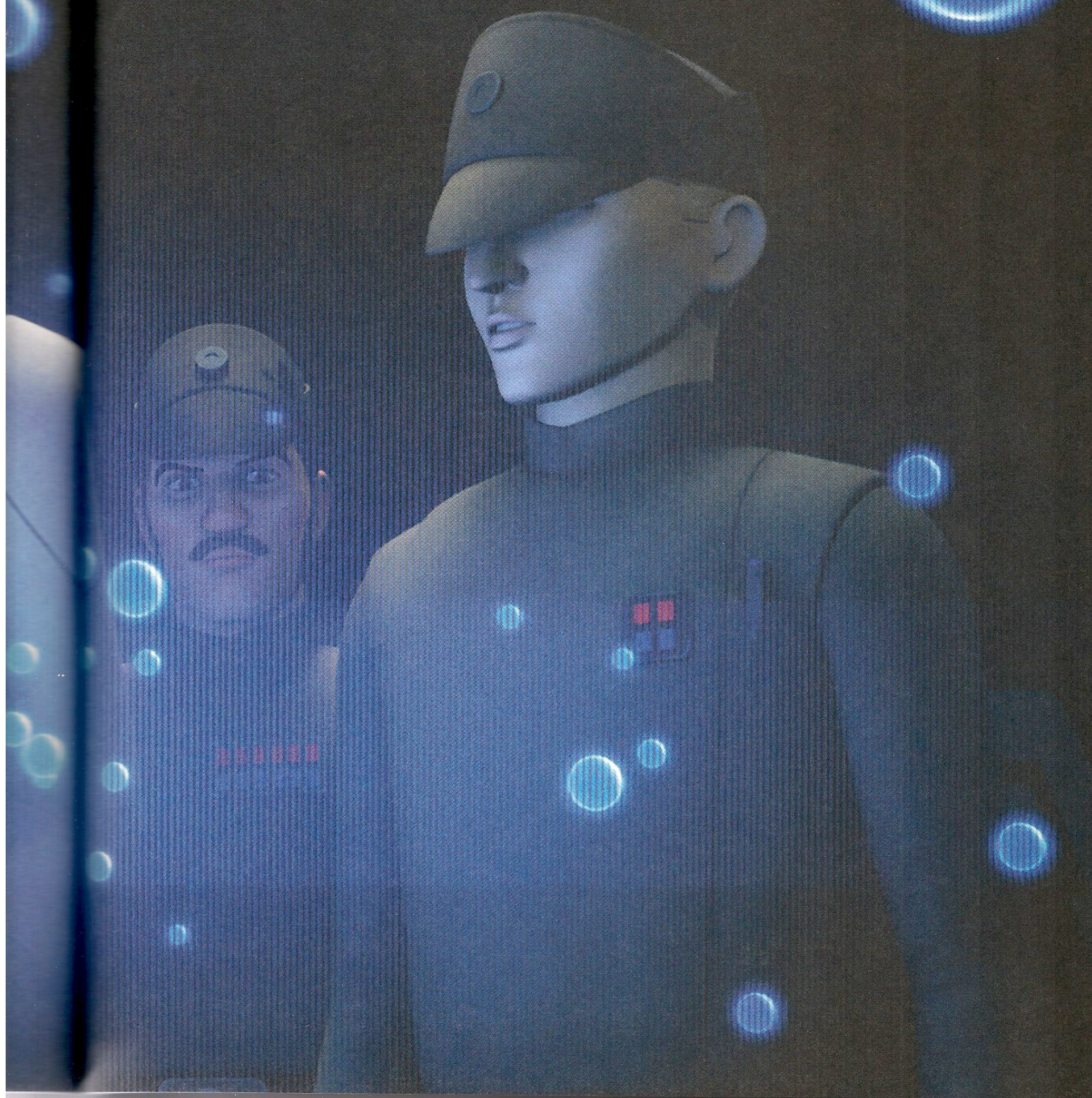
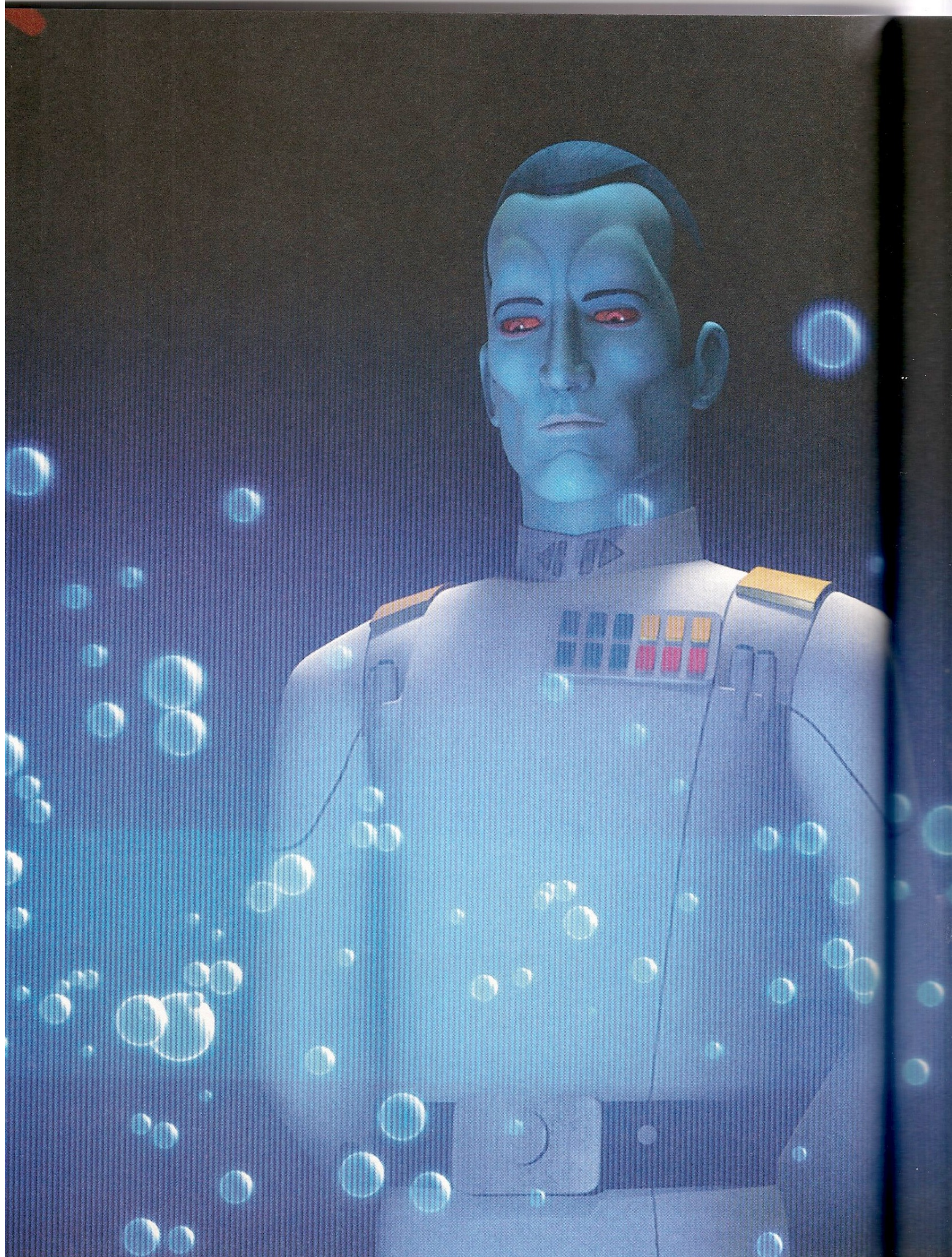


● GAME OF THRAWN:  
STAR WARS' MOST  
PERSISTENT VILLAIN

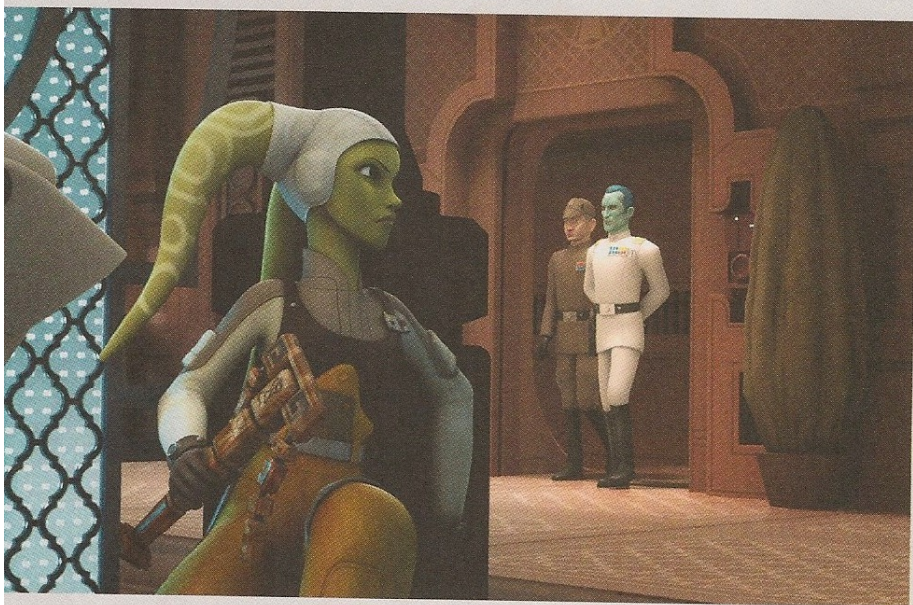
by OWEN WILLIAMS











Boba Fett crawled from the Sarlacc pit; Han and Leia had twins; Luke established a Jedi Academy; Chewbacca died. According to new STAR WARS canon, none of these things ever happened. The existence of Grand Admiral Thrawn should be on that list as well, and yet somehow he managed to survive the purge.

Mith'raw'nuruodo, to give him his full name, is the only character from STAR WARS' expanded universe novels to bridge the schism between the old canon and the new. He's also stepped from the page and been realized onscreen, in animated form, in the third season of STAR WARS REBELS, where he's voiced by Lars Mikkelsen. The original books that featured him have been shunted, with everything else from that era, under the non-canon STAR WARS LEGENDS banner. But Thrawn's creator Timothy Zahn has uniquely been allowed to continue writing the adventures of the fan-favourite Chiss warlord. The third volume in his most recent series, THRAWN: TREASON (following 2017's THRAWN and 2018's THRAWN: ALLIANCES) was published in hardcover by Del Rey Books in July. For a while, fans even speculated Thrawn would be the mysterious RISE OF SKYWALKER character played by Richard E. Grant before his character's actual name (Allegiant General Pryde) was finally revealed.

In the books, we first meet Thrawn in the wake of the destruction of the second Death Star and the Star Destroyer Executor. He's introduced aboard the Chimaera, his reputation preceding him. Within the first few pages of Timothy Zahn's HEIR TO THE EMPIRE we're told, via the internal musings of Imperial Captain Pellaeon, that Thrawn is "possibly the greatest military mind the Empire [has] ever seen."

Thrawn is so on the ball that he's had his quarters converted into a secondary bridge. He has a personal contingent of Noghri security. Physically, he's described as having "shimmery blue-black hair" and "pale blue skin looking cool and subdued and very alien on his otherwise human frame." He wears the white uniform of Grand Admiral, "the only nonhuman ever granted that honor by the Emperor" thanks to his "brilliant successes," and his voice is "quietly modulated." We also learn that he's an art connoisseur—"When you learn about a species' art, you understand that species"—and drinks "strong Forvish ale." He's a tactician with the long game of a master chess player, and adept at exploiting minimal resources (one time he managed to blockade Coruscant without using any actual ships). And he's a pragmatist: there's no mysticism or zealotry to him. He sees the "total destruction of the Rebellion" as a puzzle to be relished.

As for why, if he's such an asset to the Empire, we'd never met him before, and how his strategic genius failed to prevail against the Rebel Alliance, we're told that Thrawn "had spent... his career out in the Unknown Regions, working to bring those still-barbaric sections of the galaxy under Imperial control." He was so indispensable to the frontier campaigns that he couldn't be redeployed for the Battle of Endor.

Those Unknown Regions continue to be foremost in his agenda. Zahn told a Rose City Comic Con audience last year that Thrawn's allegiance to the Empire was based entirely on their military might and potential to counter unspecified-but-huge threats in those mysterious Outer Rim planets; if the Rebellion had possessed the greater strength he'd have joined them instead. Zahn says Thrawn would find the First Order laughable.

Whatever the future currently holds, Thrawn's creator (and the team behind REBELS) has so far avoided the continuity clashes inherent in a character belonging to two distinct narrative "universes" by setting the newer works before the older ones. Thrawn, in Zahn's handful of pre-FORCE AWAKENS novels, was operating post-RETURN OF THE JEDI. We pick up the modern Thrawn in the years prior to A NEW HOPE: the novels filling in his backstory as an exile of the Chiss and his rise to power after hooking up with Palpatine. REBELS looks at the early years of his Grand Admiralship.

"I wrote him in these books to fit in with everything else I'd done," Zahn told The Verge at San Diego Comic-Con last year, "so if someone at Lucasfilm snapped their fingers, and suddenly all of my other books were canon, it would all fit together with no retrofitting. He's [still] more antagonist than villain [and] smarter than the average imperial officer. It's always fun to have the characters out-think each other, rather than just 'Who's got the bigger blaster?'"









# SECOND STAR TO THE WEST: A LOOK AT THE SPACE WESTERN

by OWEN WILLIAMS







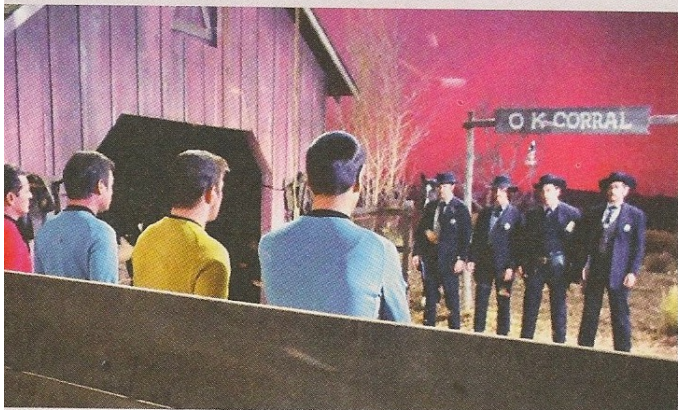


The story has been repeated so often it's now a cliché: Gene Roddenberry first pitched STAR TREK to the NBC network as "WAGON TRAIN to the stars." Roddenberry had experience with television Westerns, having written for BAT MASTERSON and JEFFERSON DRUM and contributed an award-winning episode to HAVE GUN – WILL TRAVEL: all part of the extraordinary proliferation of Western series and films that gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. But it's doubtful he ever envisaged STAR TREK as a "Space Western," per se. He was hustling the studio with an eye on what was popular. STAR TREK's similarity to WAGON TRAIN pretty much begins and ends with its being constructed from self-contained episodes comprising a wider narrative of forward momentum: the wagon train's journey West and the Enterprise's five-year mission. But space as a "frontier" would also have been an immediately graspable concept for 1960s audiences steeped in the language of the Western: a context that these days is easy to miss.

Today we think little of feature-film genre mashups, but over fifty years ago they were the preserve of pulp magazines and novels and Saturday morning film serials. One of the earliest—if not the first—Space Western heroes in print was C.L. Moore's outlaw NORTHWEST SMITH, and there are obvious Western parallels in Edgar Rice Burroughs' JOHN CARTER stories, Alex Gordon's FLASH GORDON comic strips, and the 1930s BUCK ROGERS

movie serials. Artists often played around with Western imagery for sci-fi paperback and magazine covers and movie posters, the great Frank Frazetta not least among them. STAR TREK episodes did occasionally borrow Western tropes: the Enterprise crew visiting settlers scratching a living from the soil of environmentally hostile planets; gunfights (with phasers) and hokey fisticuffs; and, of course, there's the wonky third-season "Spectre of the Gun" in which Kirk and Spock find themselves in an alien re-creation of the OK Corral. Hammer's 1969 British sci-fi MOON ZERO TWO claimed itself to be "the first moon Western." The horses and dustbowl villages of the 1974 PLANET OF THE APES TV series evoked familiar Western imagery and allowed for familiar Western plots. Roughly contemporary shows like Irwin Allen's LOST IN SPACE and LAND OF THE GIANTS plucked occasionally from a similar Western toy box.

STAR WARS, in 1977, was doing much the same thing: part of that pulp Space Western heritage but on a grander scale than had ever been previously seen. It borrowed from other genres, too; most obviously the samurai movie and in particular Akira Kurosawa's THE HIDDEN FORTRESS, from which it lifts its plot (Japan, in turn, has practically built a subindustry in Space Western anime like COWBOY BEBOP, SPACE ADVENTURE COBRA, OUTLAW STAR, and TRIGUN). But the Western details are there in plain sight. Luke is a farm boy in a frontier land where the homesteaders







are constantly harried by hostile indigenous peoples. Ben Kenobi is the aging gunslinger brought out of retirement for one last adventure. Mos Eisley is the one-street town, in which there is a bar, in which there is a bar fight. The bad guys wear black. Everyone carries their weapons in hip holsters. Han Solo—a quick-drawing amoral spaceship pilot who makes his living as a smuggler, but despite his cynicism and selfishness always ends up doing the right thing—is Northwest Smith in all but name. Modern STAR WARS, in all its iterations and across its different media, remains fantasy space opera first and foremost, but it has never abandoned those Western tics. Think of Yoda brushing his duster-like robes away from his holster as he prepares for a duel in *ATTACK OF THE CLONES*; or the train heist, cavalry (TIE fighter) chase, and poker (Sabbac) game in *SOLO: A STAR WARS STORY*. Some creators

have taken those Western vibes to their logical conclusion: most STAR WARS simply raids the Western haphazardly for cool stuff, but John Jackson Miller's novel *KENOBI*, for example, is purely and simply a Western that happens to be set on Tatooine rather than in Texas.

Post-1977, with the Western more-or-less disappeared as a popular genre, cinematic and television sci-fi became the primary home of that style of adventure. Roger Corman, ever on the lookout for a popular hit to plunder, put together *BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS* in 1980: a sci-fi reworking of *SEVEN SAMURAI*/*THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* starring Richard "John-Boy Walton" Thomas as a blonde farm boy who hooks up with a rogue known only as "Cowboy" (George Peppard) to battle a cyborg warlord (John Saxon). Robert Vaughn plays to all intents and purposes the exact same character that he'd played in 1960 for John Sturges.

Just a year later, Peter Hyams repurposed *HIGH NOON* as *OUTLAND*. A decade on, *DEEP SPACE NINE* may have kicked against some of Gene Roddenberry's utopian ideals, but it at least kept his *TREK*-as-Western pitch current, presenting its space station as a frontier town complete with sheriff's office and loose-moral saloon. John Carpenter remade *RIO BRAVO* as *GHOSTS OF MARS*, and as the century turned, Joss Whedon's short-lived series *FIREFLY* and its movie spin-off *SERENITY* placed veterans of a failed war of independence in a galactic setting where people still ride horses. Costumes, dialogue, plots, subtexts, locations, and score come right out of dime-store paperbacks and the films of John Ford (*FIREFLY*'s Western credentials would need a whole separate feature to dig into them fully). More recently, Ridley Scott's *THE MARTIAN* forced Matt Damon to farm a hostile frontier alone like a sort of astronaut Cable Hogue.

"I wanted to do a Western, but everybody said they were dead," recalled Hyams of *OUTLAND* a few years back. "I remember thinking it was weird that this genre that had endured for so long was just gone. But then I woke up and came to the conclusion—obviously after other people—that it was actually alive and well, but in outer space."

