describes it as “a cosmic war of Good and Evil, which even George Lucas would be hard put to top.”⁸

George Lucas may have provided a subtle acknowledgement of these suggestions himself. In documentary footage filmed as he began writing the script of *The Phantom Menace* and showing a glimpse of one of his bookshelves, in between books by Leigh Brackett and Edgar Rice Burroughs and copies of “100 Great Operas and their stories” and Caesar’s “The Gallic War” and “The Civil War,” is the first Lensman book to be written as such, “Galactic Patrol.”⁹

To proclaim one central inspiration for *Star Wars* simplifies things too much no matter what’s chosen, though. There are definite points of similarity between the Lensman series and the *Star Wars* saga in their clashes of interstellar dreadnoughts and their fast-paced, planet-hopping adventures of heroes equipped with psychic powers, but where the battles of the Galactic Patrol are on a scale Industrial Light & Magic might have difficulty bringing to the screen even now, the characters of *Star Wars* struggle with ambiguities the Lensmen brush off when they do have to face them.

The opening line of the Lensman series, as now ordered after the writing of two novels that fill in the backstory, does hold an echo of “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...”: “Two thousand million or so years ago two galaxies were colliding; or, rather, were passing through each other.”¹⁰ One of these galaxies is our own, though, and the backstory proceeds from that indefinite time in the past to our own future; the detachment from our own history for the sake of mythology and “fairy tale” that George Lucas sought in the end isn’t an issue for the science fiction of the Lensman series.¹¹ Stars themselves do not collide as the galaxies move through each other, the empty space between them being sufficient for them to pass, but the Earth (or “Tellus,” as it’s often named in the series) is among the numberless planets whose formation in each galaxy follows these encounters.

All of these events have been observed by the Arisians, a species already ancient and mentally powerful, “carefree, busy, absorbedly intent”¹² until one of them detects the Eddorians. Interlopers from another, less fortunate universe, the Eddorians have turned from destructive but finally futile battles against each other to searching for worlds enough for all of them to control. “Intolerant, domineering, rapacious,

insatiable, cold, callous, and brutal,” but to make matters worse also “keen, capable, persevering, analytical, and efficient,” the Eddorians have “no trace of any of the softer emotions or sensibilities possessed by races adherent to Civilization.”¹³ This is more than enough for many descriptions of the Lensman series to use descriptions like “absolute Evil”¹⁴ and “the nastiest, slimiest, most thoroughly rotten beings ever imagined”¹⁵ for the Eddorians, although the Arisians are in fact a little less extreme, declaring at one point “Your mental picture of glaring white and of unrelieved black is not a true picture. Neither absolute evil nor absolute good do or can exist.”¹⁶ With the two sides culminating in two separate species, not in the Force with its Dark Side, psychic power in the Lensman series is drawn from within an individual. The risk of committing acts connected to the Dark Side that the Jedi have to deal with doesn’t seem to exist for the Lensmen.

As an organization of lawmen-warriors, drawn from the best of all species adherent to Galactic Civilization, the Lensmen play a role very similar to the Jedi.

The Arisians are not troubled by a lack of absolutes, though, and they defend themselves against the threats of the Eddorians by erasing all knowledge of themselves from the minds of their enemies. Aware they’re not powerful enough to destroy the very strongest of the Eddorians even so, they set about raising a force among the species evolving from “Arisian spores” able to do this. Although unaware of this plan at first, the Eddorians do manage to interfere; the sinking of Atlantis (in a nuclear war) and the fall of the Roman republic are both due to the machinations of Gharlane of Eddore, accused by an Arisian of also having been “Genghis Khan and Attila and the Kaiser and Mussolini and Hitler and the Tyrant of Asia”.¹⁷ When the Eddorians finally become aware of the Arisians after “World War III” and the reconstruction that follows, they change their plans by establishing a vast, layered hierarchy using military force disguised as space piracy, the criminal drug trade, and other subversive activities against Galactic Civilization, a hierarchy that becomes known as “Boskonian.” At last, though, Virgil Samms’s search for a badge of police office impossible to counterfeit produces a suggestion from an Arisian in human form to travel to Arisia, where he becomes the First Lensman. Most of the characters through most of the novels know the enemy only as “Boskone,” and some attempts to draw connections between the Lensmen series and *Star Wars* have pointed to the second draft of *A New Hope*, where the dark side of the Force is called “the Bogan” and a “good side” is also specifically identified with the name “the Ashla”¹⁸, suggesting a similarity of names between them and “Boskone” and “Arisia.”¹⁹

As an organization of lawmen-warriors, drawn from the best of all species adherent to Galactic Civilization, the Lensmen play a role very similar to the Jedi. The Lensmen, though, are in some ways more in control, more matter-of-fact, and more idealised than the Jedi have ever been presented as. Their identifying mark is the eponymous Lens, “a lenticular jewel fabricated of hundreds of tiny, dead-white gems.”²⁰ When worn (in wristwatch fashion by humans) by the being the Arisians made it for, a Lens becomes “a lenticular polychrome of writhing, almost fluid radiance which proclaimed to all observers in symbols of ever-changing flame that here was a Lensman of the GALACTIC PATROL.”²¹ A Lens will kill any enemy who takes it from a Lensman and tries to wear it, though, and as such serves as a sure proof of identity, aiding in proving “beyond question that every Lensman was in fact incorruptible.”²² Most tests of that quality alluded to in the books seem to be bribery with money and drugs, and one agent of Boskone, her feminine wiles frustrated against a Lensman, calls him “a sublimated Boy Scout.”²³ As a result of their incorruptibility, though, the Lensmen appear to control the lightly developed government of Galactic Civilization, of which we’re informed “that in all the long history of Civilization no planet whose people have ever voted to adhere to Civilization has ever

withdrawn from it.”²⁴ The people of Civilization, aware that they’re led by the wise people Anakin Skywalker once contemplated being given the power to do the right thing, never stop believing in democracy as the people of the Republic once did.

Beyond the useful property of identification, a Lens acts as an instrument of mental communication and translation, but is not a weapon in itself. Lensmen instead use the same weapons as the rest of the Galactic Patrol, handguns called “DeLameters” with a definite resemblance to blasters and all the other bulletless energy weapons of science fiction and “space-axes”, “a combination and sublimation of battle-axe, mace, bludgeon, and lumberman’s picaroon, a massively needle-pointed implement of potentialities limited only by the physical strength and bodily agility of its wielder.”²⁵ With these weapons, it’s perhaps little wonder that “Lensmen always went in”²⁶ human Lensmen at least, and that exuberance matches that of the Jedi when Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi duel Darth Maul, the Jedi enter combat on Geonosis, and Obi-Wan Kenobi battles General Grievous. At times, too, the Lensmen also get into more trouble than they can handle.

With the facts established that Lensmen can’t be tempted and Civilization is very hard to shake, the action continues at full speed into the central novels of the series. Kimball Kinnison graduates first in his class of “Tellurian” Lensmen, once one of one million eighteen-year-old cadets, now one of a hundred left after five years of “the most brutally rigid, the most fiendishly thorough process of elimination that it has been possible to develop.”²⁷ This training is intentional; the Arisians explained to Virgil Samms that Lensmen could make the selection “among babies in their cradles,”²⁸ an echo of the selection process implied for Jedi, but those who wash out “for some reason not involving moral turpitude”²⁹ serve to staff the rest of the Galactic Patrol, uniformed like the Lensmen in “space-black and silver”.³⁰ Kinnison is thrown into action at once against the space pirates of Boskone, and is soon elevated to the level of “Gray Lensman,” “as nearly absolutely free an agent as it is possible for a living, flesh-and-blood creature to be.”³¹ He objects, thinking himself unworthy of this load, but as is typical for the rest of the books his senior officers are quick to reassure him of his talents; a clear distinction from the tensions that sometimes exist between the Jedi Order and protagonists such as Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker, and Luke Skywalker.

When Kinnison finds it necessary to develop new skills after diving into too much trouble and nearly being killed, he becomes the first Lensman to return to Arisia. Under the ready tutelage of the Arisian Mentor, his Lens becomes more than just an identifier and a communicator; he develops the “sense of perception”³² that some species of Lensmen have and the ability to control and, if necessary, destroy minds. He doesn’t, however, have the “telekinetic” ability of Jedi; when facing adversaries defended by “mechanical thought-screens,” he has to find and control nearby animals to disable those screens. Kinnison ultimately becomes powerful enough that he can remove his Lens and still use his powers, his mind “able to work without aid”³³, the better to continue infiltrating Boskonian in a variety of disguises. In this, the Lens becomes somewhat more like the Force-amplifying “Kiber Crystal” in the second and third drafts of Star Wars, an idea George Lucas took out in the end because “It was better to make the Force more ethereal than to have it solidified in a thing like the crystal.”³⁴

At the close of each novel, Kinnison and the Lensmen behind him utterly destroy who they believe to be the rulers of Boskone, in what “of stern necessity had to be, a war of utter, complete, and merciless extinction”.³⁵ This harsh fate, unquestioned by the Lensmen, is faced by space fleet and alien base world alike, although Kinnison does manage to arrange for some humans and some human planets to break free from Boskonian and join Civilization. As each novel that follows these apocalyptic conclusions opens, investigation reveals a new level of menace surviving behind the erstwhile rulers, to be plumbed further and then defeated using weapons that escalate from fleets of starships controlled so as to utterly

overwhelm their opponents, to “negaspheres” that swallow worlds in mutual annihilation, to planets shifted across interstellar space to crush enemy worlds between them, to turning the solar system into a vacuum tube and concentrating the energy of the Sun against the surfaces of armed and armoured mobile worlds. These worlds have a definite similarity to the Death Star, although they’re destroyed so quickly that they don’t quite offer the threat or the opportunity for the heroes to test themselves against that the Death Star embodies.

The steady escalation of scale in threat, response, and ability, “the conviction of the existence of level upon level of potential being and becoming”³⁶, is often suggested to be a central appeal of the Lensmen series. There may be an echo of this in the forces that destroyed the Republic in *Star Wars*, from the Trade Federation that occupied one planet becoming a part of a larger army of Separatists, and the defeat of the Separatists revealing that the Sith lords guiding them were also controlling and subverting the Republic. Unfortunately, a full awareness of what they’re facing comes too late for the Jedi to act on it before they’re all but destroyed themselves.

During his adventures, Kinnison falls in love with Clarrissa MacDougall, a Galactic Patrol nurse, a descendent of Virgil Samms, and much more thoughtful than the usual run of socialites attracted to the glamour of the plain gray leather a Gray Lensman wears. This romance is in fact encouraged by his superiors: “such stock was altogether too good not to be propagated.”³⁷ Kinnison is resistant at first, worried that his risky career makes long-term attachment troublesome in its own way, but yields in the end. This is a definite difference with the marriage of Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala, who kept it a secret; the wedding of Kimball Kinnison and Clarrissa MacDougall is broadcast “to every planet of Civilization.”³⁸

On his own initiative but with the full compliance of the Arisians, Kinnison makes Clarrissa the first female Lensman ever in order for her to better investigate a planet ruled by a matriarchy: it had been established at the formation of the Lensmen that “Women’s minds and Lenses don’t fit”; they have to be worn by “Men with tremendous force, drive, and scope”, “No more to be stopped than a glacier, and twice as hard and ten times as cold.”³⁹ Clarrissa, though, had been foreseen at that time, as “some kind of a freak.”⁴⁰ While she is successful as a Lensman, she thinks of herself as “a synthetic—or an imitation—or a sort of amateur—maybe a ‘Red’ Lensman”,⁴¹ which helps endear her to the rest of the Galactic Patrol. This, and the wedding that follows, fits the plans of the Arisians, who can foresee the future through their “Visualization of the Cosmic All.”⁴² As with the marriage of Anakin and Padme, the “Children of the Lens” are necessary to resolve matters, although in a very direct way. Kimball Kinnison and Clarrissa MacDougall represent the penultimate stage of the first Arisian scheme of advancement to reach completion, and their five grown children, one man and four women, use the full power of the Galactic Patrol without the Patrol ever quite knowing what their final adversaries are to eradicate the Eddorians and then take over stewardship of Civilization from the Arisians as the story comes to a close.

Both the Lensman series and the *Star Wars* saga have their own peculiarities and their own strengths, but those strengths are not identical. Both stories are in a sense products of their times, but *Star Wars* is not just a “modern” deconstruction of the certainties of the Lensman series. Instead, the Lensman series can be seen as one of many inspirations for the *Star Wars* saga, and can be sought out and read not just for that but for its own unique, antique appeal.

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Discovering *Star Wars*

Angie

I was a six year-old Trek fan who watched the original series on TV and played *Star Trek* on the playground. Then Trek was cancelled and we were all sad. Every now and then rumors of *Star Trek* movies would make us happy for a while, but they never happened. Finally another rumor came along – that it was cancelled (again) because they were going to make *Star Wars* instead. There was great tumult and snarling and much bitterness.

My thirteen-year-old self boycotted *Star Wars* for months. I refused to see it because it was The Movie That Got *Star Trek* Cancelled AGAIN!!! :P Stories about the huge lines and how great the effects were kept circulating and finally I succumbed. I took the bus up to San Francisco with my great-aunt and saw it. Whoa.

It was awesome. The opening crawl was incredible and it just got better after that. All the way home I dreamed of being a Jedi. I bought *Star Wars* school folders and tacked them to my bedroom wall. I collected the trading cards. Later on, when I started going to conventions, I bought *Star Wars* fanzines. The first piece of original art I ever bought was a sketch of Han Solo from a guy working the artist's ghetto at my first ever convention for five bucks. I was young enough to still be obsessive and old enough to have some money and did my share to enrich Lucas for a while.

Lumy

The Empire Strikes Back was the first movie I remember seeing in the theatre. I was six years old. My parents weren't ones for toting us kids around to movies and things so I'm sure they were waiting for my bro and I to become mature enough to sit through a whole movie. ESB was so dark, though—I didn't really like it much back then. I was freaked when Luke's hand got cut off—more so than Vader telling Luke he's his father, I don't even remember my reaction to that. Hee! I absolutely fell in love with *Return of the Jedi* though. My brother and I played with our action figures nearly every day, though the things we acted out were silly and not very *Star Wars*-y. For some reason we each became very attached to our Bossk figures... a character that had 2 seconds of screen time was our favorite to play with. Go figure!

Pronker

It was Spring 1977. My friend and I attended a Day on the Green in Oakland CA to see the Eagles, whose opener was some group called Foreigner. Sometime in the long, lovely afternoon, an advertising plane trailing a banner circled the Coliseum, the writing slowly becoming visible: *STAR WARS IS COMING*. The entire audience reacted, no one around us knew what was going on, and to quote a certain actor: "It was the Force, man!"

Skye Princess

When I was young, maybe around 6 years old, I heard about *Star Wars* but thought that it would be a scary movie. I did not want to see it because I was scared. My mom took me to see *A New Hope* in the theaters in 1997 (i.e. the special edition). I was completely blown away. I saw *The Empire Strikes Back* in theaters as well. I did not get a chance to see *Return of the Jedi* in theaters, but I saw it on video when I bought the special editions on tape. *Return of the Jedi* is now my favorite of the three because Vader is redeemed in the end by Luke. For the early part of my teen years I went through a big SW phase when the prequels. They were fun but the OT is still my favorite. Hopefully I will get to see the original versions of the OT someday.

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