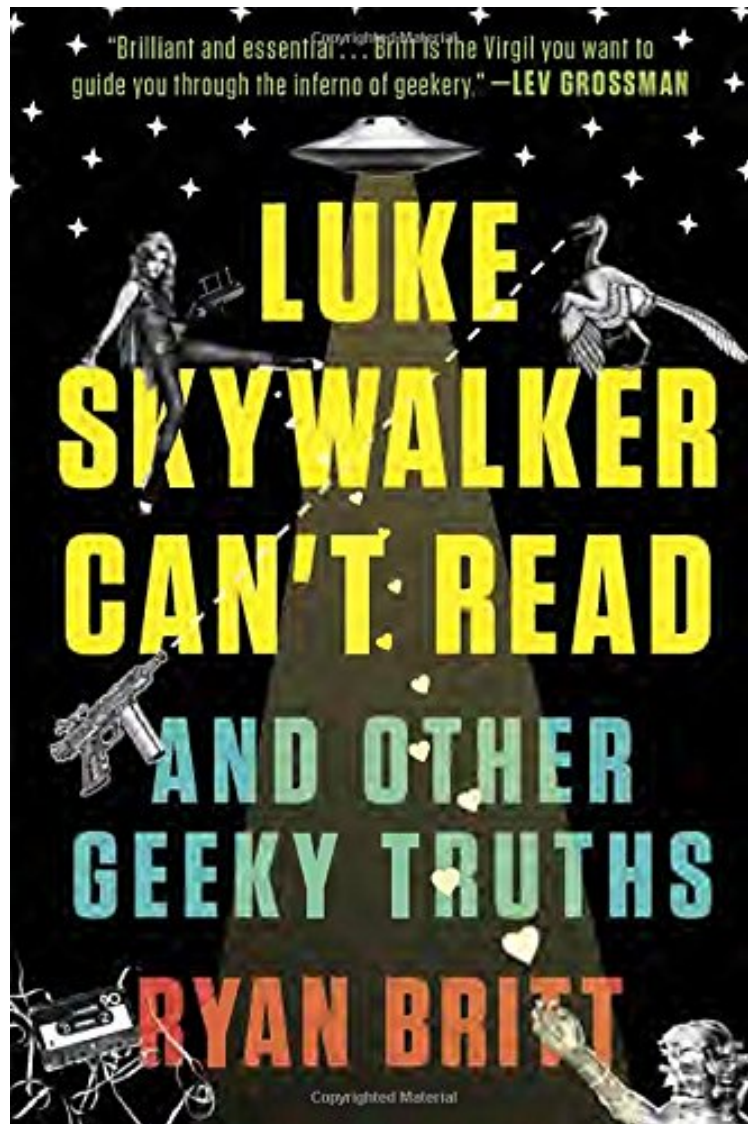


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Luke Skywalker Can't Read: And Other Geeky Truths

Ryan Britt

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Ryan Britt : Luke Skywalker Can't Read: And Other Geeky Truths before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Luke Skywalker Can't Read: And Other Geeky Truths:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. We Can Read "Luke Skywalker Can't Read" By Michael Strahan I bought this book in eager anticipation of the Star Wars: The Force Awakens, and was surprised it covered a wide range of popular media. Britt's experience growing up, his consumption of science fiction and fantasy, felt warm and comforting, a love letter to an experience many have shared. I highly recommend it to Star Wars, Star Trek, and

Barbarella fans everywhere. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Cindy Valdes really enjoyed it. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great By Avid Fan Loved the essays. Had a great blend of geekiness and insight. His passion for the subject came through. Worth a read and perhaps a reread.

“Ryan Britt is . . . the Virgil you want to guide you through the inferno of geekery.” —Lev Grossman, author of the bestselling Magician's trilogy Pop Culture and sci-fi guru Ryan Britt has never met a monster, alien, wizard, or superhero that didn't need further analysis. Essayist Ryan Britt got a sex education from dirty pictures of dinosaurs, made out with Jar-Jar Binks at midnight, and figured out how to kick depression with a Doctor Who Netflix-binge. Alternating between personal anecdote, hilarious insight, and smart analysis, Luke Skywalker Can't Read contends that Barbarella is good for you, that monster movies are just romantic comedies with commitment issues, that Dracula and Sherlock Holmes are total hipsters, and, most shockingly, shows how virtually everyone in the Star Wars universe is functionally illiterate. Romp through time and space, from the circus sideshows of 100 years ago to the Comic Cons of today, from darkest corners of the Galaxy to the comfort of your couch. For anyone who pretended their flashlight was a lightsaber, stood in line for a movie at midnight, or dreamed they were abducted by aliens, Luke Skywalker Can't Read is full of answers to questions you haven't thought to ask, and perfect for readers of Chuck Klosterman, Rob Sheffield, and Ernest Cline.

“Ryan Britt is one of nerd culture's most brilliant and most essential commentators...the Virgil you want to guide you through the inferno of geekery.” —Lev Grossman, author of the bestselling The Magicians Trilogy “Ryan Britt is an uncontrolled experiment—a genre omnivore who has spent his time on this earth flying to other galaxies, undersea cities, freaky amusement parks, Middle Earth, Transylvania, Sherlock Holmes' London, and the Cretaceous. His essays are reliably smart, surprising, provocative, and funny.” —Karen Russell, Pulitzer-Prize-nominated author of Swamplandia! “One of the most witty, fun, warm, and insightful essay collections out there. If Luke Skywalker had a favorite book, it would be this one.” —Ophira Eisenberg, host of NPR's Ask Me Another and author of Screw Everyone “Luke Skywalker Can't Read is personally revealing, effortlessly funny, carefully researched, and optimistic about the place of sci-fi/fantasy in the greater world of popular entertainment.” —Cecil Baldwin, narrator of Welcome to Night Vale “Whether he's exploring paradoxes in Back to the Future, the fundamental illiteracy of the average Stormtrooper, or being tied up and held over a rooftop by a couple of dominatrices, Ryan Britt is an amiable, perceptive, and highly entertaining observer of the sci-fi scene. I gulped down these essays like Dracula downing a pint of blood.” —Teddy Wayne, author of The Love Song of Jonny Valentine “Ryan Britt's debut collection is a wisecracking, intimate and intelligent voyage through universes both real and imagined. But to a certain kind of reader — the kind whose teenage weekends were spent at sci-fi conventions and comic book stores — it is also something much more. Luke Skywalker Can't Read is a glorious geek manifesto, illuminating the essential and often misunderstood essence of geekdom: not the pursuit of esoterica-obsessed loners but a vital and complex community, a far-away galaxy where fellow misfits meet to swap the ray guns, talismanic rings, and radioactive potions for their daily battles back on Planet Earth.” —Stefan Merrill Block, author of The Story of Forgetting and A Storm at the Door “Sci-fi and fantasy fans, meet your new best friend. Ryan Britt has an encyclopedic knowledge of geek culture, from Aurebesh to Zardoz, and this collection of essays feels like you're hanging out with him at the world's nerdiest bar. Luke Skywalker Can't Read is smart, insightful, and totally fun.” —David M. Ewalt, author of Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons Dragons About the Author Ryan Britt has written for The New York Times, Electric Literature, The Awl, VICE Motherboard, Clarkesworld Magazine, and is a consulting editor for Story Magazine. He was the staff writer for the Hugo-Award winning web magazine Tor.com, where he remains a contributor. He lives in New York City. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. AUTHOR'S NOTE This book isn't meant to be the final word on anything having to do with science fiction, fantasy, or any of those related fields. Others have written encyclopedically about all aspects of genre fiction and they've done it wonderfully. I think I try to do some of them justice here. Instead, these essays simultaneously assume a little bit of familiarity with certain subjects (I think most people have seen Star Wars) but try to inform more on others. When it comes to Doctor Who, Isaac Asimov, Sherlock Holmes, or Star Trek, I tend to split the difference; sometimes there's a lot of background information in the essays, sometimes there's not. Occasionally, I've gone hog wild with the footnotes. This, I believe, simulates talking to me about these subjects, only less intensely. Mostly, the aim of these essays is to add what I hope are new lenses to the conversations about various “geeky” topics. I've often found myself to be the only one saying a certain thing about a certain thing. And so, I decided to write it all down to not forget it. Other times, I've heard a common geeky opinion repeated over and over again, and I had to wonder why. As much as possible, I think I try to be fair, but these are only my opinions. Although I can't prove that I'm not a robot, I'm only human. Out of the Sideshows When you're a kid in a 1994 junior high school locker room, and on the receiving end of towel-snaps and occasionally missing gym clothes, you also quickly pick up on a pervasive amount of slurs. Young boys call other boys terrible things: “queer,” “wimp,” and occasionally the uncreative and rote “loooo-ser.” But something that stung even worse than a towel-snap was often getting labeled a “nerd” or a “geek.” Without getting too weepy or dramatic, I'll say being called these things

sent a simple message: if there's a club where everyone agrees on being normal together, I wasn't in it. If you use Google to find something other than a hip restaurant, looking up the word "geek" will reveal an etymological minefield. Katherine Dunn's excellent novel *Geek Love* is tragically not about having a crush on a girl who went to a Star Trek convention with me in 1992, but instead, about a family of circus freaks. Well, maybe replace "circus" with "sideshow" because the historical turn-of-the-nineteenth-century "geeks" were the performers who were often too ridiculous for the circus itself, mostly because their main job was to bite the heads off chickens, Ozzy Osbourne-style. If the boys in my junior high locker room were the circus, then I was in the sideshow: a segregated community in the kingdom of the unimportant. But as the nerded and geeked boys and girls of the '80s and '90s have grown up and become pseudo-adults in this early section of the twenty-first century, we've noticed something odd: the Gap suddenly sells Star Trek T-shirts. Seemingly overnight, being a "geek" is cool and news article after blog post trumpets that now not only are geeks hip, but their hipness is here to stay, too. The geek(s) have inherited the Earth, which is why Star Trek, Star Wars, comic book heroes, and fantasy novels are more popular than ever. This, I believe, is broadly true, but there are various space-alien devils in the details, and it's in those details that I hope these essays live. So, it's only fair I tell you now that I'm a bad geek, the same way Roxane Gay—smartly fearing the act of putting oneself on a pedestal—says she's a "bad feminist." I don't do or say or like all the things I'm supposed to, and I'm not beholden to any one fandom. I love Star Trek, but I hate the word "trekkie."* I'm obsessed with Sherlock Holmes, but am impatient that I've met almost no one who likes the Jeremy Brett adaptations as much as I do. I like Doctor Who, but I don't love Firefly. I like The Avengers and the rest of the Marvel Cinematic Universe explosion, but its dominance and the hype make me tired and occasionally cause uncontrollable eye rolls. Plus, my favorite Joss Whedon creation is the screenplay he wrote for *Alien: Resurrection*, which makes me super-unpopular with what I would characterize as more "conventional" geeks. I infamously love science fiction literature (contemporary and classic), but am also constantly complaining about how often the SF community ignores supposed mainstream fiction writers in our brave new genre-bending world. And Star Wars. What to say about Star Wars? On the one gloved robotic hand, I'm like every Star Wars fan you ever met or could dream up: I collected the toys; I read the comics and novels. Hell, at fourteen years old, I even won a few tournaments of the 1996 Star Wars collectible card game. On the other, ungloved, fleshy hand, I'm also a hater, the Han Solo inside of Star Wars making fun of the absurdities contained in that far, far away galaxy. My closest friends and I wore homemade T-shirts to the midnight 2005 premiere of *Revenge of the Sith* with the words "George Lucas Is a Virgin" emblazoned on our chests. "Real" Star Wars fans weren't sure what we meant. Did we hate Star Wars? (No.) Did we think George Lucas was so bad at writing dialogue that it seemed like he'd never had sex? (Yes.) Were we making fun of everyone by wearing these shirts? (Yes and no.) Why would someone camp out for a movie only to mock other people who were also camping out for said movie? (Unclear.)* Being the kind of geek I am is weird and confusing, but I'll attempt to prep you for what you're in for by telling you that on that very same night I also made out with Jar Jar Binks. When the whole prequel thing started in 1999, the release of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* was famously preceded by an avalanche of toylike merchandise intended to get you to care about this new slew of characters, most of which you'd never heard of, including but not limited to a pilot named Ric Olie,* a Frog-man named Boss Nass, Liam Neeson with "hippie poncho action," and, of course, the lovable clown of this particular science fiction circus: Jar Jar Binks. Someone apparently thought Jar Jar's long, gross tongue was funny, because there are no less than three bits in the movie featuring his tongue doing things that are hilarious. But that's not the worst of it, because there was also a Jar Jar candy product. It was a plastic holder shaped like Jar Jar's face, and when you pressed a button, his jaws opened and his tongue shot out. His tongue was a candy that you were supposed to eat. This is a real thing. I have pictures. You were supposed to lick Jar Jar's tongue to eat this special Star Wars candy. One of my closest friends and I—both still in high school at the time—thought this was staggeringly hysterical precisely because it was obviously in such poor taste. Star Wars was jumping the space shark way before the movie even came out. There and then, we bought enough of a supply of the Jar Jar tongue candies so that we could eat them in the theatre right before *Episode III* began. So, six years later, wearing our George Lucas T-shirts, I toasted my friend Justin and we each licked the tongue of our respective Jar Jars. We sucked on Jar Jar's tongue and got ready to see what (we thought) was going to be the last Star Wars movie ever. And if any of that makes sense to you, then you'll understand the kind of geek I am. I'm in the club, but I'm doing the Groucho Marx thing of being suspicious of any Jedi order that would have me as a member. There are no real geeks, and there are no "fake" geeks either. In a great comedy called *Adam's Rib*, Katharine Hepburn says this better than I can, and if you feel so inclined, anytime I quote anyone in this book—from science fiction author to fantasy character to unlikely scholar—I entreat you to imagine it in Katharine Hepburn's voice. In the scene that I like most of all, Hepburn is trying to get her secretary to agree with her on a particular point about this woman they're defending who shot (but didn't kill!) her husband. Hepburn is angry that her lackey isn't chiming in with any opinion at all. The lackey says, "I don't make the rules," to which Hepburn barks back, "Sure you do, we all do." "We all make the rules. And that includes how we define words like "sci-fi," "fantasy," and "geek." In his essay "Science Fiction," Kurt Vonnegut said that the crowd of science fiction writers only exist because science fiction writers want it that way: "They are joiners. They are a lodge. If they didn't enjoy having a gang of their own so much, there would be no such category as science

fiction. They love to stay up all night, arguing the question ‘What is science fiction?’ Samuel R. Delany came up with a handy definition of science fiction in his essay “About 5,750 Words,”* in which he claims that “naturalistic fictions are [just] parallel world stories in which the divergence from the real is too slight for historical verification.” Meaning, *Wuthering Heights* takes place in an alternate universe where a guy named Heathcliff is a massive asshole and *Moby-Dick* takes place in an alternate universe in which whale attacks were a common enough thing to get upset about. In this way, every kind of fiction is science fucking fiction, which means that everybody who likes reading anything that’s not nonfiction is a massive geek. Obviously, like a lot of geeks, my hyperbole is worse than my bite. Because even Delany had more to say about the definition of science fiction, speculative fiction, or fantasy than just that. And like Vonnegut’s bygone cronies, or a million other people, I do love to stay up late (and often get up early) to argue the question of what science fiction is, often in the form of an essay like this one. But I’m not one of those joiners Vonnegut talks about and I think that it’s a truism that even those geeks who appear to be joiners aren’t really joiners either. Vonnegut is half-right, because science fiction, and by extension all “geek” communities, is real not just because there are people who claim it, but because there are plenty of people who still mock it. For every one person who says that “being a nerd is cool,” there are plenty who casually and dismissively say, “I don’t really like science fiction.”*The late great Ray Bradbury uttered the definitive geek battle cry for dealing with the naysayers who don’t “get” geeky interests when he said, “I never listened to anyone who criticized my taste in space travel, sideshows, or gorillas. When this occurs, I pack up my dinosaurs and leave the room.” Look! It’s those pesky sideshows again, the place where the original geeks came from, at least one origin of why being interested in science fiction, fantasy, dinosaurs, and all the stuff that comes with it makes people feel ostracized and left out. I guess it was rougher for Bradbury growing up literally almost one hundred years ago, but I think he got lucky. Not only did he go on to create some of the best books in any genre ever; he also was childhood friends with Ray Harryhausen, a man who literally brought stop-motion monsters to life. Contemporarily, this would be like J. K. Rowling going to high school and being best friends with J. J. Abrams. But not all of us are so lucky as children, and maybe sometimes, even as adults. Maybe there’s not a comic con near us, or maybe those gatherings aren’t quite what we want. Maybe even today, with the widespread acceptance of *Game of Thrones*, or literally, every Marvel superhero ever created, there’s still a geek-shunning. And if you think I’m wrong, then why are we still using the word “geek”? It’s still easy to take potshots at “geeky” interests, though it’s getting harder, which is why I’m even able to write this book in the first place. Part of it, I think, isn’t just waiting for the world to change, but holding our ground. Because unlike Bradbury, I don’t pack up and leave the room. I stay in the room. And I talk. Which I think explains the rest of “geek” culture becoming more mainstream than it was in the previous century, and a lot of factors conspired to make it happen. J. K. Rowling didn’t pack up and go anywhere. And neither did Russell T. Davies when he approached the BBC about bringing back *Doctor Who*. And neither did George Lucas in 1977. They stayed in the room. They talked about their Muggles and Time Lords and Jedi Knights. They stood up for their geekery and flew their freak flags in ways that transformed us all. They didn’t put their ideas in a box, or a genre. They decided these things were destined to come out of the sideshows and they were right. What I mean about staying in the room isn’t just about standing up to non-geeks. Oftentimes, the people I’m talking to about the things I love aren’t ignorant or haters, but other geeks, too. We need to figure out why we like the stuff we like! Just because something is “geeky” doesn’t make it good and it’s our job as geeks (of any variety) to question all this stuff, to think about it, and to hold it up to a standard beyond simple genre definitions. On message boards, I’ll sometimes see people say things like “It’s an epic fantasy, it’s supposed to have bad dialogue.” Or “It’s a space opera, it’s not supposed to make sense.” And so on. We can never afford to be clichés in these circles, because the world is all too willing to take those clichés and turn them into unfunny monsters. Geeks, nerds, fangirls, fanboys, and just plain old fans, all have the same duty. Stay in the room. Recognize we all make the rules. I, of course, think I’m right. But I’m not right forever, and someone, I’m sure, will prove me wrong about one of my many “truths” in this book. That’s the idea. That’s what’s supposed to happen. This is the beginning of a conversation and I hope you have fun. Maybe you’re a bad geek and maybe I am one, too. Maybe you’re not a geek at all. Maybe you’re my sister, who is, somehow, not a geek. Maybe you’re a superintelligent robot from the future, trying to determine which human texts from 2015 you should upload into your hivemind starship. Whatever the case, welcome. It’s 2015. And we’re all geeks. But, maybe just maybe, we’ll not need that word someday. Maybe we’ll give it up, because now that we’re out of the sideshows, done with being picked on, comfortable with our dinosaurs and gorillas, we’ll give up the label. Maybe someday it will be different. Before Doc Brown took the DeLorean into the future of 2015 at the end of *Back to the Future*, he famously said, “Roads? Where we’re going we don’t need roads.” A road is just a constraint, a direction, a category. Maybe the same will be true for this. Maybe someday we’ll invent new words for “science fiction,” “fantasy,” and “geek.” And I suspect that day is right now, because you might know “right now” by its other name. The future. The Birds, the Bees, and Barbarella. Walking in on your parents having sex is one thing, but walking in on a couple of dinosaurs is something else. It’s not necessarily worse, just a little unexpected, particularly if you are not a dinosaur. When we’re kids, figuring out the whole deal with sex is not a mystery we’re all trying to solve; it’s just something that never occurs to us. It’s like asking, “How come Superman gets away with just putting on the glasses?” You don’t ask questions apropos of nothing until later, when you’re confronted with them,

almost by accident. And my accidental “birds and bees” talk was precipitated by seeing some dinos get it on. Shocking no one, this sex act wasn’t in real time, nor was it shaky-cam footage of real dinosaurs. I’m sad to say I don’t have any good intel on secretly living prehistoric creatures, though I do know people with Bigfoot fetishes. This dino-sex-act came from a magazine, an old issue of the science/science fiction magazine *Omni*, dated October 1988, which would have made me seven years old. Along with *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, my father also subscribed to *Omni*, which I loved because it always had my favorite stuff in it: spaceships, aliens, and dinosaurs. But in this issue, the dinosaurs were doing something I’d never seen dinosaurs do before: they were getting on top of each other in what looked like a sort of weird, horizontal piggyback ride. All my favorites, too: apatosauruses (brontosauruses), tyrannosauruses, triceratops. Were they smiling? This was before we all knew about raptors, so all dinosaurs to a kid in the ’80s were really huge. Wouldn’t that hurt to have one on top of you? Even if you were another dinosaur? The illustrations were done by an artist named Ron Embleton and the article itself was written by Sandy Fritz and was titled “Tyrannosaurus Sex: A Love Tail.” My child brain processed the basics of the illustrations—one dinosaur on top of another dinosaur—and I could read the words, but none of it was making any sense. It was like learning Santa Claus isn’t a real person or *Godzilla* isn’t actually a documentary. I needed it explained to me. And my father was happy to oblige. “Dinosaurs were just like people,” he said. “When they really loved another dinosaur, they would diddle them, and make more dinosaurs.” My dad wasn’t embarrassed about talking about sex one bit, and looking back, it seems like he was dying for an excuse to faux-innocently broach the topic and use the word “diddle.” “So, dinosaurs had to love each other to make other dinosaurs?” I said. “Well . . .” my dad said. “So did they all die because they stopped loving each other?” My dad considered this for a second, gently stroking his period-appropriate Tom Selleck mustache. “Maybe the love part wasn’t the important thing,” he said, “but what they did because of it.” In my childhood and adolescence, science-y stuff and science fiction in particular always seemed to be a weird portal into knowledge about sexuality and adulthood, my wardrobe leading into a naked and deranged Narnia. My parents were strange sociopolitical hybrids from another dimension, totally godless Republicans (we never went to church) who maintained strict bedtimes and rigorous chore schedules, but let my sister and me absorb all sorts of racy media, just as long as it wasn’t too violent. My father didn’t exactly leave the *Playboys* and *Penthouses* lying around all the time, but it was known to happen. He was a photographer, so I think he and my mother tried to cultivate a half-assed “The Human Body Is Beautiful” philosophy, which they implemented as well as their We-Used-To-Be-Hippies-But-Now-We-Love-Reagan sensibilities allowed. This is to say that my mom was still a mom and my dad was still a dad, meaning when my dad would try to get away with some bullshit, my mom would call him on it. Which is where *Barbarella* comes in. *Barbarella*. 1968. Jane Fonda, who plays the titular character, is in space boots, and little else, brandishing a ray-gun and looking like a sci-fi soft-core porn supernova. If you’re unfamiliar, I’m not sure you necessarily need to see it, but it is, kind of, a science fiction classic. This isn’t to say that it’s good—like at all—it’s just that when it comes to “important” science fiction and fantasy, the larger pop canon of science fiction and fantasy tends to include all sorts of great stuff alongside some total shit that is really memorable, and also, well, good in a different way. *Lost in Space*, for example, is objectively terrible, and yet, it had that great robot and a family who lived on a flying saucer, so it becomes “important.” *Lost in Space* next to an episode of the classic *Star Trek* is exactly like the fact that box wine is sold in the same store as some delicious Barolo. I just know when I’m slumming it. And sometimes, you might just want to grab the box wine because it’s easier. This, I think, more than anything, is what has historically turned off a lot of people from sci-fi and fantasy: the inability to see the value in the crappier examples while simultaneously being unable to distinguish it from the supposed “good stuff.” As I mentioned, those *Playboys* were sometimes lying around my house growing up, but because of my dad’s photographer status so was a black-and-white instructional manual called *Nude Photography: The French Way*. When I hit puberty, I actually preferred the ladies in *Nude Photography: The French Way* to those in an issue of *Playboy*. Can this distinction really be the difference between “good” sci-fi/fantasy and “trash”? Kind of. And what’s worse is that it’s made even more confusing when you consider that truly trailblazing genre authors like Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin were (and still are!) published in *Playboy*. The mix of lowbrow “trash” with high-concept “brilliance” is the undeniable heritage of science fiction and fantasy, and it’s totally connected with a young person’s notions of growing up. Which—duh—is connected to sex. The idea that those of us who end up loving science fiction and/or fantasy are obsessed with the low-hanging fruit when we’re young is tricky, because all kids are obsessed with low-hanging fruit. They’re kids! And if you’re still into that stuff—robots, aliens, and dinos—as an adult it can come across as a bit like you haven’t really grown up. As a grown-up, I’m lucky to have a lot of friends who are totally into the whole cosplay scene: they dress up as characters from their favorite fiction. One couple I know tends to do couples costumes, and my favorite one was when they dressed as Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, partly because this couple is a couple of girls. Other times, they’ll dress up as something more highbrow: maybe characters from the book versions of *Dune*. The kind of geek you are depends on the day, and your mood. Box wine or Barolo. So where the hell does *Barbarella* fit in? At a glance, *Barbarella* is an on-purpose crappy movie with the pornographic trappings of embarrassingly old-school testosterone-fueled science fiction. And yet, somehow, for me anyway, it’s accidentally a progressive work of sci-fi genius. *Barbarella*—the film—is like an idiot savant, maybe not aware it’s good (and often bad in many places) and maybe not even actually

good, but infinitely redeemable. A Rosetta stone for explaining how we think about pop fiction. Barbarella—the person—is essentially a female James Bond, somebody who is fucking people to get what she wants and definitely not with the intention of making little Barbarellas. From her first moments in a zero-gravity striptease, nine-year-old me started to connect the dots between sex as a sometimes reproductive act and sex as recreation. The dinosaurs-doing-it-for-fun comment my dad had made a few years earlier started to make a little more sense. Just because you get your birds-and-bees (and brontosaurus) talk doesn't mean you instantly understand sex, the universe, and everything, overnight. In 1990, I was a tiny bit worldlier than when I'd stumbled on "Tyrannosaurus Sex," but still at not quite ten years old, I still hadn't figured out my body, or science fiction. To be fair, at thirty-three, there's a very real chance that I still haven't done either. Barbarella had a profound effect on me. There's something fairly guiltless about enjoying this movie, because it's so obviously about sex. And yet, in being exposed to it so young, I was getting the good stuff about the movie without any of the horny and misogynistic baggage. Sure, I was starting to feel certain stirrings by watching this movie, but little kids have so much weird sexual energy, that was inevitable. The profound thing about Barbarella was that I was tricked into renting it by my father. When we went to the video store with one parent or the other, either my sister or I was allowed to pick out "our own" movie, while whichever parent was with us got something else. For a solid five years, this probably meant I lurked in the sci-fi/fantasy/horror section of a non-franchised hole-in-the-wall called the Movie SuperStore. Mostly I stuck with certified classic monster movies—Frankenstein, Creature from the Black Lagoon, The Wolf-Man—which my parents supported because these films were usually bloodless. You could call this policy "boobs not blood," but prior to Barbarella, it was mostly just blood. The day this happened, though—sometime in December 1990, I think—I had my little paws on something that was probably Godzilla vs. the Cosmic Monster or some similar fare, which I had certainly already seen. (Side note: isn't it funny how little kids cling desperately to the familiar? Next to the very elderly, they've got to be the most set in their ways of any age group.) But my dad was like, no Godzilla, what about Barbarella? "You'll like this!" he said. "It's got all your favorite stuff in it." "Dinosaurs?" I said. "No, but spaceships and ray-guns and, look, this guy can fly!" I had to admit, Barbarella's ray-gun did look awesome, and everything else about the movie seemed appealing. When we got home my mother rolled her eyes really hard when she saw what I had selected as "my movie." "Ryan picked this out, huh?" she snorted. "All on his own?" "What?!" my dad said. "He's gonna love it." "I bet he's not the only one," my mom said. In that moment, Barbarella became my first guilty pleasure. I did like it a lot, though I never really let on to my mom that I did. And in my heart, I knew I really didn't understand it, but that it was changing me. When Jane Fonda has an orgasm so strong that she breaks the "Excessive Machine," I had no idea what was going on. Did I understand the lesbian tendencies between her and the Black Queen of Sogo? Nope. Was the joke of the name Dildano Duran? Yes, the band got its name from this movie; the movie was not searching for the band, even though, philosophically, it kind of was. Somehow, because Barbarella was a girl, and seemed to sort of be in charge of the movie, and won through less-than-conventional means, I think it made me start to think differently about what to expect from these kinds of stories. And maybe other stuff, too. Ironically, because I was sort of still figuring out some of the sex-stuff in the movie, I could draw my own conclusions from it that my father, the supposed Barbarella fan, was totally incapable of. I don't think this was the result he had hoped for. I think his goal was to turn me into a sort of man's man, kind of like him. This didn't really work, because what I took away from the movie ended up having little to do with what my father loved about it. He created a monster, totally by accident. In watching Barbarella as an adult, and science fiction critic, I've realized that my thinking about sci-fi/fantasy started right here. For little kid me, this wasn't a movie that I'd wanted. It didn't reinforce anything that I really had enjoyed about these types of stories at that time—male main character, outer space morals, people who were clothed—which is exactly why it changed me. By throwing sex in the viewer's face and having a woman seemingly not be the victim of it, the movie tried to convey (a little naive) '60s progressivism, which was actually lost on someone like my father, who was of that generation. In 1990, as a sort of armchair Larry Flynt conservative, my father just saw the movie as an excuse to watch soft-core porn at dinnertime. For my father, Barbarella was wish fulfillment, getting away with something, reinforcing his own interpretation of what the movie was about. But for me, it was a sea change, something that was in the category of stuff I liked, but totally different. Because it was so imperfect and so odd and full of stuff I didn't understand, it was more of a challenge, and it required me to pay better attention, and think about life in ways I never had before. A woman could run the show, a blind man could fly, and maybe the astronaut you're trying to rescue will turn out to be an asshole. I know feminists are divided on this movie, but count me among the feminists who think the good outweighs the bad for this particularly confusing mess of pop culture. And that's because Barbarella is exactly like a short story by Margaret Atwood appearing in an issue of Playboy, a mixed message that requires the individual to parse out the good from the bad, the low-hanging fruit from the potential for intellectual and emotional growth. Soon after this epic viewing, my father (who passed away in 2012) offered me his definition of what science fiction supposedly "really was." He'd repeat this notion well into my adulthood. "You've got to have three things," he said, "spaceships, robots, and babes. Otherwise, it's not science fiction I want to watch." It goes without saying that my dad

liked Robert Palmer music videos.