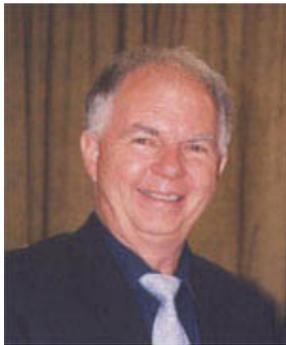




TRANSCRIPT



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Cinema

Reviews

Get Smart

Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull

The Jane Austen Book Club

John J McGowan

In this item we'll look at a mixed bag of movies including the return of an old television series; the end of Indiana Jones as we know him and a suggestion for a worthwhile trip to the video store.

The original *Get Smart* was a television series which began in the mid-1960's. The series was clearly inspired by Ian Fleming's character - James Bond, Agent 007. However, the central character of *Get Smart* - Maxwell Smart, Agent 86 - was the polar opposite of James Bond. Where Bond was self-reliant, ruthless and sophisticated, Smart was a bumbling incompetent who only managed to get his man or extract himself from dangerous situations via the assistance of his female partner - Agent 99.

The comedy series leaned heavily on ironic one-liners - such as "There are no holidays in the fight against evil". Dialogue such as this was written by Mel Brooks and Buck Henry and delivered deadpan by actor Don Adams. *Get Smart* - the movie - comes with the imprimatur of Mel Brooks but there are big differences between this glossy, action-comedy and the old studio-bound TV series.

Big-budget sets and exotic locations give the movie something of the appearance of a contemporary spy thriller. And Maxwell Smart - played by Steve Carell - is not quite as dopey as his small screen predecessor. He actually manages to sort out the bad guys quite effectively - albeit still relying on considerable help from Agent 99 - played by the glamorous, kick-boxing Anne Hathaway. However, there are still plenty of chuckle-producing one liners along the way.

There's also some good visual comedy here and there - in particular a well-devised sequence which takes place in an aircraft toilet where our hero tries to free himself from plastic hand restraints by firing little arrows at the cuffs out of his customised multi-purpose Swiss army knife. As this funny sequence unfolds, with the ricocheting arrows doing more and more damage to Max himself, the question forms in one's mind: "Why doesn't Max just use the *blades* of the knife to cut his plastic bonds?"

Well, I guess the answer to that question is what makes the difference between Agent 86 and Agent 007. On the movie trivia side, I was pleased to note a couple of local connections involved in the production of *Get Smart*. The Director of Photography was South Australian-born Dean Semler, who was a colleague of mine at Adelaide's Channel Nine some years before even the *original Get Smart* was made. In addition, some of the special effects used in the movie were produced by an Adelaide-based computer animation company called Rising Sun Pictures. Although the input of both of these South Australian connections no doubt contributed to the smooth professionalism of the movie, *Get Smart* is, sadly, not destined for any movie hall of fame.

However, it does keep you chuckling and for that I gave it **two and a half stars**.

Unless you've been holidaying on another planet in recent months you would have been made aware of the release of a fourth movie starring Harrison Ford as the intrepid archaeologist adventurer Indiana Jones. This one is called *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

In preparation for the arrival of this movie I re-visited the earlier three. It was not an arduous chore as the fun and games of an Indiana Jones movie are right up my alley. When Steven Spielberg originated the idea for the Indiana Jones movies his aim was to re-create the tearaway adventurous fun and innocent delight that audiences used to find in the “B” grade movies and serials that were typically shown at Saturday matinees. Appropriately, therefore, the first three of the movies were set in the 1940s - a period when the “B” movies and serials were still common.

The latest movie is set about midway through the 1950s in part, perhaps, to accommodate the fact that it has been seventeen years since the third movie was made, and even the remarkably well-preserved Harrison Ford is unable to conceal *all* of the ravages of time. The newest movie gets off to a good start and establishes a feeling for the period with appropriate vehicles; uniforms; house interiors; an atomic bomb test and a bobby-soxer milk bar sequence that is straight out of *Back to the Future*.

In movies one and three of the series the bad guys were Nazis and there was plenty to dislike about them. In the *Crystal Skull* the enemies are Cold War Russians and, somehow, they don't seem to carry the same sense of threat that was embodied in the malevolent Nazis. The leader of the Russians is a sword-wielding female colonel but, while she is played as well as possible by the wonderful Cate Blanchett, I felt that her character lacked any real sense of evil or deviousness.

And this is where I think the movie begins to disappoint. Without any half-believable nemesis against whom the hero must match his wits, the movie lacks dramatic tension and goes soft at its core. Caves full of spiders and mummified bodies and ant-hills spewing flesh-eating bugs can't make up for the absence of a really threatening villain. Of the earlier three movies I thought the first and the third were the best but, sadly, this movie bears a greater resemblance to the second in the series which, in my opinion, was the least successful.

The creative team just seem to have run short of ideas. There's an over-long truck chase in this latest movie in which the choreography is almost identical to the really silly mine shaft chase in the *Temple of Doom* and there are far too many bullets sprayed around without ever hitting targets. A punch-up between an ageing Indiana Jones and a gigantic, much younger, Russian baddy, just caps off the silliness. I came to the conclusion that we have probably seen the last of Harrison Ford as Indie and that it's probably not such a bad thing.

Perhaps *The Crystal Skull* so closely resembles the old serials it sets out to emulate that it really *is* just another “B” movie. I gave it **two and a half stars**.

Now for my video store pick of the month. The novels of Jane Austen have been getting a good working-over in the movies and on television in recent times so if you've become a little jaded by the nineteenth century novel of manners you might well have bypassed a movie called *The Jane Austen Book Club* which was released earlier this year.

As the title suggests, the movie concerns the proceedings of a book club set up specifically to study Jane Austen's novels. However, the movie is more about the relationships of the six members of the book club than about Jane Austen and their romantic attachments, and de-attachments are explored through one of the most brilliantly constructed screenplays that I have seen in a long while.

The Jane Austen Book Club is a civilised, witty, satisfying **four star delight**. Track it down at your video store. Bye for now – see you in the back stalls.

John McGowan