

Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue



The biblical archaeologist at my seminary once donned Indiana Jones–inspired attire to publicize one of his discoveries. He claimed not to enjoy this publicity stunt. If so, he’s about the only movie-watching male who didn’t want to play at being Indy, the brainy, hip, unflappable professor of archaeology who could fight off Nazis with little more than a fedora and a bullwhip.

After a 19-year hiatus, director Steven Spielberg and producer George Lucas have provided the fourth installment of the series, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Watching it is like attending a high school reunion: it’s nice to see everybody and to reminisce over the old days, but everyone’s rounder around the middle and crinklier around the eyes, and it’s just not the same.

Still, it’s a fine summer popcorn film, with Soviet baddies taking the place of Nazis (“We wore the Nazis plumb out,” Ford has said) and a 1950s ambience (greasers and jocks, drag-racing in cars without seatbelts, and iconic images of mushroom clouds) replacing the earlier movies’ stylized 1930s atmosphere. Indy is still the master of obscure languages who outwits dozens of gun-toting villains, makes his way past ferocious creatures and unravels mystifying myths on the way to finding an ancient treasure that has eluded other researchers for centuries.

And he's back with the best of his old flames, Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen). Marion is Indy's equal in wit and spunk, though she gets too little screen time here. Shia LeBeouf is comic relief as an archaeologist wunderkind, and Cate Blanchett is marvelous as a Soviet dominatrix intent on using Jones to acquire a mind-altering weapon that will win the cold war.

As in the earlier films, the plot is preposterous. But this one turns out to be less inspiring than the others because the "MacGuffin," as Hitchcock used to call it—the focal item around which the search is built—doesn't have the religious resonance of those in the earlier films, which tracked the ark of the covenant, Hindu stones or the holy grail. The search in the new film is for a Mayan-carved crystal skull that turns out to have some relationship to an alien landing in New Mexico, in 1947. I can't imagine ten-year-olds growing up with a longing to traipse into the Amazon looking for aliens. But then it's hard to think of what ancient religious relic the scriptwriters could have come up with (the true cross?).

The film allows that Indy has aged 20 years, as Ford has, but he still exudes professorial cool. After the FBI raids his office (the agency thinks he's collaborated with the KGB), the university gives him a leave with full pay—because his dean resigned in support of him. Pretty soon he's off on a motorcycle, driving around his university (Yale and New Haven are the stand-ins) pursued by enemy agents. Now there's a vision of university life—a supportive administration, admiring students and an adventure on fast wheels. Unfortunately, this adventure doesn't involve a dig in lost desert cities to find stones written on by the finger of God. Too bad. Pass the popcorn.