

Lynchburg College Digital Showcase @ Lynchburg College

Communications

2011

Indiana Jones. From: DiMare, P. C. (2011). Movies in american history : An encyclopedia Santa Barbara, Calif. : ABC-CLIO, c2011. pp 254-258

Michael G. Robinson

Lynchburg College, robinson.m@lynchburg.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalshowcase.lynchburg.edu/comm_facpub

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DiMare, P. C. (2011). Movies in american history : An encyclopedia Santa Barbara, Calif. : ABC-CLIO, c2011.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Showcase @ Lynchburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communications by an authorized administrator of Digital Showcase @ Lynchburg College. For more information, please contact digitalshowcase@lynchburg.edu.

From: *Movies in American History*. Philip C. DiMare, editor. Santa Barbara, Calif. ABC-CLIO. 2011 pp. 254-258.

INDIANA JONES.

Dr. Indiana “Indy” Jones (Harrison Ford) is the title character of a popular franchise developed by film school friends George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. The series was built primarily on three films: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). After a two-decade absence from the big screen, Jones returned in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). In terms of content, theme, and style, the Indiana Jones movies demonstrate nostalgia for times of high adventure and excitement. The original trilogy takes place before World War II, mimicking the action-packed tone of movies of the day. Set in 1936, *Raiders* sees archaeologist Jones pressed by the U.S. Government to prevent Hitler’s forces from recovering the Lost Ark of the Covenant. Teaming with lost love Marion (Karen Allen) in Nepal, Indy heads on to Egypt where he finds the Ark, only to lose it to the Nazis. The wrath of God seems to strike down the Nazis when the Ark is opened. Indy survives, but he is disheartened when his own government takes the Ark, placing it in a strange warehouse. *Temple of Doom* is a prequel of sorts. This 1935 adventure sees Indy fleeing Chinese gangsters. Accompanied by his sidekick Short Round (Jonathan Ke Quan) and singer Willie Scott (Kate Capshaw), Indy is caught up in a struggle to rescue an Indian village from a Thuggee cult. *Last Crusade* opens with a 1912 adventure for young Indy (River Phoenix), and then shifts over to a 1938 battle against the Nazis. This time Indy must help his father, Dr. Henry Jones (played marvelously against type by Sean Connery), stop the villains from acquiring the Holy Grail. *Crystal Skull* jumps ahead to 1957 for some Cold War action against the Soviets. Opening in the mysterious warehouse from *Raiders*, the film has Indy working to prevent the Soviets from discovering the secret to the alien skulls. Indy discovers an unknown son in Mutt Williams Scene from the 1989 film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Harrison Ford. (Photofest) (Shia LaBeouf) and is reunited with Mutt’s mother, Marion. Filled with daring exploits and adventure, one signature of the franchise is that each movie has several long action sequences. In *Raiders*, for example, a tense escape from the snake-infested Well of Souls leads directly into a thrilling fight on a grounded flying wing aircraft; this, in turn, is followed by a lengthy chase involving a truck convoy. Whether menaced by snakes, a bruiser of a flight mechanic, or being dragged behind a truck from which he has been thrown, Indy is in danger from one moment to the next. Although the title character is an accomplished archaeologist and university professor, Indiana Jones is no stuffy academic. Rather, he is perfectly suited for the kinds of wild situations he often encounters. Iconic in his dusty leather jacket and brown fedora, with his favorite bullwhip and pistol by his side, Indy is a two-fisted everyman-adventurer in the classic American mode. He can plan, but he also relies on his intuition. Racing off to rescue the Ark in *Raiders*, he is asked by his Egyptian friend Sallah (John Rhys-Davies) what his plans are. His famous reply: “I don’t know. I’m making this up as I go along.” A scrappy fighter, Indy can and often does endure a great deal of punishment. Both physically and mentally agile, however, he usually emerges victorious from his brawls. Although he almost always escapes mortal danger because he is daringly creative, he is also sometimes ridiculously lucky. In *Temple of Doom*, for example, Indy, Willie, and Short Round survive what seems to be certain death by jumping from a crashing plane, just in the nick of time, into an

inflatable raft, which they then ride down a snow-covered mountain into a raging river. In addition to all the action, the Indiana Jones pictures also incorporate moments of horror. One signature element of the franchise is that in each film, Indy encounters large numbers of fear-inducing animals. Phobic when it comes to snakes, his courage is put to the test in *Raiders* when he discovers that the Well of Souls, the location of the Ark, is squirming with countless serpents—"Snakes, why did it have to be snakes!" Although he apparently suffers no phobia as in regard to these vermin—although we certainly may!—in *Temple of Doom* our hero must navigate a tunnel of insects; in *Last Crusade*, he must find his way through a catacomb overrun with rats; and in *Crystal Skull* he must face army ants that devourer human flesh with carnivorous zeal. Other horrors involve the fates of many of the villains in the films. In *Raiders*, Nazis Toht (Ronald Lacy) and Dietrich (Wolf Kahler) essentially melt away when they make the mistake of looking into the opened Ark, while the head of evil archaeologist Belloq (Paul Freeman) explodes. *Last Crusade* sees traitorous Donovan (Julian Glover) die from super-speed aging when he drinks from a bejeweled cup he mistakes for the Holy Grail, and in *Temple of Doom*, Soviet villainess Spalko (Cate Blanchett) is obliterated in a psychic encounter with aliens. Perhaps, though, the most famous horror sequence of the franchise comes from the latter film. In *Temple*, Thuggee cult leader Mola Ram (Amrish Puri) uses his hand to pull the still-beating hearts from the chests of his victims. (Interestingly, public reaction to this special effect inspired the creation of the PG-13 rating.) The Indiana Jones films implicitly configure the times before World War II as the last era of great adventure. In a stylistic mode reminiscent of older films (such as the opening moments of 1942's *Casablanca*), Indy travels that world through a montage that superimposes the mode of transportation onto a red line making its way across a brown map to places like Egypt, India, and Brazil. Indy is a savvy traveler, wise to the importance of respecting the local customs. The films are not always as respectful as Indy himself. Although not all people of color are portrayed as savages, villains from these "older cultures" often are, especially when they appear in large numbers. The Thuggee cultists from *Temple of Doom* and the tribal guardians of the temple in *Crystal Skull* are particularly salient examples. *Temple of Doom* also gives another example of this "third world" stereotyping: Indy, Willie, and Short Round are guests at a banquet at which items of food are presented as nothing short of bizarre, and Indy and Short Round laugh derisively at Willie's attempts to deal with chilled monkey brains served right from the animal's skull. True villainy in the Indiana Jones universe is clearly equated with the Nazis, however. Indeed, Indy is twice contrasted with evil archaeologists in the employ of Hitler:

Raiders' Belloq and *Last Crusade's* Dr. Elsa Schneider (Alison Doody). Although not a Nazi himself, Belloq is willing to use Hitler's ambitions and lead the Nazi expedition to recover the Ark in order to further his own interests. Indy is disgusted by Belloq's allegiances; although, ironically, it is Belloq who points out that there is little difference between the two adventurers. Schneider's Nazi connections are particularly troubling, as she is also a love interest of Indy. At one point in *Last Crusade*, Indy and his father have covertly pursued Schneider to Berlin. Indy confronts her at a book burning rally, hammering home the point that the Nazis seek to extinguish knowledge. An amusing aside then sees Indy accidentally meeting Hitler, with the dictator mistaking Indy for an autograph seeker. In drawing these contrasts, the films seem to gloss over Indy's own motives for relic hunting: he thinks items belong in museums for all to see— not quite the same as returning materials to their native cultures. Although the moral ideology expressed in the Indiana Jones films is typically made explicit, the shadowy metaphysical entities that

embody that morality are more difficult to divine. Still, it is clear that higher powers are at work in the films. Opening the Ark of the Covenant in *Raiders*, for example, evokes the wrath of some “what,” presumably the God of the Old Testament (made manifest within a decidedly Christian context), that rains down in full-force-special-effects-wonder on the Nazis; and drinking from the Holy Grail—the Last Supper cup of Jesus—heals the mortally wounded Henry and keeps an ancient crusader alive for centuries. In a less religiously miraculous sense, the Sankara stones in *Temple of Doom* seem to possess magical powers. In the final battle with Mola Ram, for instance, the stones burn and appear to provide Indy with a spiritual strength that allows him finally to overcome his tenacious foe. Interestingly, the films never provide us with definitive answers to the metaphysical questions they raise. While Henry Jones does believe in something that transcends the finite world, his son Indy is more pragmatic. Although in each of the films, Indy encounters something mysterious, he never really pauses to consider what that something might be. (It may be that *Crystal Skull* violates these unwritten rules to a certain extent, as the film provides us with a great deal of exposition and suggests that the skull in question could possibly be the product of alien, albeit not divine, beings.) Two more themes are also characteristic of the Indiana Jones films. The first is intense yet unsustainable romance. The embodiment of the iconic American hero who must not be tied down by the things of civilization, Indy never seems to be able to keep a romantic relationship alive between films; still, as befits our filmic heroes, he is always paired with a woman he loves and leaves. (Interestingly, *Crystal Skull* sees an older Indy [and an older Harrison Ford] finally settling down, as he is reunited with and marries Marion.) Although missing from *Raiders*, the films in the series also explore the theme of fatherhood. (This is familiar thematic territory for collaborators Lucas and Spielberg, who, in their own individual films, have examined the role of the father, or the father-figure, as both breaker and redeemer within the family structure.) In *Temple of Doom*, for instance, Indy reluctantly serves as a tough yet compassionate father figure for Short Round; in *Last Crusade*, Indy and Henry must negotiate their own, tortured father-son relationship; and finally, in *Crystal Skull*, Indy is presented with the son he never knew, and a new family is formed.

Never quite ascending to the dizzying merchandising heights of the *Star Wars* franchise, the Indiana Jones movies have still spawned a frenzy of spin-offs. In addition to all the individually licensed products, the Indy character has appeared in a variety of other media: novels, comic books, and videogames. One notable example is *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, a television series that debuted in 1992. The series focused on the adventures of Indy as a child (Corey Carrier), or more often as a teen (Sean Patrick Flannery). In the show, audiences saw Indy grow into his role as the great adventurer, as he encountered a host of famous historical figures. While the Indiana Jones series has not inspired as many cinematic imitators as *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, the adventurous spirit of the franchise can certainly be seen in movies like *King Solomon’s Mines* (1985) and *Romancing the Stone* (1984). Perhaps the greatest accomplishment the franchise can claim, however, is that it successfully refreshed the spirit of a more down-to-earth American adventure hero in the era of science fiction blockbusters. As his many fans from all over the world are aware, adventure has a name, and that name is Indiana Jones.

References:

Morris, Nigel. *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*. London: Wallflower, 2007.

Pollack, Dale. *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas*. New York: HarmonyBooks, 1983. Reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1999.

Rinzler, J. W., and Laurent Bouzereau. *The Complete Making of Indiana Jones: The Definitive Story behind All Four Films*. New York: Del Rey 2008.