

CURRENT CINEMA

A person riding a horse through a tunnel in a jungle. The tunnel is made of brick and is surrounded by dense green foliage. The person is in the center of the frame, riding away from the viewer. The lighting is dramatic, with bright light coming from the end of the tunnel and deep shadows in the foreground.

**KINGDOM** OF THE  
**PLANET**  
OF THE  
**APES**

JOSH FRIEDMAN USHERS IN A  
NEW ERA OF SIMIAN SUPERIORITY

BY JEFF BOND

**SPOILER ALERT**  
**MAJOR PLOT POINTS ARE DISCUSSED**



The 2011 initial reboot of the 1968 sci-fi juggernaut *Planet of the Apes* ignited a glorious revival for the beloved franchise, the first of a new trilogy that used sophisticated motion-capture technology and digital effects to create the intelligent ape characters once rendered through prosthetic makeup. The three—2011's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, 2014's *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* and 2017's *War for the Planet of the Apes*—moved from the present day, where a lab-leaked virus causes a pandemic that gives apes human-like intelligence while killing off most of mankind, leading to the beginnings of an ape civilization in *Dawn* that finally concludes in *War*, with the series' longstanding protagonist Caesar (Andy Serkis) fighting humanity's last big military power to cement the dominance of the apes.

Even the near-future *War* seemed to leave the world of the original movie far into the future, as that is set in the year 3978. (To learn more about *War*, see *Backstory*'s cover story in our archive.) But now, some seven years later, the new entry *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*, directed by Wes Ball (the *Maze Runner* series), arrives, taking place generations after *War* and reflecting the iconography of the first film by resurrecting talking apes on horseback, warlike gorillas, humans as dumb brutes and X-shaped scarecrows. Screenwriter Josh Friedman, who co-wrote James Cameron's *Avatar* series and Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, collaborated with Ball and the husband-and-wife team of Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver—who wrote and produced the previous trilogy—to kickstart a new chapter. “I think the marching orders were to figure out how to make a movie or a series of movies going forward that were within that kind of canonical river, but we could kind of jump in at whatever point we really wanted to,” Friedman says. “To a degree, [*Kingdom*] talks to the previous three films, which it clearly does, and contemplates the future. That sort of grew organically over time.”



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Before the film reveals its third-act gorilla antagonist, Proximus Caesar (Kevin Durand), *Kingdom's* narrative follows a chimpanzee, Noa (Owen Teague), a scholarly orangutan he encounters named Raka (Peter Macon), and a mysterious human female. Noa initially lives in a remote village with the “Eagle clan,” an ape colony centered around the domestication of American eagles. Friedman credits Ball with the concept. “I remember having early conversations with him where he suggested they should be training eagles to hunt, and I don’t know if we started with hawks or maybe we were always on eagles, but we definitely were exchanging a lot of really cool falconry YouTube videos way back before we wrote anything. Domesticating animals and using other animals as tools is an interesting development for a particular society.” The screenwriter looked to a specific weakness of simians as an adjunct to their embrace of birds of prey. “They created this bond with the eagles because the eagles helped them hunt. One of the things I was always interested in is apes don’t swim. Apes are terrible swimmers, and so are they bound by this river on one side and on the other? How do they get fish? What if they train the eagles to get fish? It’s easy to kind of work from one to another.”





It was important to Friedman to make clear how apes speak, as so much time has passed since *War*, and unlike the previous films, which mostly featured only the leaders speaking, all apes here can talk, mirroring the original series. In his meetings with Ball, Friedman recalls a consistent emphasis on the magic ingredient of talking apes. “Wes will get up almost every day and jump around the room,” Friedman says of the director. “He does the voices. When he pitched to me, he was on the ground. And he’s great at it, by the way. I remember he said to me before we started, ‘You can’t forget how cool it is to watch apes speak.’ And we wanted to move the speaking a little further along and the different vocabularies for [the eagle clan] versus orangutans versus people who’ve been infected by knowledge from the humans, who long for the days when they ruled the earth, to kind of try to subtly differentiate those languages, the patterns and stuff like that. I think that is really important, because obviously people speak differently even 10 miles apart, especially if they’ve been isolated in a non-technological society. As a writer, I was always thinking we’ve got to figure out how they talk because watching them talk is just so fun. The question then becomes, How well do they speak? What do they use language for? And what other kinds of tools or ideas might they be moving toward?”





Friedman cites his experience on the *Avatar* movies as a proving ground for fleshing out the culture of *Kingdom*. “One of my favorite parts of *Avatar* is creating worlds and creating these subcultures, these rituals, and kind of making them feel really lived in and important. I think that was a huge part of the first act of the movie, because all apes are not equal in terms of how they’ve grown. Some of them are in the city, some in the country, and I always felt like [Noa’s] group was very isolated. And because of that, they had created a very particular set of rituals or a particular way they handled information, truth and language. I always felt like the elders handed down information. They weren’t abstract thinkers, they weren’t people who could see what was in the stars or what was beyond the river through the tunnel. It was a cloistered but very structured society—a nice place to live, but they had a very limited understanding of the world.”

As *Kingdom* plays out, after Noa has his village burned down by an army of marauding gorillas led by Proximus, he meets up with orangutan Raka, who imparts wisdom about the legacy of Caesar and ultimately disappears in a very Obi-Wan Kenobi-esque act of self-sacrifice on a river bridge. While the temptation to keep Raka alive was there, Friedman says the ape's death ultimately became a practical necessity. "It was actually a craft thing originally. It's not really a traditional third act of a movie, and there were a lot of characters to deal with. I think there was a point where I wrote about halfway into that third act with Raka alive. I love the guy, but we're introducing a whole new culture, a whole new bad guy. We just have so much going on, so maybe we need to [kill him off]. Hopefully, it's a good thing, and you get the sacrifices. I think [Raka] believes the work will continue." One route not taken was Friedman's original conception of Raka. "I wrote him as a faithless priest. I think those [orangutans] always end up sort of like the wise old owl, but originally my thought was he's a priest who's lost his faith or a religious figure who had believed a certain thing for a certain amount of time and had this thought about what humans could be or what the relationships could be, and it just never came to pass. And then his arc is, *Oh, my goodness, I was right, and the things I thought about Caesar were right.* I do think there was a day where I thought, *I wonder if in the middle of act three, he's brought in bound on a horse, and they found him, soggy, two miles down the river,* but I think it's better that we didn't [bring him back]."

