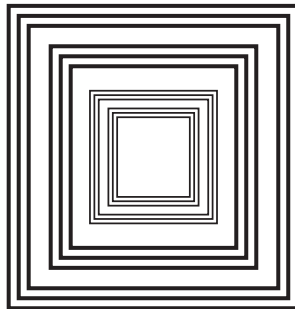


# **The Power of Storytelling**

**Social Impact Entertainment**

**Robert Rippberger**

*with additional writing by*  
**Spencer Moleda**



**REGENT PRESS**  
Berkeley, California  
2022

# FOREWORD

by Howard Roffman

For thirty-seven years, I had a job that allowed me to experience the power of storytelling in ways that most people never can. Day after day, I witnessed the truth that Rob Ripberger describes so compellingly in the book you're about to read.

My job was at Lucasfilm, the company that George Lucas established when he began his filmmaking career.

Of the countless stories that have been created and told during our lifetimes, few, if any, have been as impactful as the *Star Wars* saga. My job at Lucasfilm had me overseeing every ancillary use made of *Star Wars*—from toys to books to video games and everything in between. Together, George and I managed the entire *Star Wars* brand. George had an interesting way of describing our respective roles. We were two parts of a Trinity, he liked to say. He, as the creator of the films and TV shows, was the Father; I was the Son; and the fans were the Holy Spirit. It was the kind of playful yet insightful overstatement that George loves to make.

For all his playfulness, however, George was always thoughtful and deliberate when it came to *Star Wars* storytelling. Every aspect of the stories he told was there for a well-thought-out and usually well-researched purpose. For the original *Star Wars: A New Hope* in 1977, he studied Joseph Campbell's classic work on mythology, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, to help him craft a story that could use allegory to impart values and important psychological lessons to children. For *The Empire Strikes Back*, concerned about the

impact on kids of learning that Darth Vader was Luke Skywalker's father, he consulted the esteemed psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, whose seminal work *The Uses of Enchantment* focused on the emotional and symbolic importance of fairy tales for children. For *Return of the Jedi*, he used America's experience in the Vietnam War to inform a story that told how a group that others might see as primitive and underdeveloped—the Ewoks—could in fact help to defeat the superior forces of a mighty empire.

In crafting the *Prequel Trilogy* years later, before writing a single word, George carefully laid out the themes he wanted the movies to address, such as the importance of letting go, the dangers of attachment, how democracies fall and ruthless dictatorships rise up in their place. George became a student of so many disciplines—from history to psychology to religion—in fashioning the stories that together constitute his *Star Wars* saga.

Doing my job at Lucasfilm meant becoming immersed in the ways audiences around the world connected with *Star Wars*, and what I saw confirmed the genius of George's approach. For its millions of fans, *Star Wars* was much more than a wildly entertaining series of films. It was an intricately crafted modern mythology that accomplished what the greatest mythologies of humankind have done for millennia: it became a powerful allegory that speaks to the things that matter most to us as human beings—what it means to be good or evil, the power of the choices we make, the opportunity each of us has to be a hero, the importance of spirituality, and the interconnectedness of all things. People see themselves in the hero's journey of Luke Skywalker, the farm boy who steps into a larger world and discovers his inner power, helped along the way by mentors and friends, confronting his demons and ulti-

mately finding enlightenment. The elements of that journey have become icons of our time, touching and inspiring countless millions of people now spanning more than three generations.

I got to see that influence play out day after day during my many years at Lucasfilm. I saw how *Star Wars* brought people together and created a collective experience and a sense of community; how much joy people experienced sharing *Star Wars* with their friends and introducing *Star Wars* to their kids; the ways that the fantasies kids acted out with their *Star Wars* toys were fundamental to their development as human beings. I heard countless stories from people whose lives had been touched by *Star Wars*, whether in the career choices they made, the comfort the film gave them through trying times, the reinforcement of their belief in a higher power, or their faith in themselves.

The fact that *Star Wars* can be quantified as a business proposition measured in dollars generated, number of times seen, number of items sold, is quite secondary to the unquantifiable aspects of the franchise—the values it has taught, the enhancement of our lives it has brought about, the changes to our culture it has spawned. Imagine, if you can, a world in which Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader never existed, R2-D2 and C-3PO had never bickered, the Millennium Falcon had never made the jump to hyperspace, and Princess Leia had never said “I love you!” only to hear Han Solo reply “I know.” Worse yet, a world in which no one had ever uttered the words “May the Force be with you.” Unthinkable!

I realize, of course, that *Star Wars*, with all its extraordinary power, is an outlier. Few storytelling vehicles in modern times can match its reach, its success, or its impact. Still, the point remains the same. The power of storytelling is universal and regularly expe-

rienced on much smaller but no less impactful scales.

Trust me, I know.

As a gay teenager growing up in the sixties, confused about my identity in a culture where homosexuality was criminalized, concealed, and condemned, I turned to the few sources in popular culture that might help guide me. I snuck into the X-rated *Midnight Cowboy*, John Schlesinger's Oscar-winning film in which the young cowboy Joe Buck, newly arrived in Manhattan, is "reduced" to turning tricks for closeted gay men who grovel pathetically before him, one of whom he brutally assaults. I secretly went to see *Boys in the Band*, William Friedkin's film of the acclaimed Mart Crowley play, hoping that none of my friends would catch me. What I saw on screen was a group of closeted gay friends in New York camping it up at one of their apartments until an old—and straight—college buddy of the party-thrower shows up unannounced and boiling over with conflict and judgment, an encounter that ends in despair for his now-outed and miserable friend. I read *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin's classic novel from the 1950s in which David, a closeted American expat in Paris currently engaged to a young woman, falls in love with Giovanni, a bright-eyed and hopeful young Italian, but is ultimately unable to overcome his own self-hatred and deserts his lover, who becomes desperate, kills a man, and is eventually executed for murder.

Each of these works is a masterpiece crafted by brilliant gay storytellers and of unquestionable historic significance. Each spins a very different yarn but all share a common message of self-loathing and tragic fates. Highly acclaimed as they were, I would venture to guess that collectively they have been experienced by fewer than the number of people who see a *Star Wars* film on a single

day of its opening weekend. That didn't blunt their impact on me. These stories told me that all the horrible things I'd heard about homosexuality growing up were true. For a lost teenager struggling to find his way in the hostile world of suburban Philadelphia, they were powerful enough to cause untold confusion and pain, and to nail the closet door shut for many years to come.

There is no storytelling that doesn't deliver a message—good, bad, or indifferent, intentional or not. The same power that can educate, inspire, and enlighten can also be a source of oppression and harm. It's long been said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Rob's book is an eloquent reminder that those who forego the sword and choose the pen assume a weighty responsibility. As wielders of the mightiest of weapons, they must always be mindful of the message, for theirs is the power to lift us up or drag us down, the power to make a difference in our lives.

— Howard Roffman