

## The Truth About Yoda

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Long ago, in an America not so far from us, really, captivity narratives were all the rage. A captivity narrative is the harrowing tale of someone captured by the Indians, someone who had to—gasp—*live* with the savages, and suffer all the mistreatment and indignities. Then, come the sixties and seventies, the spiritual descendants of all those captivity survivors started wearing beads and vests and headbands, and growing their hair out, and resisting the government.

Right around then, we got *Star Wars*.

Those captivity narratives had never stopped happening, though. At least not for me. Growing up Indian, when the people up on the screen aren't like you but you kind of like them all the same, the obvious thing to do, it's abduct them. Make them come live with you. I was capturing people left and right. Rambo, because he had a headband and a cool knife. John McClain from *Die Hard*; his guerrilla warfare tactics fit right in. Conan the Barbarian, because he could teach these town people a thing or two. Spider-Man, because he lived with his aunt, and always had trouble coming up with enough change to buy his school lunch. Kyle Reese from *Terminator*, because he looks like the guy who hangs out by the gas pumps, and has stories you can't begin to believe.

*Star Wars* too. *Star Wars* first, even.

Broad-stroke, *Star Wars* is a crew of die-hard rebels pitted against the big dark evil Empire—the Empire that has wave after wave of white infantry to send out into the (star)field. And, where the Empire has not just bigger guns, but the biggest gun ever, what the rebels have are these elegant, cool, traditional weapons. And they've got X-wing fighters too, the trustiest ponies ever, which they use to slash in for raid after raid, and then they're gone again before the Empire even knows what's happened.

Darth Vader? More like Darth Custer.

And, Leia, with her Hopi hairdo, her homeland isn't just taken from her, it's turned to (space)rubble. But that just makes her fight harder. Luke, he's been adopted out of his tribe, has been forced into (space)farming, but is always looking up to the sky for home. Is there a more Indian name than Skywalker? Maybe: Han Solo, that living embodiment of an Indian who is *not*

going to wait to get his request to cross the reservation line approved. He just hits that hyperspace button and *goes*. And, like all Indians, he believes in Bigfoot. He has to: Bigfoot’s his copilot. And don’t forget that Luke and Leia being twins, so many of the tribes have stories about twins either messing up or saving the world—sometimes both. It’s what they do.

What really gives away that *Star Wars* is Native, though, it’s Yoda. He’s an Indian grandmother if there ever was one. Not because he’s nine hundred years old and on a cane, not because the words he’s translating in his head always come out in the wrong order, and not because he’s where messed-up kids retreat to, to figure a few things out. It’s because about the first thing he says, it’s “How do you get so big eating food of this kind?” It’s because his refrain, it’s pretty much “Hear you nothing that I say?” It’s because he tells this gangly kid stumbling through his house that “You must unlearn what you have learned.” It’s because he always has a pot of something cooking over the fire. It’s because he turns that stumbling boy into a warrior.

Yeah, I needed some Indian role models, growing up. I needed some Indian heroes.

And I didn’t have to go far, far away.

I just had to go to the theater.

Thank you, *Star Wars*.

*Yoda: Episode 1491* Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byxx6NjMTiQ>