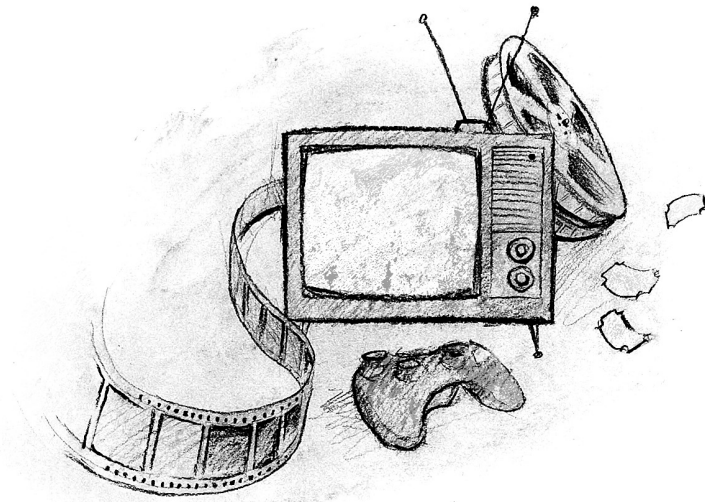


CINEMAGOOGUE

**reclaiming entertainment
and navigating narrative
for the myths and mirrors
they were meant to be**



by

James Harleman

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opening credits

(to those under the sun)

Firstly, to

Linda, for the prayer

Jerry, for the playground

Richard, for the head start

The Core, for the fellowship

Dean, for the internets

Diana, for the red ink

Also, to

George, for ignition

Stan, for inspiration

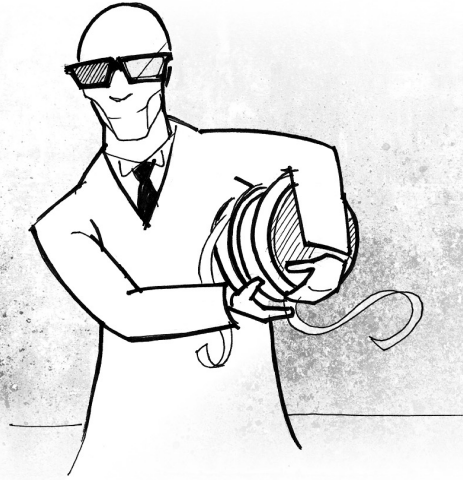
Thundarr, for amalgamation

Paul, for association

Mike, for motivation

And finally, to

Kathryn, for all the ways words fall short



prologue: **coming attractions**

or

*“sometimes the trailers are
more interesting than the movie”*

“I am wondering... why are you here?”

– Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

Everybody has a reason. You’re no exception.

I wrote this book with a particular conviction and aim that I intend to reveal in short order, but honestly: that impetus may not carry the same weight or heft as the motivation you have for picking it up. Truth be told, your story might be far more interesting than mine, and before you dive into the scary recesses of my mind, take a moment to consider yours.

You’re here because (fill in the blank):

Let's assume you didn't simply flash into existence at this very moment, like that tragically doomed whale in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. You didn't find yourself manifest as a fully grown human, suddenly staring at this configuration of letters, armed with the literate ability to comprehend words, phrases and concepts. We'll assume you have a history.

Let's also guess—or hope—that you aren't alternately tied to a chair with your eyes pinned open like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, forced to read this until you scream, wince, and ultimately laugh maniacally while you're... ahem... rehabilitated. You have a choice.

Perhaps you're a film aficionado, and want to see how this book speaks to your passion in deeper ways. Maybe you're a religious person curious to understand how film and faith—movies and meaning—integrate in your daily life. Perchance you're giving this book a shot simply because a teacher, friend or acquaintance recommended it. Maybe its some other bizarre reason I simply can't imagine.

Whatever got you here, I just want you to understand that reading this book isn't the beginning of a journey: it's the continuation of one. Your life is a collection of chapters and scenes that have all preceded opening this book. I hope the contents within add shape and color, context and clarity, perhaps even unraveling some knotty thoughts and uncovering misdirection, giving you a fresh perspective. One might say "everything in your life has been leading up to this moment"... but then again, you can say that about *any* moment, so that statement doesn't represent arrogance on behalf of this writer. It's a firm conviction, however, about the warp and woof of the universe we live in, a cosmos where *destiny* is real and *chance* is a fiction:

"There is no such thing as chance; and what seem to us merest accident springs from the deepest source of destiny."

– Freidrich von Schiller, *Wallenstein*

"There are no accidents." – Oogway, *Kung Fu Panda*

I can absolutely guarantee this is not the best book you will ever read, nor is it the climax for your life-thus-far. Unlike a lot of

spiritual or self-help books that promise epic life change and transformation, my desire is that this half-rant, half-story, half-scholarly work (that's three halves, for those of you who can't do math either) will challenge some of your sensibilities, confirm others, and leave you with a better tool set for engaging the world around you.

For those who haven't even strapped on their utility belt, I suppose this might be like the day you get your very first bat-a-rang, while for others this might just be a few more knockout darts or shark repellent for the spare pouches.

Still, just as somebody ultimately *does* win the lottery, and the Millennium Falcon can navigate an asteroid field despite all odds to the contrary, there is a chance this book could be one of those pivotal scenes in the story of your life... or the story of which your life (and this book) is a part. Whether you intended it to be or not, that moment may have arrived:

"Necessity or chance approach not me; and what I will is fate."

- God, *Paradise Lost*

"Fate rarely calls upon us at a moment of our choosing."

- Optimus Prime, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*

A major facet of this book is about challenging the preconceptions of where we find the big moments in life, the transcendent pivot points in which we discover deeply spiritual epiphanies of our existence, where—quite literally—the God of the universe shows up, shakes our hand and rattles our soul, finding us and reminding us of who He is and why we're here.

Traditionally, we're more likely to look for these moments in a textbook than a cartoon—a book on philosophy instead of a Suzanne Collins novel—and the standard Christian expects the Creator to be revealed in Holy Scripture or in an official church, not a Saturday matinee or a CW teen drama. But if the premise this book stands upon holds any water, I shouldn't rule out the prospect that this book could be one of those unlikely places where you meet your Maker... where the real Master of the Universe steps out from behind the curtain and rocks your world.

Truth is, that possibility makes me downright giddy, albeit embarrassed. If Christians actually read the Bible they claim to treasure, they would see a God who knows how to keep his servants humble. He's chosen at least one occasion to speak his mind through the mouth of a donkey... so if he reserves the right, freedom and humorous proclivity to make use of such an ass, he can certainly leverage my musings to divine ends.

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise..."
- Paul, 1 Corinthians 1:27

Another important point to glean anything from this experience is the simple fact that I'm no ascended guru: I'm not the Fu Manchu of film and theology or the second coming of cinema. My goal in writing this is not to impress, but *inspire*. No matter who you are or why you cracked the cover, I believe with everything in my heart, mind and soul that you can utilize the contents as well, or better, than the guy who scribbled them down here. The purpose is not just to provide striking information, but a rousing transformation that incites replication.

"You, all right?! I learned it from watching you!" – Public Service Announcement, *Partnership for a Drug-Free America*

In 2001, I took over a small "Film and Theology" gathering at our church and, in teaching others, began to unravel precisely why God put me on the planet. My upbringing, my prodigal wandering, my particular path—even when defiantly not following God—began to reveal his articulate, underlying craft that worked despite my missteps to make me the man he desired me to be. Film and Theology would grow from a dozen cinephiles discussing the art of film to crowds of several hundred as we'd look at modern narratives and examine them under this redeemed premise.

The *Cinemagogue* website, started in 2007, would transcend geography and surface like-minded people around the world. Although my focus began with the filmgoing audience, I began to receive encouragement and questions from pastors and church leaders who were benefiting from and leveraging the material. Then I began to get queries from an unexpected source: screenwriters and aspiring filmmakers began thanking me for helping them

understand how to approach their craft as they contribute to the creative pool of the 21st century. The wave of encouragement began to splash from all sides of the storytelling equation.



Teaching at Wheaton Academy in Chicago.

My response, however (of which this book is a part) is based on a biblical principle summed up well by Rick Warren: *“it’s not about you”*. While I appreciate encouragement, I don’t want to be *the film and theology guy*. Every complement I receive lauding the allegedly unique way I see things is a double-edged sword. I can’t believe the Lord of the universe opened these eyes simply so I could impress people with my amazing insight. If our shared creator and designer helped me understand pop culture and story in a God-glorifying fashion, it means anyone can.

The hope of this book is to equip everyone—from the casual movie-goer to the next Steven Spielberg, from the cinematographer to the homemaker—with the basic tools for replication, to inspire emulation that will expand and transcend my meager offering. To that end, we’ll walk through the “whys” and “hows” of narrative and theology, establishing the bridge and basic connections to

enable anyone to view story within God's great story... for sifting and personal growth, enrichment and edification, education and evangelism. The following chapters will address this by:

- Redefining what we mean by "entertainment".
- Understanding why humans are born storytellers.
- Establishing the foundation that there is only one story.
- Looking at prime examples of story for illustration.
- Examining our fears about encountering questionable material in the stories of our culture.
- Calling us to a greater and intentional engagement for the glory of God.

The worst thing I could imagine would be dazzling crowds with narrative interpretation and some well-placed humor, then taking any and all of those God-given tools with me to the grave. That would make me a spiritual gift-hoarder at the height of my hubris. I should desire that many would outlast and outpace me in making these joyous abilities and applications known, learned, and put into practice. That's where you come in.

No matter who you are, you probably fall into one of three categories as you open this book:

1. You're a *consumer*: you go to, turn on, open, download, or otherwise intersect with a particular diet of popular culture. You rock that Kindle, sail the seas of Direct TV, or surf a lot of fan fiction. This diet may be light, gluttonous, restricted, or very selective. Broad tastes or very narrow, you consume a subset of the entertainment our world has to offer, sampling its stories. It's likely (although it may change through time, availability, taste or conviction) this will be a part of your existence until the day the soap opera called "your life" is cancelled.
2. You're a *contributor* as well as a consumer: you like spinning stories of your own for audiences of various size, perhaps

directing the motion pictures those above will fill the seats for this summer. You're active, or aspiring, as a storyteller: getting your first book published, earning your stripes in film school. Maybe you're collaborating with an artist on a comic book, or getting your first job working with an animation studio, or meeting someone on his or her first day next door in the writer's room for that new sitcom. You want to use the gifts you have to contribute story in some form to the world.

3. You're a *leader*—pastor, teacher, elder, preacher—dedicated to the education, edification and/or evangelism of what you believe in. You see the growth and impact of storytelling in our culture, and possibly more people fill seats in the cinema than your auditorium or classroom. You have both creative and consumer in your sphere of influence, and want to examine what others are doing and how this might inform or enhance your efforts to lead and love well, pointing people toward the worldview or story you think holds the greatest benefit for their lives.

I hope this book is useful on all three levels, though I won't deny it's first and foremost for the consumer. There are thicker, denser books tackling elements of craft out there if that's what you're looking for, whereas the length and content here are hopefully more accessible to the everyman, a baseline from which we can all begin. Also, the reality is that most storytellers love story and consume a lot themselves. It's how they stay fresh, what inspired them in the first place, and helps inform what stories they craft next. A pastor/teacher needs to build themselves an appropriate diet if they don't have one already. Understanding the stories that comprise our popular culture "in theory" only goes so far, which is why we'll put over a dozen stories under the microscope before we're done here.

Do you need to be a Christian to read this? An easy assumption one might make is that those flipping through the pages here are professing Christians; I don't want to make that mistake. You don't need to be a Jesus follower to read this book. If you just love the art of storytelling and want to see what metaphysical musings this writer is pondering, thanks for the look-see. Even if you assume I'm

“the enemy” and just want to see what the other side is thinking these days, I’m actually thrilled you’re reading. After all:

“Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.”

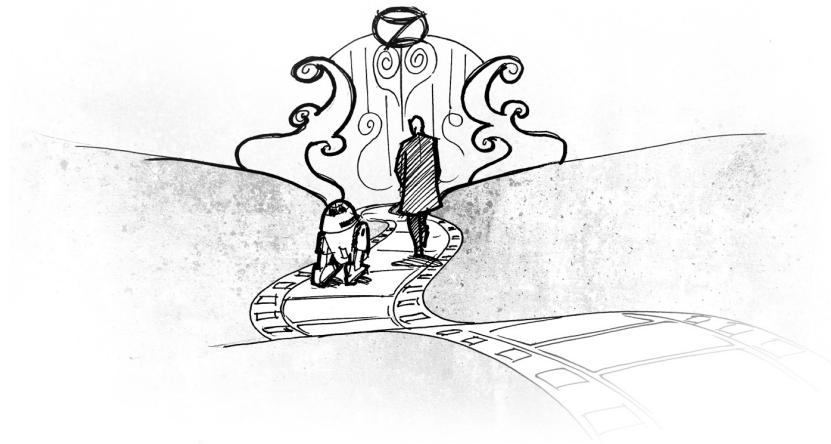
– Michael Corleone, **The Godfather Part II**

“Lord, protect me from my friends; I can take care of my enemies.” – Voltaire

For the record, if you’re not a Christian I don’t regard you as the enemy. In fact, sometimes the most frustrating people in regard to this subject can be Christians. An atheist or agnostic might be a breath of fresh air as they consider the concepts contained herein, rather than just nitpicking the nuances as professing believers. You may encounter sections where I assume belief, or a worldview you don’t hold, or speak as Christians do, but I hope that’s refreshing in its honesty, versus some fancy verbal footwork to make you feel included when there’s an obvious and imminent line between where we presently fix our foundations. There is differentiation, but also invitation, and I pray you’ll honestly consider that. Maybe I should just pray that *you’ll* pray before reading.

Certainly—as the soundtrack kicks up on this baby and the opening credits start to roll—my first wish would be that, Christian or not, you take the time to invite discernment from outside yourself; if our universe is part of a grand story—a *meganarrative*—then the shaper of that story might lend you the ability to see things the way they really are: related and revealing, connected and communicating. I hope by the end, you’ll see your own story as one chapter of that story, joyously folded into that epic, an imminent episode in a timeless classic.

My story is one of those chapters, and that’s where we’ll begin...



Act 1: **James in Wonderland**

or

“the addled story of a story-addict”

Scene 1: **A LONG TIME AGO...**

Whose hand am I holding? My five-year-old, chubby digits are tightly curled around a firm elder offering of support and guidance, arm held high as I waddle back from the bathroom. The big hand’s owner is a coin toss between Mommy and Daddy, because my eyes don’t drift sideways to seek an answer; they’re transfixed on the doorway ahead, awaiting the blessed hope offered by the silver screen lurking beyond. As swinging double doors part like enormous sideways eyelids, flickering images attack what are aptly called my “pupils”. My rods and cones are imprinted forever with the waft and wing of X-Wing fighters, their S-foils locking into attack position, descending on a moon-sized eyeball boasting enough power to destroy an entire planet... or at the very least worsen my astigmatism.

What is your first memory?

Perhaps you recall staring through the bars of your old-school playpen, or up from a softer, kid-friendlier pack-n-play, or snuggling in the strong arms of a loving grandparent. It might be playing with a favorite toy – something tantalizingly tactile – or something less gentle like a tumble-and-skinned knee. A first memory might be person, place, or thing, and if you're lucky a parent or older sibling might recollect the details of story surrounding it, and you, in cognitive inauguration.

In this particular case, my first memory is a scene from a story known to millions, a visual introduction fueling childhood development like baby formula a la Lucasfilm. As it turns out, my story isn't my story at all, but a particularly pivotal moment in history that accomplished far more than the destruction of an Imperial space station and the maturation of a single *Star Wars* fan. For all of western culture, the rules of storytelling and entertainment utterly changed forever. My magic moment only mirrored a cultural shift that would become appropriately named *immersive* entertainment.

The achievements of the Star Wars franchise could fill a book of its own, but suffice it to say this film did more than dominate six years of my life as my brother and I breathlessly awaited sequels. The Force was strong in my family, and thanks to George Lucas' marketing miracle with 20th Century Fox – retaining rights to all merchandising – he showed everyone you could make even more from the retailing rights on a movie than you could from the movie itself. This didn't just impact every kid's Christmas tree, but revolutionized the use of multi-media entertainment. Suddenly swimming in a story-formed pool of equal size and shape to the Sunday schooled surroundings I grew up in, I had a competing and compelling narrative for my attention and affection.

Remember – or learn from someone who grew up there – the landscape we accept as normative today didn't exist in the 70s. Movies came and left the theater... and that was about it. You snoozed and you, well... maybe you read the crappy novelization, then prayed the film made its way to "edited-for-television" in less than a decade. Seriously, this world lacked Blu-rays, didn't do DVD, barely contained videotapes (not a single luxury, like Robinson

Crusoe) and yet Lucas' creative teams found a way to encircle their audience without benefit of Surround-sound.

My older brother and I had action figures, of course. That's how it started, like a plastic gateway drug with five points of articulation. Then came the Soundtrack, back before they differentiated between "soundtrack" and "score". And don't forget the bubble gum trading cards (or the cereal). We even had a 40-minute edited audio version of the movie on vinyl – yes, a record of the film – where you flipped sides right when the Death Star was opening the magnetic field to swallow our heroes and John Williams' music ramped up in anticipation. My uber-cool older cousin Dale had issues of the Star Wars comic books, with iconic images of Luke Skywalker fending off a sea monster and Han Solo firing at a gargantuan lizard (if I ever wondered why, later in life, I would be fascinated by the Loch Ness monster and Godzilla, I believe the answer is clear). My dad brought home a damaged copy of "*Han Solo's Revenge*" and I drew, colored and attached my own paperback cover for the novel.

In a world without instant replay, George Lucas forged the formative ways to ensure the Force would be with us, *always*. Take a historical tour of film, superheroes, science fiction, and other fantastical media prior to this in the 20th century. There are sprinklings of Flash Gordon jet packs, inklings of Buck Rogers toy tie-ins, and the ever-enticing X-ray specs and Sea Monkeys, but never the coordinated brand saturation accomplished by Lucas' team. The offering of action figures was meager at best (and Mego at worst) until toy company Kenner made dolls for boys out of every single character in the film, from Luke Skywalker to Walrus Man. Every ten-year-old boy could recreate the movie.

Reality began to blur, beyond the measly merch my Dad purchased for us on a public schoolteachers' salary: everything began to look like Star Wars. Our tree fort in the backyard was the Millennium Falcon. The path between the two halves of our garden was the corridor of the detention block. The Sunday school classroom was the briefing room on Yavin, and the church sanctuary was where my award ceremony would take place someday when I blew up the Death Star. The sandbox was Tatooine, naturally. From 1977 to 1983, I'm not sure I played anything except Star Wars, and to

this day cinnamon rolls still remind me of Princess Leia's spacey hairdo.

As if in response to the thrown gauntlet, the 80s rushed to catch up with this demand and give us a multiplicity of options. It wasn't long before other storytellers learned the game... or, perhaps more accurately, the moneychangers behind those minstrels modified the playing field. In 1981, *Tron* came out as a film with action figures... *plus* an arcade game. Video games entered the consumer cocktail, stirring more interactive media into the creative cauldron long before Pokemon would sum it up so elegantly and enviously with "gotta catch 'em all". Hasbro followed the size and strategy of Kenner in 1982, and instead of one scar-faced *G.I.* named *Joe* we had an endlessly expanding team of gallant heroes and vile villains furnished with vehicles, play-sets and backstories.

Media-makers from Hollywood to HarperCollins were testing and reestablishing the rules of engagement for entertainment. As if the storytelling snowball hadn't gained enough momentum, additional traction and attraction were granted when Hollywood and the U.S. government experienced a historical, "chocolate and peanut butter" kind of moment. Affable actor Ronald Reagan became America's first face and fearless leader. When this well-spoken President supported a landmark deregulation of FCC and broadcasting standards in the 80s—allowing toy industries to finally make television shows about its products – the rules changed forever; a televised tidal wave of broadcasting bombarded a generation of consumers.

He-Man was the first cartoon toy out of the less guarded merchandising gate, cleaving through culture and toying with our affections, but the landscape would ultimately be "transformed" by the indomitable Optimus Prime. The circle was now complete; from the advent of *Star Wars* in 1977 to the *Return of the Jedi* in 1983, the real saga hadn't been happening in a galaxy far, far away. Between the aspirations of a starry-eyed 70s filmmaker and the capitalist decision-making of a former TV-star turned President in the 80s, the impact of fictional franchise had reached a cultural saturation unlike any other. Sadly, this reality remained predominantly

misunderstood by the well-meaning parents who sought to steep their children in the Greatest Story Ever Told.

Scene 2: Kill Your Tele-Vicar

“Whenever I look back on the best days of my life I think I saw them all on T.V. I am so homesick now for someone that I never knew. I am so homesick now for someplace I will never be” - The Bravery, Time Won’t Let Me Go

My parents just didn’t get me.

I don’t mean that in the arrogant, I’m-so-angsty, nobody-gets-me kind of way. My Dad was a wonderful man and my mother a tremendous servant with an encouraging heart. What they didn’t “get” was the damage that the superfluous, un-shepherded story was doing to my worship-minded heart. Everyone worships something. Between their diligence to keep me involved in weekly churchgoing, Christian school, and home Bible-reading, I was getting pumped full of Christian literacy.

However, I was also slurping from the spigot of popular culture that had shifted in a way they didn’t understand.

On one hand, I praise God my parents weren’t the type who went the legalist’s route, or I’d have a host of alternate problems to contend with. Kids in my carpool couldn’t watch Star Wars or E.T. the Extraterrestrial because Yoda and Elliot’s alien buddy were “obviously demons” (maybe Fozzie Bear was the anti-christ, and “wokka-wokka” some sort of incantation). These kinds of ignorant assumptions ruled about half of the households I knew growing up, whereas the other half did their best to sift and screen what seemed “safe” to watch with a more discerning and reasonable eye. To their credit, my parents did an above-average job filtering the popular stories of culture, waiting to introduce me to them at a decent age.

What they didn’t put their finger on, however, was that the sheer bulk of competing stories, however “safe” from “sinful” content, allowed me to construct and immerse myself in my own fantasy world. The stories didn’t have to be *depraved*: they only needed to be

distracting. This subsequently James-formed universe incorporated elements of the Bible story they told me was true, but didn't give it the primacy and exclusivity it deserved. I also lacked the proper time to connect and classify the fantasies with the fantastic story of Jesus, and no conversational context to categorize protagonists and antagonists amidst the literature and pulp fiction I ingested, so I spun them all together to form my own pseudo-intellectual web of spirituality, morals and ethics.



A long time ago, in a living room far,
far away...

But wait... let me rewind here, lest it be thought that I'm blaming culture, or my parents, for my own miserable myopia, inner blindness and suppression of Jesus Christ. The fact that, even in my Bible reading, I preferred the stone-smashing Samson or the stone-slinging David to the Savior—the God-man, the ultimate hero of the story of Scripture—is a testimony to my own willful rejection. A wise man once said "accept no substitutes" and for a quarter of a century I ignored Jesus. Culture offered me vast, innumerable pools of proxy to swim in that had never been accessible before, a supply of surrogates for supplanting the one true myth, and my parents (a generation of parents) didn't understand that nuance of narrative's power.

When I think of “story” in my teenage years, my mind correlates it with the classic arcade game *Frogger*. As your green, amphibious avatar hopped from the highway around the pixilated water, you had to leap from object to object seeking safe landing and resting places... but you could only sustain yourself on one of these for so long. Logs would eventually slide off the screen, turtles would occasionally submerge, and the alligators were only safe if you avoided their jaws. This was, for me, an adequate description of my reliance on story-formed, surrogate saviors from ages 10-20. Whereas a Christian might testify that their “identity is in Jesus Christ”, mine took momentary stands on whatever fictional character appealed to my emotions (or hormones) at the time.

Han Solo pirated my early childhood, as by some twist of fate or genetics my brother and I gravitated toward Luke and Han respectively without argument. One might unpack a goodly portion of my life – devil-may-care, reckless, haphazard, bit of a scoundrel with only one good buddy while disregarding most other people – and see nuances of that pirate’s attitude liberally scattered around to this day. His casual indifference and cynicism toward spirituality, his basic material-world framework, helped smuggle away the faith I was comfortable selling. As a young man I acknowledged the existence of a creator-god, but remained a functional deist at best, happy to “thank the maker” without making him imminent or real in daily life. My other sci-fi influence, Captain Kirk, shared many of the same qualities – although he had more responsibility and a larger crew than Solo. The equally cavalier Kirk casually sent ensigns to their deaths every episode and only grieved a minute or so, until that particular week’s miniskirt sauntered by.

After the *Star Wars* trilogy ended (and it’s still a trilogy, *only* a trilogy) the Abraham Lincoln of giant robots satisfied my emotional needs for a time. You know who I’m talking about: that shining titan of Autobot goodness and John Wayne wisdom that transformed into a truck, telling us we could conquer all our enemies with the might of right and a stiff (steel) upper lip. However, I always knew I couldn’t be Optimus Prime, unyielding defender of goodness with nerves of steel (seriously, they were metal). I identified with the smaller character, Bumblebee, a scrappy aspiring robot lad who

meant well, but didn't possess anything approximating Prime's power and sage wisdom.

Kids didn't want to BE Prime – they wanted to be next to him. For latchkey kids in the 80s, he was their surrogate father. Although I had a dad, Uncle Optimus towered even higher and told me “*freedom is the right of all sentient beings*”. I now understood that because “I think, therefore I am” I was subsequently entitled to self-govern: transmission received, dear Optimus.

I realized at some point that voice actor Dan Gilvezan, the cartoon vocals for Bumblebee in the 80s, was also the voice of Peter Parker in *Spider-man and his Amazing Friends*. This wall-crawling hero showed up in an issue of the *Transformers* comic as well. Whether that web of connections cultivated my affection for the perpetually under-achieving student/superhero, or whether my own emerging nerd status in junior high and high school had more to do with it, is hard to quantify... but it made for a curious cultural baton-pass. The often oppressed and misunderstood web-slinger became my new avatar, my new identity, and I lived vicariously through his victories, sympathized with his out-of-costume sufferings, and lusted after his aggressive girlfriend, the Black Cat. (Mary Jane? Meh.)

Becoming more withdrawn in high school, harboring measures of anger and anguish (I know, SO uncommon in high school, right?) I poured my obsessive hero-worship into *The Incredible Hulk*, reinforced by that 70s television show with Bill Bixby that I once watched with my Dad. The idea of a depraved monster that I could never truly control despite all my efforts resonated with something deep inside me. There were some biblical realities that might have been realized there had I been paying attention, but instead my metamorphosis grew darker as high school trundled along. Watching a more sinister transformation on the short-lived FOX series *Werewolf*, I sank deeper into the horror genre.

Werewolves and Vampires were underground then – not yet clichéd and befouled by sparkling teenage soap operas like *Twilight* – and so my stories trended darker and bloodier with less hope of redemption. However, being a *Lost Boy* wasn't dark enough to fill

my sense of inner torment, and the siren songs of *Hellraiser*, *Night Breed* and other stories lured me, letting me stew in a sense of lost identity, fearing afterlife and judgment at the hands of Pinhead or something worse. Unable to watch or read Stephen King or Clive Barker at my parent's home, I would hide books and videos at a friend's house and we would watch them while both his parents were working. Strangely enough, this drove me to ask theological questions of a few Baptist students, who were very gracious in their attempts to articulate the gospel. I listened, but their offerings still simply sidled up alongside other stories and nurtured my swinging emotional states.

The vampire allure followed me from my childhood in rural/suburban Washington State to North Seattle when I went to college, along with a shifty "grey" character named *Constantine* (not the Keanu Reeves version, the British Vertigo version) who could often be found negotiating and navigating between angels and demons. It was then I decided to shift from simply being a consumer to participating in this narrative potpourri. I determined myself to be a storyteller.

Two novels flowed from the fingers into my Brother Word Processor: fraught with heroics and fantasy, bloodletting and sex, a misunderstood young man cursed with conscience but no power to enact change, more gore and lust, and a merit-based redemption achieved after a long road of suffering and loss. College, my first few jobs, and a ruined relationship passed by, this obsession remained. I was going to contribute the *ultimate story* that encompassed all the themes I had gestated in from birth to adulthood.

This story would have heroes and villains... glory and horror... rejoicing and lament... good deeds and depravity... action and drama... doubt and betrayal... blood and sacrifice. After all, there had to be one story that could grab all of these variant elements and express them perfectly. Death... and resurrection. And I was going to write it. My first stab at the title would be...

Scene 3: Purchase of Blood

"Well, whatever you do, however terrible, however hurtful, it all makes sense, doesn't it, in your head. You never meet anybody that thinks they're a bad person." - Tom Ripley, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

Deep in Dostoevsky, dabbling in drugs, sucking down cigarettes and coffee at a dingy Denny's, I pondered if I was brilliant enough to commit the perfect murder and not get caught at the end of Hitchcock's *Rope*. I determined myself to challenge morality with my willpower, make Stephen King's work look like *Goosebumps*, and have a picture perfect marriage façade like something Dexter Morgan would model for us a decade later. I even had my odd, irascible roommate Rich – my Rick Jones, my Cliffjumper, my Chewbacca – and it all made perfect sense. The only thing seriously challenging my plan consisted of one of the world's deadliest weapons: a quiet, unfailling, ticking time bomb we call...

...a praying mother.

Every time I called home for the requisite parent call, my sweet, silver-haired Harle-matron would ask if I had "found a church" (as though I were looking). I indulged her fantasy and occasionally popped in on a church service... but without fail, congregants would be conveniently seated in such a fashion that I could look down my nose at them. Milking one visit would go on for about three months, until I felt obligated to have a more recent experience to defend my lack of involvement to dear mother. Asking softly and tenderly time and time again, the dear woman simply continued to pray.

Inevitably I attended a worship service that changed my life, at a church named after a place and event in Athens, where the apostle Paul preached a famous message from the Book of Acts. In the sermon I dropped in on, however, the pastor wasn't preaching from Acts, or even a book from the Bible's New Testament. The guy was yammering on about Jesus and reading through the Old Testament. My brain revolted against this. Something had to be very wrong here; after all, Jesus wasn't *in* the Old Testament.

Sure, every good little Christian knows John chapter 1, which makes a vague reference to Jesus being the living “Word” of God that spoke the universe into existence... but that was it, right? Right?

For the first time in my life I actually paid attention to the continuous thread of Scripture’s narrative, seeing the singular protagonist woven through the fabric of not only the biblical account... but real life alongside it. This radical notion, that the ultimate superhero spoke our universe into existence, working behind the scenes—and IN some of those scenes—laboring even prior to his incarnation in a manger, unblocked the clog in my belief pipe. The second member of the Trinity, the Godhead, had made appearances as the “angel of the Lord”, perhaps even as the mysterious Melchizedek who commissioned Abraham. He’d wrestled with Abraham’s grandson Jacob, appeared to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in a fiery furnace... the list of mysterious Christophanies went on and on like episodes of *The X-Files*, *Fringe* or *Lost*.

Even if some of these were merely angels or visions and not actually the “pre-incarnate Christ”, they foreshadowed or imaged Jesus. For over three months, this local church poured through the entire Bible looking at Jesus’ foreshadowing and interplay: from the universe’s Genesis to the white horse riding, sword-wielding, tattooed combat Lord at the conflagration and climax of Revelation.

I’d always seen a kind of dichotomous affection in my Dad—a juxtaposed love for both Jesus and John Wayne—and to this day I’m not sure he ever fully reconciled his love for the Christ and his brotherly affection for the Duke. I now felt I understood why: Jesus’ mission in his humble incarnation was specific, but his revelation return makes *Braveheart* and *Conan* look like amateurs. While those latter men of action might mirror some of the ass-kicking, they didn’t speak the very stars into formation at the beginning of time, and they weren’t scheduled to roll those same stars up like a scroll at the end of days. There was much more to Jesus than meets the eye, more to his will and work than three years of ministry unto martyrdom. Focusing on the incarnation without the the full scope of interaction and intention leaves one with a myopic view of scripture’s superhero. Although the cross of Christ remains central

to the story, the scope of it sent ripples in *both* directions throughout human history from—no surprise—Alpha to Omega.

I was on my knees repenting for my life and my bastardized storytelling aspirations; I didn't need to write an all-encompassing book, addressing humanity's compromised nature and our need for atonement entitled "Purchase of Blood", because it had already been written... and it wasn't fiction. In my hubris, I'd been hoping to fashion my own savior and satisfy myself when I needed something holy and wholly other to introduce me to what *story* was truly all about.

Thankfully, I would find out that in more than one way... I wasn't alone.

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