

Page Turners, They Are Not: *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* and the Archives*Reviewed by Samantha Cross, CallisonRTKL, Inc.**Note: Some spoilers for The Last Jedi.*

If you've read [my previous work](#), then you'll know that the *Star Wars* franchise and the archival profession have become unexpectedly intertwined in the last decade or so. Two films, so far, have featured Jedi and Imperial Archives as settings for intrigue and action while inadvertently emphasizing issues archivists are still struggling with as we redefine and reshape our profession. *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) made the Jedi archivist unknowingly complicit in the burgeoning Empire's plans and *Rogue One* (2016) put the Imperial Archives recordkeeping practices, and security measures to protect those records, under scrutiny. It's the arrogance of the Jedi and the Empire regarding their records and the function of the archives that ultimately led to their subsequent downfalls. Hyperbolic? Maybe, but true nonetheless.

It's the aftermath, however, that I'm most concerned with when examining the latest *Star Wars* film to reveal archival themes. *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* (2017) doesn't feature an archival institution in the same way as its predecessors. There's no building security to penetrate nor is there a search engine poised to return negative results. Instead, we have a student and a teacher on an island with some books stored in a giant tree; and an outdated droid primed to play one of the most important recordings in the history of a galaxy far, far away. On the surface, neither scenario appears to be blatantly relevant to archives. But like the island of Ahch-To, sometimes the answers can only be found when you go a little deeper. Or descend into a vision quest cave. Whichever metaphor suits you best.

Picking up where the events of *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* ended, Force-sensitive scavenger Rey (Daisy Ridley) asks for Luke Skywalker's (Mark Hamill) help to save the galaxy and train her in the ways of the Jedi. To say that Luke is less than thrilled with the idea of training another powerful Force user is an understatement. By his admission, he exiled himself to Ahch-To to die and be forgotten. Rey eventually coerces him into three lessons, though she only gets two. The teachings amount to this: no one should have a monopoly on the Force and the Jedi need to die. Granted, Luke's a bit embittered at this point in his life for a good reason, but the case he makes against the Jedi, as well as the movie's overarching interpretation of "what's past is prologue," can be applied to the archival profession as well.

During their lessons, Luke makes a point of showing Rey the sacred Jedi texts stored within a giant tree on the island. I would like to take this moment to point out the description the official *Star Wars* website provides about the Ahch-To Library:

“The fabled founding texts of the Jedi Order are sheltered from Ahch-To’s weather by the huge trunk of a once-mighty uneti tree. This collection of ancient tomes was painstakingly assembled by Luke Skywalker, but has now become a burden and a torment.”¹

First of all, “library”? That’s debatable. Secondly, the words *painstakingly*, *burden*, and *torment* describing the acquisition and preservation of the sacred texts paint such a lovely picture, right? Think your life as a lone arranger is burdensome? Here’s Luke Skywalker’s beer. Watch and learn. Just saying, that family has a long history of angst. So much angst.

Anyway, the texts contain the supposed “wisdom” of the Jedi, but as Luke later points out, that wisdom led to arrogance and complacency, which allowed the Empire to form while the Jedi were at the height of their power. Luke admits to that same arrogance himself as he bought into his hype as a hero yet still failed to prevent his nephew from going to the dark side. As we later learn, Luke is partially *responsible* for Ben Solo becoming Kylo Ren, which bolsters his resolve to let the Jedi die with him. Consumed by his failure, Luke threatens to burn the sacred texts but it’s force-ghost Master Yoda that does the deed (with lightning!), prompting this exchange:

Luke Skywalker: So it is time for the Jedi Order to end.

Yoda: Time it is for you to look past a pile of old books, hmm?

Luke Skywalker: The sacred Jedi texts?

Yoda: Oh, read them, have you? Page-turners they were not. Yes, yes, yes. Wisdom they held, but that library contained nothing that the girl Rey does not already possess. Skywalker, still looking to the horizon. Never here, now, hmm? The need in front of your nose.

Luke Skywalker: I was weak. Unwise.

Yoda: Lost Ben Solo you did. Lose Rey we must not.

Luke Skywalker: I can't be what she needs me to be.

¹ “Ahch-To Library,” Starwars.com, accessed March 27, 2018, <http://www.starwars.com/databank/ahch-to-library>.

Yoda: Heeded my words not, did you? Pass on what you have learned. Strength. Mastery. But weakness, folly, failure also. Yes, failure most of all. The greatest teacher, failure is. Luke, we are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters.²

At least two interpretations of this scene from an archives and records management point-of-view come to mind. The first is a matter of foundation and practicality. It's important to know that every character in *The Last Jedi* struggles with issues of the past, whether their own or someone else's, and unlike Kylo Ren's belief in killing the past (literally) to move forward, Yoda sees the value in growth beyond past successes *and* failures. The sacred texts offer their wisdom, but they should not be considered dogma. Otherwise, how can one truly grow?

We can apply the same ideas to archives. We hold on to our own "sacred texts" as the foundation of the profession, some more than others, but with each generation the archival literature evolves and changes. It's not necessarily that the texts are less relevant, but they continue to be built upon. Our success and failures then become an extension of the foundation, like strata in the earth. Though we later learn that Rey does, in fact, possess the actual sacred texts on the Millennium Falcon, Yoda's argument still rings true: Rey has all the wisdom she needs to be a Jedi, and her actions will be informed by that wisdom not defined by it. She is the new generation of Jedi, the summation of Yoda, Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Luke's choices driven to do better.

Another interpretation of this scene concerns the actual treatment of the sacred Jedi texts. Before we as the audience learn that the books are fine, Luke watches Yoda call down lightning to destroy the tree and burn the texts within. He protests but Yoda calls him on his indignation. Did Luke spend a lot of time poring over the worn pages of Jedi religious practices? Did he incorporate their teachings into his daily life? Unlikely. So why is he so bent out of shape when merely moments ago he was ready to do the same? Did he value the content of the texts or the physical format containing the text?

As archivists and records managers, we must make decisions about content over format regularly, especially in cases of preservation. Is a book merely the vessel for the prose or does the book itself have value as an object? Personally, working in corporate archives means walking a fine line between the evidentiary and nostalgic values of paper and the ease of access and distribution of digital records. So, what's Luke's deal? I mean, he stored the ancient works, which he *painstakingly* tracked down, in a tree. A tree. And those books don't look all that sturdy despite the supposed cover from the weather of Ahch-To, so his concern for their actual preservation wasn't that high. Maybe he's become more of a hoarder in his old age,

² *Star Wars: Episode VIII: The Last Jedi*. Directed by Rian Johnson. United States: Walt Disney Pictures, Lucasfilm, 2017. Film.

but hoarders don't exactly use the "kill it with fire" method of dealing with their issues. Or perhaps Luke is simply a lone arranger struggling with his collection.

There's another scene in *The Last Jedi* that very much applies to archivists and records managers. While Rey is training, Luke sneaks aboard the Millennium Falcon to pay his respects to the now deceased Han Solo. Resting in the corner is R2-D2, who immediately powers up when Luke enters the ship's galley. Elated to see his old friend, R2 encourages Luke to join the resistance again, but Luke declines, saying:

Luke Skywalker: [to R2-D2] There's nothing you can say to change my mind.

Leia Organa: [R2-D2 plays Leia's message] General Kenobi, years ago you served my father during the Clone Wars . . .

Luke Skywalker: That was a cheap move!³

It's a small moment, one steeped in nostalgia for the original trilogy, but *it's still important* from an archival perspective. R2 is likely an outdated droid model in *The Last Jedi*. It's been thirty years since the events of *Episode III: Return of the Jedi*, so it's safe to presume a lot of droid technology updates got us from R2-D2 to BB-8. By that logic, we can assume that the recording of Princess Leia stored in R2's databank may only be playable through his particular model. This is important regarding data migration and outdated media.

I don't exactly know the ins and outs of recordkeeping practices in the New Republic, but I'm betting no one made a backup copy of Leia's message to Obi-Wan Kenobi as part of the historical record. Just a hunch. That also means R2 himself has historical value. Should he power down permanently or, the Maker forbid, be destroyed in battle, the recording could be lost forever. Although, one wonders if Leia's plea would have value at all as an historical record within the reality of the Star Wars universe. Luke, Leia, and Han are legends based on their actions fighting the Empire, but would any random Stormtrooper on Cloud City watching the same recording think of it within the context of "the message that sparked the Empire's demise"? For that matter, would Leia or Luke see any necessity in saving the recording?

It seems, then, that R2 is acting as an archivist of his own accord. We've seen in the past that he works autonomously, ignoring commands, erasing and copying data, and doing what he deems to be correct even if others don't see the logic behind his actions. So, we must assume R2 kept the recording for no other reason than *he* found it valuable. And because he found value in the record, he was able to use it to spur Luke to action once more. No one else and no other argument could have changed Luke's mind the way R2 did. Was it nostalgic for the audience? Of course,

³ *Star Wars: Episode VIII: The Last Jedi*, 2017.

but it was also nostalgic for Luke as a character, a reminder of why he joined the rebellion so long ago. If it had been BB-8 showing him the message, the moment would ring false because BB-8 has no connection to the events of the original trilogy. No R2 means no message means no Luke means no badass duel with Kylo Ren on the salt flats. End of the resistance, everyone goes home. All because one droid decided to keep a supposedly inconsequential piece of data.

And a post-script for good measure: *Rogue One* foreshadows the entire conceit of the First Order having hyper-space tracking capabilities. While searching through the Imperial Archives for the Death Star plans, Jyn Erso quickly comes across records of the Empire developing the technology, which means they found it in the archives!