

An Interview with Cass R. Sunstein: Author of *The World According to Star Wars*

by Jason W. Ellis and Sean Scanlan

Cass R. Sunstein is the Robert Walmsley University Professor at Harvard University. He is the author of *The World According to Star Wars*. Contact: csunstei@law.harvard.edu

Jason W. Ellis is an Assistant Professor of English at the New York City College of Technology, CUNY where he teaches courses in science fiction and technical communication and coordinates the City Tech Science Fiction Collection. His research focuses on the intersection of digital technology and the human brain in 20th/21st-century American literature and popular culture. Contact: jellis@citytech.cuny.edu

Sean Scanlan is the founder and editor of *NANO: New American Notes Online*. He is an Associate Professor of English at New York City College of Technology, CUNY.
Contact: sscanlan@citytech.cuny.edu

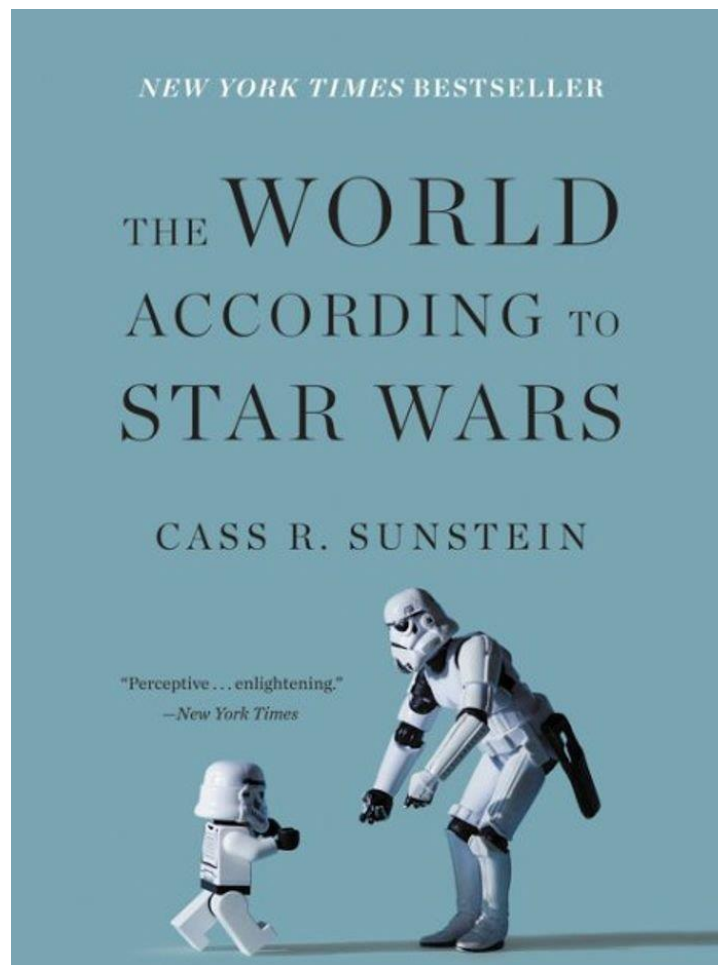
<https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue12/An-Interview-with-Cass-R-Sunstein-by-Jason-W-Ellis-and-Sean-Scanlan>

Abstract:

The World According to Star Wars attempts to understand the *Star Wars* universe in ten chapters through the lenses of Cass R. Sunstein's academic interests, namely: culture, sociology, psychology, behavioral science, and political science. The book is both personal and theoretical, practical and academic. It takes accurate measure of the genesis of the movies, the movies themselves, and briefly, but trenchantly, it examines concepts such as reputational cascades and speculates on what *Star Wars* can teach viewers about constitutional disputes.

Keywords: Interview, Cass Sunstein, The Force Awakens, Star Wars, The World According to Star Wars

Copyright Information: *NANO: New American Notes Online* by <https://nanocrit.com> is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



NANO: Thank you for taking the time to talk with *NANO: New American Notes Online* about your ideas on *Star Wars*. To start, we think that your book, like the movies, raises many important and thought-provoking ideas; we were wondering if you had to select the two or three most crucial ideas, which ones would you choose? [editor's note: a favorite is pattern recognition]. Further, we wonder if one of your closely-held ideas has something to do with your shift from liking *Star Wars* to loving *Star Wars*.

Cass R. Sunstein: Here are three: the possibility of redemption (and you can always be redeemed); how much children need their fathers, and how much fathers would do to protect their children; and freedom of choice (you always have it!). The idea of redemption is probably what most moved me from liking to loving - though I think the movies are amazing, and brilliant, and ultimately profound, on fathers and children.

NANO: We can imagine that with your myriad interests, compounded with such a large set of movies, some really interesting ideas did not make it into the final draft of the book. What idea or ideas, upon further reflection, do you wish that you could have included?

CRS: I had a much longer discussion of constitutional law, but I am glad that I didn't include it—people would have gotten bored. I also cut way down the discussion of informational and reputational cascades, on the ground that it really wasn't necessary. The big idea that I didn't do much with involves serendipity, accident, and happenstance. When I first planned the book that was supposed to be the organizing theme. With every draft, it got smaller, until it got dropped. That broke my heart, kind of, but I think it was the right call.

NANO: Since Issue 12 is titled: *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*: Narrative, Media, Characters, and Event, we'd like to turn the conversation to that movie. We were surprised to read that although you say it is "awfully good," you ranked *The Force Awakens* as 5 out of 7 (143). We know that you said in the book that you would not accept any arguments about this ranking. And we're not going to argue about the rank. But we would like to make an observation. In your ranking, are you revealing your own personal cascade effect blended with your knowledge of the importance of origin myths further blended with nostalgic whiplash? Or, might it have to do with characters, like Kylo Ren, who, let's face it, is just not as awesome as Darth Vader? Is it narrative or character that drives the best of the seven? Or, as you say in the book, is it quality, influence, or timing?

CRS: I love *The Force Awakens*, and it's not an insult to that terrific movie to rank it fifth, in a virtual tie with *Revenge of the Sith* (which is much more flawed and imperfect, but also more amazing and visually astounding, and in some places genius). The problem with *The Force Awakens* is that terrific though it is, it's not unfair to say that it's a bit *Star Wars* By the Numbers. At its best, *Star Wars* startles you. (*Rogue One* did that.) *The Force Awakens* is exceptionally competent, and nothing in it doesn't work, but it's not touched by genius. (I love love love *Rogue One*, by the way.) Still, *The Force Awakens* is a tremendous reboot.

NANO: Have you seen the latest trailer for *The Last Jedi*? What do you anticipate from the next installment of the *Star Wars* saga, and what do you hope will come from the continuing stories of Rey, Finn, and Poe that you discuss in the book?

CRS: Hasn't everyone seen that trailer? I anticipate something a bit like *The Empire Strikes Back*—that is, something that deepens and darkens what we saw in *The Force Awakens*. The audience might be set back on its heels. Also something with big surprises. I am hoping that the continuing stories will combine fun with emotional depth and a feeling of awe and amazement. They can do a lot with Poe, I think, and with Rey, the tale should get pretty primal.

NANO: Near the end of your book, in the last chapter, you write that “*Star Wars* has a lot to say about empires and republics, and it draws directly on the fall of Rome and the rise of Nazism. Its simple, stylized claims about what's wrong with empires resonates in many nations. But it's not didactic” (178). We agree that *Star Wars* is not excessively moralizing, but it does offer lessons,

it does seem to teach us many things. Our main question here is if you think *The Force Awakens* teaches audiences things about women and people of color and other species that go beyond the issues of the first six movies? Quick follow up: colleges often have classes dedicated to Shakespeare and law, would you teach a class dedicated to *Star Wars* and law or public policy?

CRS: Know what? I don't think that *The Force Awakens* teaches us a lot about women and people of color and other species, though it enables us to go there if we like. If you want lessons about women and people of color and other species, read Martha Nussbaum, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, and Peter Singer.

I love *Star Wars* but would not teach a course on it—it's a better service to my students to teach Administrative Law and such. (While I was doing the book, I did do an informal reading group on serendipity in law and politics, and *Star Wars* did appear.)

NANO: Since NANO has just published a special issue on the gift, we've been thinking of the gift in terms of *Star Wars* and *The Force Awakens*, especially Lewis Hyde's ideas on the conflicts that surround the artist, gift exchange, and the market (see *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* 1983). The true gift, in Hyde's formulation, is one that needs to be continually given away and kept in circulation. With this in mind, we wonder if both the original 1977 *Star Wars* movie (*A New Hope*) and the recent *The Force Awakens* can be considered cultural gifts. Although they are market products with add-ons and spin-offs galore, can they still be considered as gifts to the world—gifts that not only need to be kept in circulation but that have become successful due to their circulation? Sure, Disney may be the owner of the franchise and TFA, but once released, can anyone truly say that they own TFA?

And related to the idea of keeping the movies in circulation, there are material gifts within TFA that circulate—the lightsaber that Rey finds on the planet Takodana (in Maz Kanata's basement) is perhaps one of the most potent of these gifts. But also, could we consider more intangible gifts such as hope and parenthood as informing our fascination with these narratives? Based on your enthusiasm for the most recent *Star Wars* story, perhaps you can expand on this question beyond TFA and include your thoughts on *Rogue One*, too.

CRS: Many years ago, I told a story, a true one, about my childhood, by letter, to a woman. (Yes, she was older, and yes, I had a galaxy-class crush on her.) I wrote it as carefully as I could, and it was quite personal. It meant something to me. Her response? "I am taking that as a gift." As long as I shall live, I do not think I will ever forget that response.

What did she mean? It's not as if I gave her a Christmas present, or something of value. And my motives were not entirely altruistic. But I did give her something of myself. The story was real, and it was full of feeling, and while it was pretty silly, I had never told anyone before, and it had an assortment of emotions. She took that as a gift.

I haven't read Lewis Hyde, but if his theory means that my crush's answer was wrong, I don't agree with him.

But I am happy to see the best *Star Wars* films as a gift, not because they circulate or whatever, because so much is poured into them. Actually I would take all of Lucas' six as gifts, and certainly *Rogue One*, and what the heck, *The Force Awakens* as well. (I hesitate, slightly, because for all its phenomenal qualities, it was a by-the-numbers moneymaker.) They're not Shakespeare, but they're worlds better than my little story.

Thanks, *Star Wars*.

NANO: Considering the theme of this special issue of NANO on *The Force Awakens*, most folks would probably agree that the "canonical" *Star Wars* story lies in the films. However, *Star Wars* is told, retold, added to, expanded, and riffed on through a variety of media, including comic books, video games, websites, mobile apps, animated television shows, toys, and other merchandise. On the one hand, the story of *Star Wars* reaches a wider audience through these media, but on the other hand, it is an enormous economic machine driven by consumerism. What is your sense of this side of the *Star Wars* universe? Are there some parts of the transmedia of *Star Wars* that you think serve a better purpose than others for the audience? For example, *Star Wars* action figures serve one kind of role for children re-enacting and making new stories on their own, but it seems like they serve a very different, consumerism-centric focus for adult action figure collectors. Reflecting on the theme that you most like about *Star Wars*, do you see some of *Star Wars*' transmedia storytelling as redemptive of other aspects that do not attain the greatness of the whole?

CRS: I like *Star Wars* (did you know?), and fun is good, and *Star Wars* merchandise, television shows, and such is fun, for many. I don't have much myself (maybe a shirt and a tie; I never wear them), and there is no *Star Wars* LEGO set in my office, but my kids have plenty. If people like it, and if it gets them into the *Star Wars* universe, why not?

The fact that many *Star Wars* products are commercial isn't a problem. Consenting adults, and all that. (And people enjoy them!)

NANO: Last question: You provide many great references and resources in your book *The World According to Star Wars*, what other movies or books have you enjoyed since it was published or that didn't make the cut that illuminated your experience of *The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars* in general? Put another way, what additional movies and books informed your *Star Wars* experience that you would recommend to other *Star Wars* viewers?

CRS: Books: The book was definitely informed by my favorite science fiction writers. I would single out Robert Charles Wilson, and especially *Mysterium* and *Chronoliths*. Try them? Also it was informed by the sensational mystery writer, Harlan Coben. Try him, maybe especially his standalones? And everything I write, just about, is influenced by my favorite novel, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. It's even science fiction, kind of.

New fiction: Gosh did I love *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.* by Neal Stephenson and Nicole Galland. It's very different from *Star Wars*, but it moves, and it's whoa.

New nonfiction: Try *Improbable Destinies*, by Jonathan Lobos. All about life on other planets, and what it would be like. Well, partly about that. It's terrific, and serious, and fun too.