

AUTHORS OF THE EXPANDED UNIVERSE

CHRONICLER: JAMES KAHN

BY MICHAEL KOGGE

WHEN A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE IS RELEASED, ITS STORY IS OFTEN RETOLD IN MANY FORMS, FROM COMIC BOOKS AND SOUVENIR MAGAZINES TO THOSE HOT OFF-THE-PRESS PAPERBACKS SOLD FROM DRUGSTORE RACKS AND AIRPORT KIOSKS. CRITICS DISMISS THESE BOOKS AS “NOVELIZATIONS,” VIEWING THEM AS NOTHING MORE THAN LITERARY TRANSCRIPTIONS OF WHAT’S SEEN ON THE SCREEN. A BRIEF GLANCE AT THE WORK OF JAMES KAHN, HOWEVER, DEMONSTRATES THIS KIND OF CRITICISM TO BE COMPLETELY UNJUSTIFIED. HIS NOVELIZATIONS FOR *POLTERGEIST*, *THE GOONIES*, *INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM*, AND *RETURN OF THE JEDI*, STAND ON THEIR OWN, EXPANDING THE STORIES BEYOND THE CINEMA, IN WAYS THAT ONLY NOVELS CAN.

Chicago Hope

Born in the suburbs of Chicago on December 30, 1947, James Martin Kahn knew he wanted to be a writer at the age of nine. He started by scribbling new endings to stories from *Tales from the Crypt* and *Amazing Stories*, then began to write original material. His first success came when “The Box,” his interior monologue of a Chicago postman who’s stuffed into a mailbox, placed second in a college contest and one of the judges recommended it to *Playboy*. The March 1971 issue gave Kahn his first paid byline and landed him an agent.

“I thought, *Terrific, I’m off and running and I’m going to be a professional writer now*,” Kahn says. Yet in the next two years, only his sci-fi tale “Mobius Trip” saw print. “That was it. I kept writing short stories and sending them in, but nothing happened.”

To ensure that he could pay the rent, Kahn followed in his father’s footsteps. He enrolled at the University of Chicago’s medical school to become a doctor.

He spent a year interning in Internal Medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, then took up his residency in the emergency room of the USC Los Angeles County hospital. The work proved both exhilarating and exhausting, as he was dealing with that most fundamental of human struggles—life and death—on a daily basis.

Through it all, Kahn never stopped writing. His hospital experiences inspired his debut novel, *Diagnosis: Murder*, a mystery featuring a doctor-detective. He then turned his hand to the more otherworldly fare he loved as a boy. Taking his title from the opening line of a famous Andrew Marvell poem, he wrote *World Enough, and Time*, a science fiction novel about a futuristic California where mankind has genetically engineered legendary creatures. His manuscript won over editor Judy Lynn Del Rey, and soon Kahn was an author for the same Ballantine imprint that published Brian Daley, L. Neil Smith, Alan Dean Foster, and Terry Brooks—all writers who had (or would have) books set in a galaxy far far away.

From Aliens to Poltergeists

While writing *World’s* sequel, Kahn continued working his shifts at St. John’s ER—when fortune struck again. Kathleen Kennedy, then a young movie producer, rang up the hospital and asked if any of the doctors could assist in the resuscitation of an extraterrestrial.

Kahn and a number of other ER doctors came to the set of none other than Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*. Spielberg filmed them in hazmat suits as they pounded on E.T.’s chest and tried to revive the dying alien. Kahn even wrote some of the medical jargon spoken between the actors. As a parting gift, Kahn gave Spielberg a copy of *World Enough, and Time*.

It so happened that Spielberg was searching for someone to pen the novelization to *Poltergeist*, the horror film he was producing. Kahn’s writing so impressed both Spielberg and

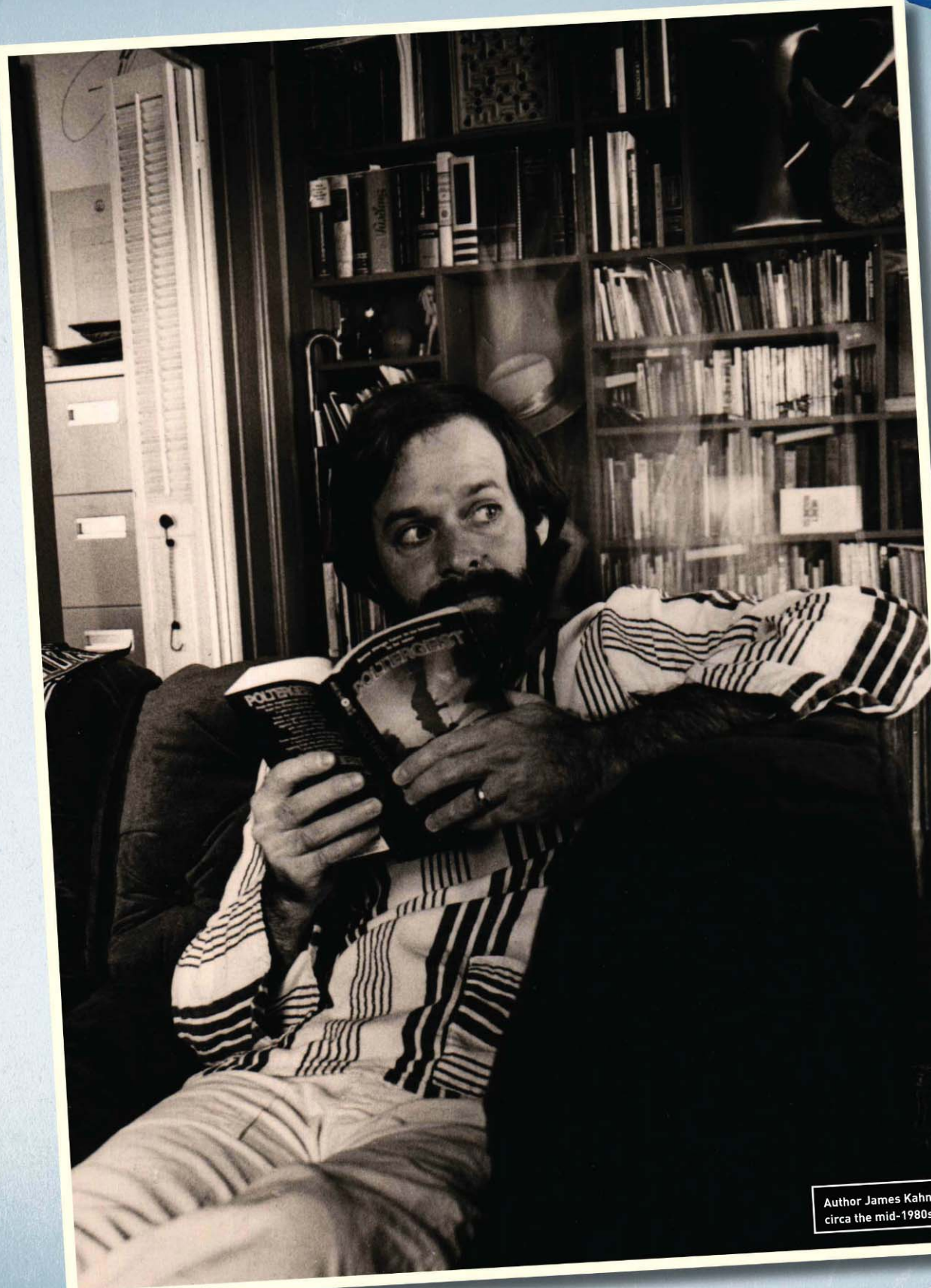
producer Frank Marshall that they asked Kahn if he would write it, though he would have only a month, since the production was behind schedule.

Kahn holed up in Spielberg’s office at MGM where he wrote night and day for four weeks while a secretary transcribed his longhand into type. He found that the tight deadline had a positive

effect on his writing. “When you’re given time constraints or page-count constraints,” he says, “you produce things that you would never have realized. You get flashes of inspiration that produce passages and ideas that come out of that pressure.”

Spielberg gave him free rein to be creative, and, consequently, Kahn turned in a story twice as big as the movie. He delved into characters’ back-stories, expanded the plot, and even explored the netherworlds of the extra-dimensional creatures. A testament to his work is that many fans of *Poltergeist* claim that Kahn’s novelization is spookier than the film.

STEVEN SPIELBERG
GAVE KAHN FREE REIN
TO BE CREATIVE.



Author James Kahn,
circa the mid-1980s

Call of the Force

Steven Sielberg loved Kahn's interpretation of *Poltergeist* so much that he recommended Kahn to a good friend. Soon Kahn was out of ER again and meeting with George Lucas about how he would translate *Revenge of the Jedi* (as the film was then titled) into a book.

Novelizing *Jedi* brought Kahn a new set of challenges. The galaxy of *Star Wars* was firmly established in the movies, books, and radio plays, and there was less flexibility for invention. "Lucas had a very clear and distinct vision of exactly what he wanted," Kahn says. "He didn't want anyone to stray from that."

Armed with an early draft of the screenplay and some production art, Kahn went to work, completing his first draft of the novel in three weeks. Though constrained by what he could do, he exerted a good deal of effort into writing something that was more than just throwaway merchandise. He let his poetic side guide his words, such as fattening up his prose in this marvelous description of Jabba the Hutt:

He had no neck, but only a series of chins that expanded finally into a great bloated body, engorged to bursting with stolen morsels... He had no hair—it had fallen out from a combination of diseases. He had no legs—his trunk simply tapered gradually to a long, plump snake-tail that stretched along the length of the platform like a tube of yeasty dough. His lipless mouth was wide, almost ear to ear, and he drooled continuously. He was quite thoroughly disgusting.

ARMED WITH AN EARLY DRAFT OF THE SCREENPLAY AND SOME PRODUCTION ART, KAHN WENT TO WORK...

Jedi
under
19, 1982

PROLOGUE

The very depth of space. There ~~was~~ ^{was} the length, and width and height, and ~~the~~ ^{the} curved over on themselves into a bending blackness, measurable only by the glinting stars that tumbled ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~the~~ ^{the} infinity through the chasm, receding to infinity. To the very death.

~~And~~ ^{giants} ~~stars~~ ^{giants} marked the moments of the universe. There were aging orange ~~stars~~ ^{giants}, blue dwarfs, ~~super~~ ^{giants} yellow giants. There were collapsing neutron stars, and ~~the~~ ^{the} angry supernovae that hissed into the icy emptiness. There were burning stars, breathing stars, pulsing stars and dying stars. ~~There~~ ^{There} was the Death Star.

At the feathered edge of the galaxy the Death Star floated in stationary orbit above the green moon Endor. The Death Star was ~~the~~ ^{the} Empire's armored Battle Station, nearly twice as big as its predecessor, which ~~rebel~~ ^{rebel} forces had destroyed so many years before—nearly twice as big, but more than twice as powerful. Yet it was only half completed.

Half a steady, dark ~~moon~~ ^{orb}, it hung above ~~the~~ ^{the} green world of Endor. ~~Its~~ ^{Its} tentacles of ~~unfinished~~ ^{unfinished} superstructure curling away toward its living mate like the groping leg of a deadly spider.

An Imperial Star Destroyer approached the giant Space Station at cruising ~~speed~~ ^{speed}.

It was massive—a city itself—yet moved with deliberate grace, like some great sea dragon. It was accompanied by dozens of Twin-Jon-Engine Fighters—black and forth ~~about~~ ^{about} the perimeter; scouting, ~~scouting~~ ^{scouting}, ~~scouting~~ ^{scouting} docking, reorganizing.

Soundlessly, the main bay of the ship opened. There was a brief ignition flash, ~~and~~ ^{and} as an Imperial Shuttle emerged from the darkness of the hold, ~~it~~ ^{it} sped toward the darkness of space. It sped toward the Death Star with quiet purpose.

In the cockpit the Shuttle Captain and his co-pilot made final readings, monitored descent functions. It was a sequence they'd each performed a thousand times, yet there was an unusual tension ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ the air now. The Captain ~~spoke~~ ^{spoke} into his mouthpiece.

"Command Station, this is ST321. Code Clearance Blue. We're starting our approach. Deactivate the security shield."

Static filtered over the receiver; then the voice of the port controller. "The security deflector shield will be deactivated when we have confirmation of your code transmission. Stand by..."

over as well to stand beside their dearest comrades. ~~sempiternally~~ The foggy Evoks continued their wild jubilation far into the night, while this small ~~group~~ ^{company} of gallant adventurers watched on from the sidelines. For an evanescent moment, looking into the campfire Luke thought he saw faces dancing—Ben Yoda; was it Anakin? He drew away from his companions, to try to see what the faces were saying; but they were ephemeral, and spoke only to the shadows of the flames, and then disappeared altogether.

It gave Luke a momentary chill, a vision of loneliness—but then Leia took his hand, and drew him back close to her and to the others, back into their circle of warmth, and camaraderie, and love.

And it was good.
The Empire was dead.
Long live the Alliance.

FINIS

Friday, August 13, 1982

"The very depth of space"

Kahn's literary bent offended one sixth-grade librarian in Texas. She complained in a letter that he was corrupting the grammar of young writers by opening the novel with a sentence fragment, "the very depth of space."

Little did she know that the same line already had a notorious history. A month before the book's release, Kahn lost \$60 in a poker game. In a scheme worthy of a Corellian, he scrawled the opening line on the back of a personal check and told its recipient that the check would be a valuable artifact of the film if it was not cashed.

The check was cashed. But the loss of \$60 became a fleeting memory for Kahn when his novelization of *Return of the Jedi* topped the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

Molten Pits and Certain Points of View

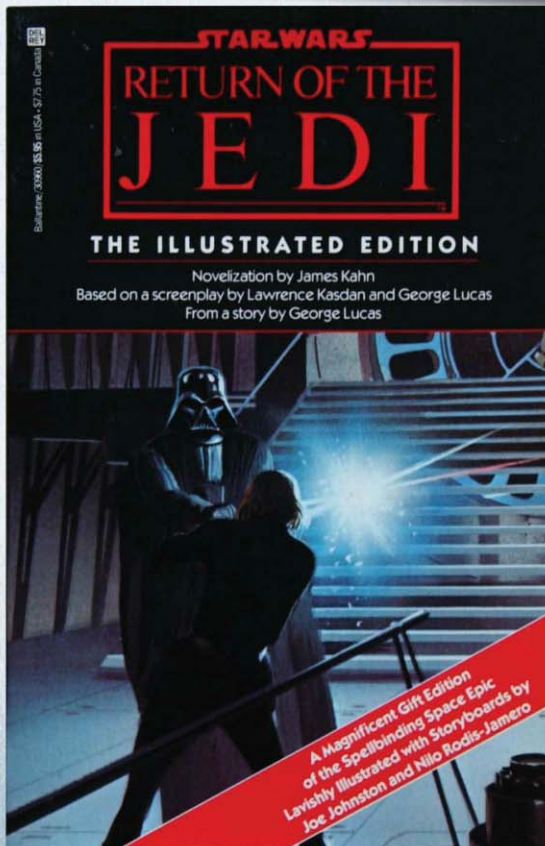
Before the Blu-ray release of *Jedi*, Kahn's novelization offered some of the only peeks at what had been cut from the film. Where the film's first Tatooine scene goes right to the droids at Jabba's palace, the book introduced a shrouded Luke constructing his lightsaber in Obi-Wan Kenobi's hut. The much ballyhooed-about sandstorm, which for years, could be glimpsed only in a single photo, pounded the heroes in the chapter that follows their defeat of Jabba. And in the middle of the novelization, a red-robed Royal Guard received a Force-choke when he tries to stop Vader from entering the Emperor's throne-room.

Kahn also peppered the story with details of his own creation. He had Han remember his "27 piracies" after being unfrozen from carbonite. He further embellished Lando's legend, recounting the maneuvers that won the Battle of Tanaab and a lithium scam Lando ran on Pesmenben IV (named after Kahn's grandfather, Ben Pesmen, who first inspired him in the arts). Kahn even wrote a chapter that examined Leia's childhood on Alderaan, but it was excised because it veered too far from the film's story.

Yet what fueled countless speculation for more than two decades was the moment in the novelization when Old Ben's spirit divulges the secrets of the Skywalkers. He tells Luke that he took him to be raised by Ben's own brother, Owen Lars (later changed to be Anakin's stepbrother in the prequels). Ben went on to tell of his failure to turn Anakin from the dark side: "We fought... your father fell into a molten pit. When your father clawed his way out of that fiery pool, the change had been burned into him forever—he was Darth Vader."

Until *Revenge of the Sith*, a thousand-million imaginations ran wild with this shocking revelation, playing out the epic duel along volcano rims, in transparisteel foundries, or on worn Kenner playsets.

Above and opposite page: James Kahn's longhand draft of the *Return of the Jedi* novelization. Left: The illustrated edition of Kahn's novelization.



Triumph of the Jedi

Toward the end of their story sessions, Kahn asked George Lucas if he'd mind reading *World Enough, and Time* to consider as a film. Lucas gave Kahn a sad smile and walked the writer into an adjoining office. "It was like the last shot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," recalls Kahn, with a chuckle. "Scripts were piled over every surface, from floor to ceiling. [Lucas] said, 'These are the scripts from all my closest friends. Feel free to put your book on one of the piles.'"

Kahn's original novels haven't appeared on the silver screen yet, but the *Return of the Jedi* credit helped propel him further into Hollywood. He became the go-to guy to novelize studio blockbusters, and merely chatting about his work on the *Jedi* novelization broke the ice for many pitch meetings.

Kahn went on to have a highly successful 20 years in television, writing episodes for *St. Elsewhere*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager* and rising to co-executive producer of *Melrose Place*.

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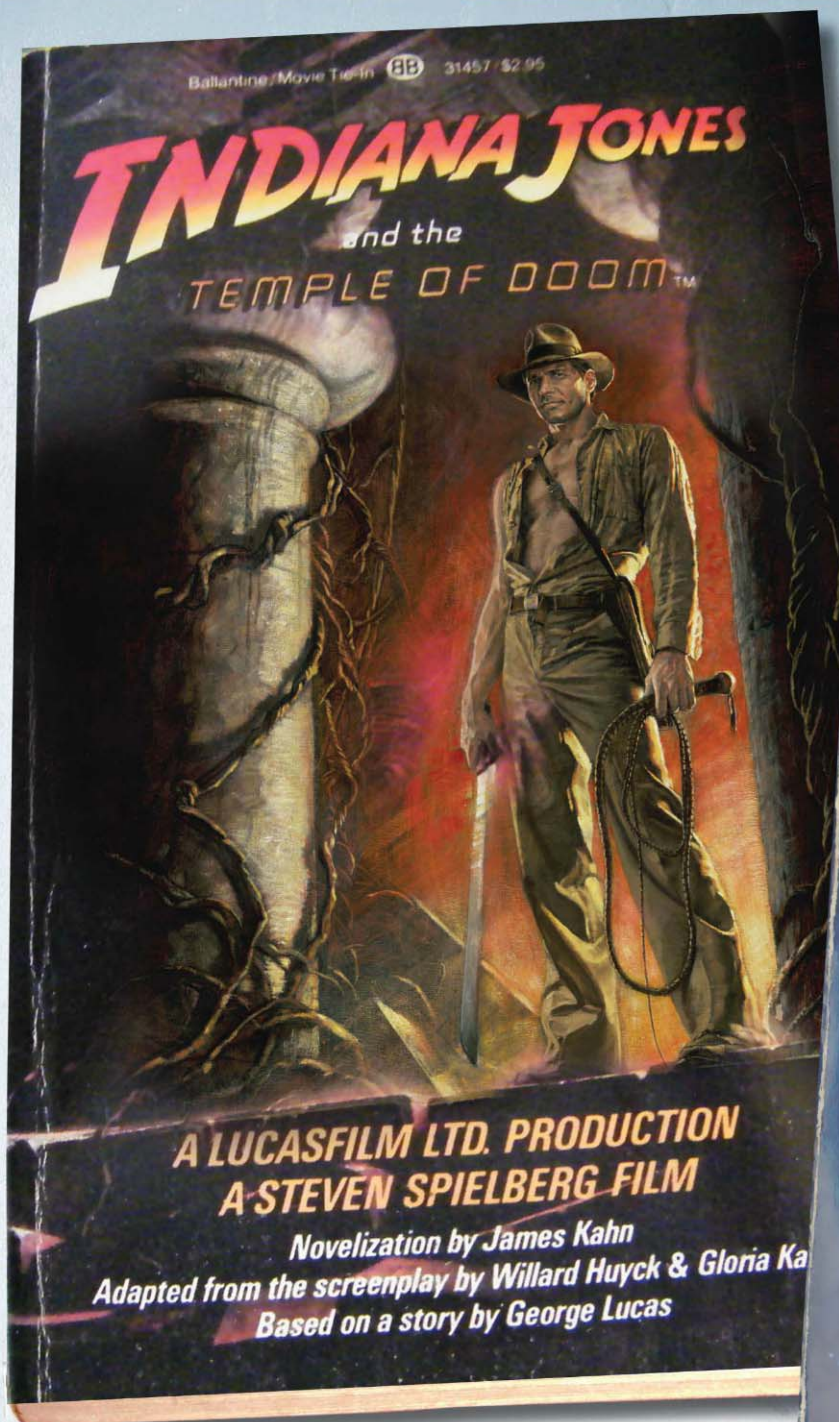
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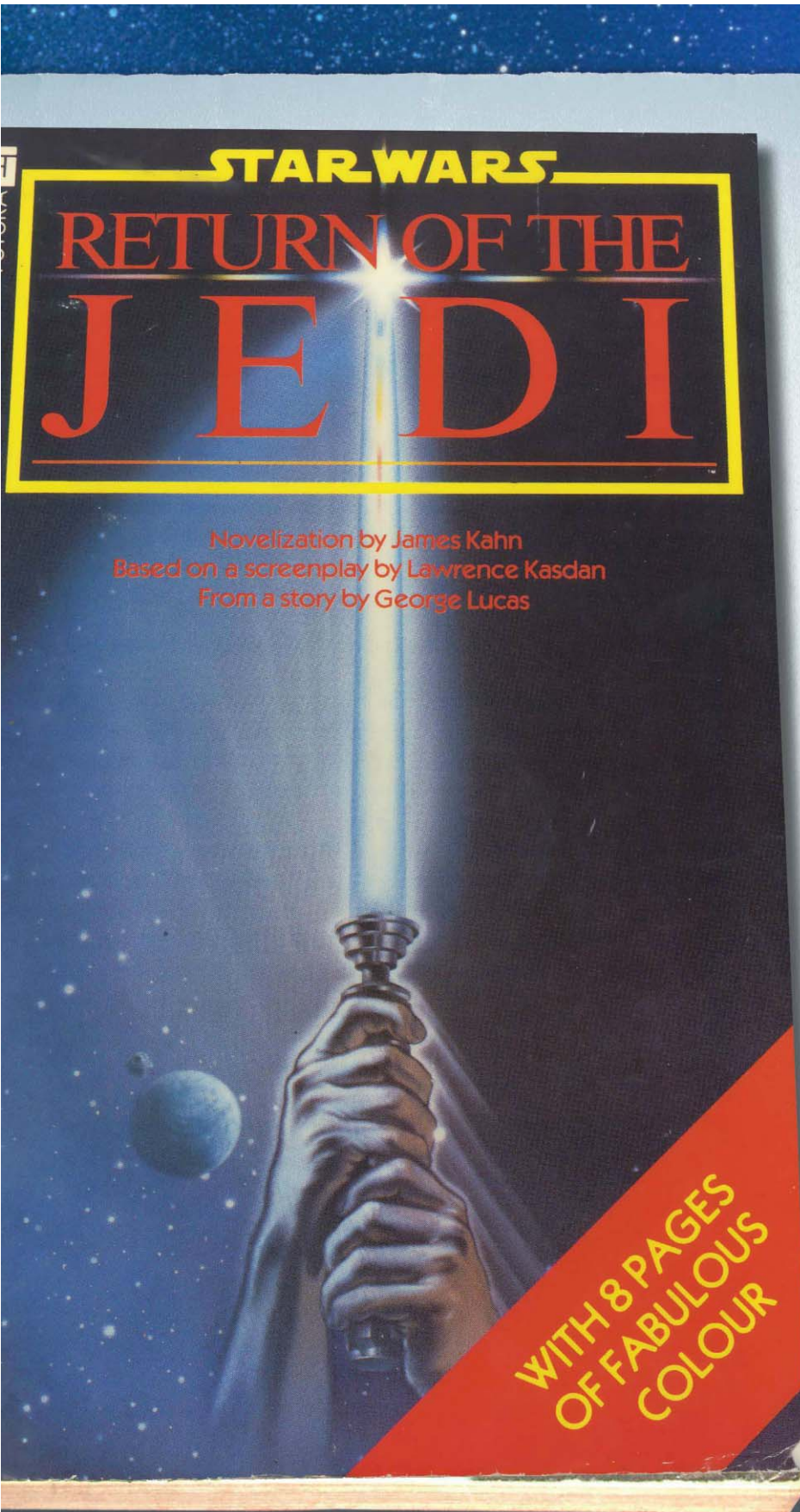
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984)

The Goonies (1985)

Kahn's novelizations of *Return of the Jedi* (far right) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (right) added to the movie experience!



WRITING THE LAST LINE OF
RETURN OF THE JEDI
HAS NOT STOPPED KAHN IMAGINING
LUKE'S FUTURE ADVENTURES...



STAR WARS RETURN OF THE JEDI

Novelization by James Kahn
Based on a screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan
From a story by George Lucas

WITH 8 PAGES
OF FABULOUS
COLOUR

"Long live the Alliance"

Thirty years since its publication, Kahn's novelization continues to attract admirers, from voracious *Star Wars* readers to acclaimed colleagues such as the president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, John Scalzi. "I was in the eighth grade in 1983," says Scalzi, "and I borrowed a copy of the novelization from a friend and read it through the school day, sneaking pages in classes and faking a stomach cramp in gym so I could have a whole hour to read it. I don't remember every science fiction book I read in eighth grade, but I remembered [Kahn's]... it was pretty darn good."

Writing the last line of *Jedi* has not stopped Kahn from imagining Luke's future adventures. "He would have to have gone about starting the rebuilding of the Republic. What's interesting about that to me is that revolutionaries are often great at knocking down the existing structure, but they're often not so great at sticking around to do the long, tedious work of building something lasting and new. I think that would have been his dilemma."

The Force is still strong in Kahn. With Kathleen Kennedy taking over Lucasfilm and the new sequels on the horizon, Kahn hopes that it all might come full circle. "I would love to get back involved," he says. "I remember going to the opening-night midnight screening of *Star Wars* at the Chinese Theater in Hollywood, sitting in the third row because the rest of the seats were taken by the time I got in, grumbling because I didn't like sitting that close. And then when the opening crawl was done, and that humongous Star Destroyer Dolby'd over my head like nothing I'd ever seen before, I thought, *This changes everything*. And it did. For movies, and certainly for me, who at that time could never have believed I'd be involved in creating some of that mythology myself." 🌌

EXPANDED

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UNIVERSE