

# RETURN TO GLORY

Jack McDevitt

**Stephen King described Jack McDevitt as “the logical heir to Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke.” Eleven of Jack’s twenty-four novels have been Nebula finalists. *Seeker* received the award in 2007. He’s also won the Campbell and Philip Dick Awards. Jack has been a naval officer, an English teacher, and he has conducted leadership seminars for the Customs Service. His latest story for the magazine imagines how recent popular culture may have an unexpected influence on the future.**

There could not have been a better time to be alive. Every nation on the planet had evolved into a democracy, we hadn’t been tangled in a war for over a hundred years, and technology had removed virtually every possibility of poverty. Work if you like, go golfing, or spend your time on the front porch. Life spans were averaging out to almost two centuries. And the funniest comedians the world had seen dominated hypervision. When I was about seven years old, my parents took me onboard the *San Diego*, which we rode up to Moonbase. I remember being annoyed because I’d wanted to go to Mars, but Mars had never worked out. The colony had lasted only about thirty-five years. It was just not a promising location, and it took too long to get there. I didn’t care. I told my dad that we’d given up on the Red Planet too easily and that I would eventually go on my own. I guess, when we’re kids, we’re all a bit silly.

I was at home with my wife Sara munching on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when the call came in that, though I didn’t realize it at the time, might possibly change the world. We were watching *Darkness at Noon*, a spy thriller set in the Martian colony. The caller was Peter Harkins, a longtime friend and a guy I’d gone to school with. His image blinked on in the center of the room. He looked excited and happy, seated in a leather armchair, legs crossed, his jaw propped up on his right fist. “Juan,” he said, “how are you doing?”

Sara, who was sipping tea, smiled in his direction. We stopped the movie. Fred Rollins, the super agent, was trapped in a tank with rising water. Peter didn’t call often, but he was a talker and we knew that whatever this was about it would take a few minutes. “We’re good,” I said. “What’s happening?”

“I was over at the construction site this morning.” The site, which he owned, was in Kingsland, just across the border from Florida. It was being rebuilt after the ongoing destruction inflicted by forty years of hurricanes. The world was good, but it wasn’t perfect.

“That the place that’s going to become a distribution site for travel tech?”

“Eventually. It used to be a research center. That’s a long time ago. Before that it

was a library, and before that it was something called the Neutral Zone. That was in the twenty-first century. I wanted to take a last look around before they brought the heavy equipment in. And guess what I found?" He held up a disc. "I think it's an episode of *Star Trek*."

I looked over at Sara, who shrugged. "What's *Star Trek*?"

He frowned and smiled. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised." He looked in her direction. "You don't know, either?"

"The name rings a bell," she said. "But—"

"It's a long time ago. *Star Trek* was a television show. Pretty well known in its time." Television, of course, had preceded HV. A couple of centuries ago.

I focused on the disc. The label read: *Starship Republic*.

"Okay," Sara said. "So it's an old TV show. Why the fuss?"

When I was a kid we had a holovision show called *The Rambler*. I loved it. The *Rambler* was a starship. Its captain was Rick Cooper. They visited different worlds, fought monsters, helped aliens, and generally lived exciting lives. The crew included a super-strong alien named Karas, a physician who seemed able to repair any kind of injury, and Tanya, a comm officer who became the first love of my life. But the show disappeared when I was about twelve. It was never even available on the replay services.

"Guys, all the *Star Trek* episodes have been thought lost. They were wiped out during the cyber wars two hundred years ago. We have the scripts, and photos from the shows, so we know what the cast members and the starships looked like. Now, I think, we have one of the original shows."

"Okay. You have an antique, Peter," I said. "Congratulations." It would probably be worth a few bucks on the open market.

"I don't think you understand, Juan. *Star Trek* was a classic. If this is actually one of the original programs, it'll be worth a small fortune."

"So have you watched it yet?"

"No. Unfortunately the disc doesn't fit into the HV. I haven't been able to get it to work."

That explained the call. Sara was a historian at the Jacksonville Tech Museum. "That was when?" she asked. "The later part of the twentieth century?"

"Yes."

"That would be a Digital Versatile Disc, a DVD. It was good for its time, but no way the data on one of those things would have survived this long."

"Damn." Peter looked seriously unhappy. "I was afraid you'd say something like that."

Sara took a deep breath. "Where'd you find it?"

"In a storage cabinet. It was in the ruins of the Kilgore Building in what used to be called the Neutral Zone. But that was long ago."

"What was *Star Trek* about?" I asked.

Peter looked at me, trying to be patient. "Starships. The characters traveled around the Galaxy in vehicles that were faster than light. They connected with aliens, sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly." He looked down at the disc and bit his lip.

For a moment we were all silent. Then Peter said, "Maybe there'd be some way to recover it?"

"It doesn't look like a DVD," said Sara. She frowned. Leaned over it. And smiled. "It's an M1."

"Which is what?" asked Peter.

"The next generation storage unit. Twenty-first century. If that's really what it is, we can probably make it work. Send it over to the museum and I'll get back to you."

He nodded. "Can I bring it in tomorrow?"

Sara thought about it for a minute. "Sure. About eleven?"

"I'll be there."

I spent the balance of the evening reading everything I could find about *Star Trek*. I got so caught up in it that, next day, I joined Sara midmorning at the museum. It was late June. The high schools were on vacation so I had plenty of free time. And if Peter actually had a classic show from the twentieth century, I was pretty sure my American history classes would enjoy seeing it. The language had changed a little since then, but that would just provide some laughs.

Peter arrived a few minutes early. I was sitting with Sara in her office when the call came in from the entry desk. Sara told the AI to send him up. Then she looked over at me and delivered a smile that suggested she wanted to take me in her arms and squeeze the life out of me. “Juan, this is the part of my job that I love. There’s so much lost from those early years.”

I’d heard it before. She’d helped with the recovery of the 1942 film *Yankee Doodle Dandy* six years earlier. We knew James Cagney’s name and reputation, but we had no idea of the type of performer he was. It’s still all we have of his work, but he’s never going to get lost again.

And she’d been part of a team that restored an episode of the *Jerry Seinfeld Show*. As with so much of the TV and early movie material, we had the scripts but I don’t think we’d ever quite understood the nature of the comedy until we actually saw one of George’s panic attacks.

Peter was carrying a briefcase. He let me see that he was glad I was there. “With luck,” he said, “this will be a big day, Juan.”

“Let’s hope so,” I said.

There was an electronic device on Sara’s desk that I hadn’t noticed. “It’s a converter,” Sara said. Peter opened the briefcase and produced the disc, which was wrapped in plastic. Sara pulled on a pair of synthetic gloves. He handed the disc to her. She removed the wrapping, took it over to the converter, and placed it on an insertion tray. “They didn’t do holovision in those days,” she said. “We’ll have to settle for the display.” A screen was mounted on the wall beside the door.

“Whatever works,” said Peter.

Sara nodded. “Leia,” she said, addressing her AI, “do it.”

The tray closed, carrying the disc inside the device. A blue light came on, and the display screen lit up and showed us a sky full of stars. “Looks good,” said Peter.

A triumphant symphony filled the room as a space vehicle glided onto the screen. It was similar to ones we’d seen in pictures of the *Star Trek* interstellars. “We got it,” said Peter. For a moment I thought he was going to have a heart attack. He raised a left fist and turned to Sara without taking his eyes off the screen. “Thank you,” he said. “I don’t believe this.”

The ship moved slowly across the sky. The symphony picked up and we got a title: *Marloch’s Vengeance*.

“Well done, Peter,” I said.

Onscreen, the title rose and we got a new line: **BASED ON *STAR TREK***.

“What?” said Peter. “Based on *Star Trek*?”

For a long moment no one spoke. Then Sara inhaled. “It’s not the original series.”

“Wait,” said Peter. “There’s more:” **A *Star Trek* Fan Production.**

He was rubbing his forehead. “How could this happen?”

The interstellar was approaching a planet filled with lights.

“I’m sorry,” said Sara. “If it’s any consolation, this isn’t the first time something like this has happened.”

“Damn.” He was shaking his head. “Guys, I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“It’s not a problem, Peter.” I raised my hands in an effort to show him some sympathy. “If you find something else like this—”

"I'll try not to get too excited."

"The disc should be worth something."

"I know." He reached for it.

"You mind," said Sara, "if I make a copy of it? I think some of the museum visitors might be interested in seeing it."

"Sure. Whatever you like. Maybe the fans produced a good show."

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We sat staring at each other after he'd left. Sara crossed her arms. "I feel sorry for him, Juan. He really thought he had something."

I tried to laugh. "As far as I know, his life's been going pretty well, love. But I'll admit that, of all the early television shows, this is probably the one I'd most like to have back."

"Why?"

"I've done a lot of research, Sara. *Star Trek* has become something of a legend. They had a solid cast, interesting storylines, perfect effects for the time. It's got a pretty good reputation."

"But you've never seen one?"

"No."

"We have the scripts, Juan. If they were that good, why haven't we remade them? We have pictures of the cast and the sets, so the retrotech could put it all together again, like the *Seinfeld* episodes."

"We could. But it wouldn't be the same."

"How do you mean? It would be the same thing, except the images would be sharper."

"People in those years must have thought they were looking at their future. We'd be looking at something different. Now it's only a fantasy. We know star travel will never happen. We're not going anywhere."

"How about some lunch, Juan?"

"Sounds good. But let me ask something."

She smiled. "Sure. We can watch it tonight."

\* \* \*

We ate out that evening, at Sandy's down on the edge of the beach. And you should have no problem guessing what was at the center of the conversation. "There was a lot of space travel on HV and in the movies during those years," Sara said. She meant *TV*, of course, but I didn't correct her. "We've only had two series like that in the last century, Juan."

"Only two? You sure?"

"I checked it out. *Quantum Drive* and *The Rambler*. *Quantum Drive's* been gone sixty years. Why'd we stop making them? You have any idea?"

Her eyes focused on me. Behind her, a full moon floated over the Atlantic. It was beautiful, as was she. A bot approached us with iced tea and salads. We sat quietly while it set everything down. "They were probably popular in the old days because people didn't understand the science." There'd be no manned starships. We'd had a colony on Mars for about thirty years, but there was no point to it so they shut it down two centuries ago. Physicists had declared faster-than-light travel impossible. We'd launched an automated vehicle to Proxima Centauri at the beginning of the century. It's expected to arrive in another forty years. Last time I looked, nobody cared.

She glanced down at the plastic bag, which was lying on the table. "I can check it out. I'll let you know if—"

I shrugged. "It might be fun. Let's give it a chance."

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We settled in at home with coffee and slices of lemon cake, expecting a dull story and probably a fair amount of overacting. Instead, we were seated in the middle of the *Republic's* control area when it received a transmission from the *Argonaut*,

which had been studying an alien civilization at Althea, a planet orbiting a distant star. "It's a colony world," the *Argonaut* explained. "The home world has sent a ship to kill some of these people," said a horrified female voice.

"The colonists are their own people?"

"Yes." She identified herself as Audrey Tucker, the ship's captain. "What are we supposed to do?"

Jason Doyle was captain of the *Republic* and obviously the series protagonist. He looked in my direction as if he expected me to help, then touched a button on the arm of his chair. "Captain Tucker, what's going on? Is it a war?"

"Not exactly. It's a religious conflict. Both sides practice the same faith, worship the same god, a deity by the name of Marloch. The colonists believe the emphasis should be on behavior, and the ones back home on Althea maintain it's the dogma that matters. So they look on the colonists as infidels. They've warned them about an attack if they don't accept the official canon, and even told them where it will happen." The designated target appeared on the *Republic's* monitor. It was a city on the edge of an ocean, bathed in sunlight. Probably big enough for ten thousand inhabitants. They could see movement in the streets.

"What kind of weapon will they be using? Do you know?"

"A nuclear bomb."

"How many?"

"Just one." Tucker cleared her throat. "The colonists have had plenty of time to evacuate, and a lot of them have. But they probably aren't going to get everybody out."

"Why not? The place too crowded?"

"If we can believe what we're hearing, some of them, a lot of them, think that dying for the faith is a good thing. And you haven't heard the worst of it."

Doyle's jaw tightened. "Which is what?"

"A follow-up fleet is leaving Althea with more nuclear weapons. They won't be here for a while, but they've informed the colonials that if they don't swear allegiance to the faith, the Altheans will cleanse the planet. That's literally what they're saying."

The colony was based on a small world orbiting a gas giant. "They call it Melanik. It translates to something like Peace and Understanding. *Nirvana*."

"Do they have an FTL drive?" asked Doyle. "The attackers?"

"No. They've never been outside the home system. We could take the first ship out easily enough. But the prime directive prohibits it. But it's an atom bomb. What do we do? The colonists have no effective way to protect themselves." She banged her fist down against something. "I don't want to just sit here and watch this happen."

"Okay, Captain Tucker. For now, we need you to send us everything you have on the technology of the Althean ship, especially the communication tech. And whatever else you think might be helpful. We're on our way." Doyle glanced over at the officer immediately to his right. "Go to warp, Jody."

\* \* \*

She also sent an image of an Althean. It had greenish skin, large eyes and ears, and no hair. Its face was solemn and left me thinking it did not have an easy life. It was dressed in dark silky clothes. I couldn't tell how tall it was because there was nothing to compare it with.

There was a third officer in Doyle's control center, obviously not human. That was Bayla, the second-in-command. "Captain," he said, "we can't attack the incoming ship. In fact we can't even let them know we're here."

"Any ideas?" Doyle asked.

Bayla exhaled and shook his head. Finally, Jody said they had no choice but to take them down.

"You're right," said Doyle. "But maybe we can do it without letting them know

we're here. These guys aren't very advanced. They've not gotten out of their planetary system. And they're killing one another over religion."

"So? What do we do?"

Doyle's plan was simple enough: Could they insert a virus into the operations system of the approaching ship without being detected? The AI informed him that the alien system was almost primitive. It could probably be breached.

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They arrived inside the gas giant's ring system, located the Althean ship, and, if I got it right, fired off a transmission that resembled a disintegrating solar burst. The virus was concealed inside. The program's musical background hyped up until finally Jody reported the virus had gotten into the vehicle's data collection system. And finally Doyle gave the order: "Do it. Jettison their nuke."

Bayla pulled his earphones down and pressed them. They waited. And finally he shook his head. "We got nothing, Captain."

They made some adjustments to the virus transmission, resent it, and tried again to launch the bomb. Still nothing. The alien vehicle continued its approach toward Melanik.

There was a brief debate over whether they should simply attack the alien ship and not worry about the details. But that would have been a serious violation of the prime directive. And they picked up a transmission from the alien ship. They were giving the colonists a final chance to apologize to Marloch. "Maybe," Doyle said, "they're bluffing." They had a telescopic view of the town and the ocean and were still debating whether they should step in, when a transmission from the *Argonaut* informed them that the bomb had been launched. They watched in horror as the city disappeared inside a mushroom cloud.

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Doyle was overcome with guilt, intensified by a report from the *Argonaut* that the colonials had ramped up their defiance. "These people are determined to get themselves killed," he told Tucker.

"It's exactly what I'd expected," she said. Her group had been studying the alien culture for two years, and she didn't think there was much possibility the colonists would concede.

Doyle asked what was behind all the animosity? Althea had a religious leader referred to as the *Sakeela*. The term translated to Marloch's Envoy. "You know where he can be found? The *Sakeela*?"

"Yes. In a place known as The Consulate. It's in the capital on the home world." A few minutes later, the *Republic* was on its way.

"What's the point?" asked Bayla. "We going to blow them up?"

Doyle was looking out of the screen again, talking to Sara and me. "They don't have a transporter."

"So?"

"Later. Got work to do." He retreated to his cabin and told the AI he needed help practicing the Althean language.

\* \* \*

The screen went dark, save for a starlit window. We were in a bedroom.

"Who's there?" The tone was gruff.

"I am. Marloch's courier." It was Doyle's voice. "I bring—" A lamp came on. And a female squealed. "—a message from our creator."

Two Altheans were in bed. The larger one, presumably the *Sakeela*, was rolling out, putting a foot on the floor, scrambling to open a drawer in a side table. The other was trying to hide in the blanket.

Doyle held up a gun. "You looking for this?"

The Sakeela stared at him. "How did you get past security?"

"There's no way you can prevent my entering." Doyle lowered his voice and spoke to the partner. "Shesel, you have nothing to fear from me."

She came out from under the blanket and stared at him.

"What is the message?" asked the Sakeela.

"Leave the colonials in peace. You have two days to cancel the second mission. Bring them back."

"I don't believe you."

"It's your choice. But if you fail to comply, Marloch will destroy the ships. And I will be sent back to visit you again. If that happens, you will not be happy. And you might also consider what your judgment in the long term will be."

Doyle smiled and faded out.

We watched him reappear in the transporter back on the *Republic*.

"Brilliant," Jody said.

"Let's see if it works."

"That thing about the judgment," said Bayla. "These guys believe in hell?"

"Not exactly. The penalty for them isn't fire, but being sent to a place that's completely empty. No animal life. Maybe not plants either. The dogma's not clear on the details. Except that you're alone forever."

"Yuk," said Jody.

Bayla shook his hand. "Well done, Captain." Moments later they intercepted a transmission aimed at the attack fleet. *Turn back. Abort mission.*

\* \* \*

The storyline wasn't great, but it was okay. It wasn't the narrative that caught our attention. It was entering the ring system at the gas giant. And watching stars pass steadily through the windows of the *Republic*. And looking down on other planets. The special effects took us for a serious ride.

"I think the magic," said Sara, "is knowing it was put together by people who believed it was coming." She was holding the disc in her hand.

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The show was a natural for the museum. There wasn't much background on the people who'd put it together, or on how many episodes they'd produced. But maybe that made it all the more interesting. In any case, it delighted the attendees, who grew rapidly in number. They seemed absorbed by the same features that had captured Sara and me: the sense of being out among the stars, of looking down on strange planets, of talking with aliens, and most of all of riding into the gas giant's ring system. And the reaction that we heard most frequently: If this was done by fans, what were the original shows like? There was a growing sense of loss.

It took a while, but eventually the Corley Brothers Broadcasting System picked up the scripts and began remaking the original *Star Trek* episodes. The retrotech procedure, which had eliminated any need for live actors, allowed them to produce the episodes with the original cast. The show rose rapidly to prominence. It was nominated in its first year for the Colbertson Prize.

Peter Harkins became a prominent figure in the media for having discovered the lost disc. And several physicists admitted having doubts about the impossibility of faster-than-light travel. We haven't actually had a breakthrough yet, but it might happen.

Meanwhile, *Star Trek* has gone well beyond the original seventy-nine episodes. And two other interstellar shows have surfaced. Last week the Cox Group ran a test in an effort to determine whether FTL was possible. It failed, but they called it the Warp Project. They're going to try again in six months.

We may actually get to the stars. If we do, we'll owe that accomplishment to Kirk and Spock. And to the group of enthusiasts in Kingsland, GA.