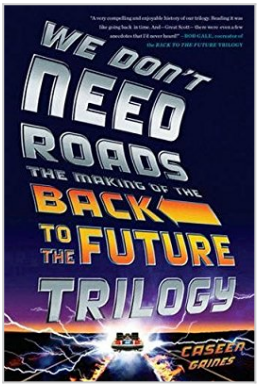

We Don't Need Roads: The Making of the Back to the Future Trilogy

By Caseen Gaines

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"A very compelling and enjoyable history of our trilogy. For me, reading it was like going back in time. And - Great Scott - there were even a few anecdotes that I'd never heard!"
– Bob Gale, co-creator, co-producer, and co-writer of the *Back to the Future* trilogy

A behind-the-scenes look at the making of the iconic *Back to the Future* trilogy

Long before Marty McFly and Doc Brown traveled through time in a flying DeLorean, director Robert Zemeckis, and his friend and writing partner Bob Gale, worked tirelessly to break into the industry with a hit. During their journey to realize their dream, they encountered unprecedented challenges and regularly took the difficult way out.

For the first time ever, the story of how these two young filmmakers struck lightning is being told by those who witnessed it. *We Don’t Need Roads* draws from over 500 hours of interviews, including original interviews with Zemeckis, Gale, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson, Huey Lewis, and over fifty others who contributed to one of the most popular and profitable film trilogies of all time. The book includes a 16-page color photo insert with behind-the-scenes pictures, concept art, and more.

With a focus not only on the movies, but also the lasting impact of the franchise and its fandom, *We Don’t Need Roads* is the ultimate read for anyone who has ever wanted to ride a Hoverboard, hang from the top of a clock tower, travel through the space-time continuum, or find out what really happened to Eric Stoltz after the first six weeks of filming. So, why don’t you make like a tree and get outta here – and start reading! *We Don’t Need Road*s is your density.

"What fun! Deeply researched and engagingly written … the book *Back to the Future* fans have been craving for decades. Geekily enthusiastic and chock full of never-before-heard tales of what went on both on and off the

screen, *We Don't Need Roads* is a book worthy of the beloved trilogy itself." – Brian Jay Jones, author of the national bestseller *Jim Henson: The Biography*

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Editorial Review

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"The most enlightening and informative book I've read since Grays Sports Almanac. Every true fan of the Holy Trilogy should own a copy... It's your density."
-Ernest Cline, DeLorean owner/Author of *Ready Player One*

"We Don't Need Roads is the truly fascinating story of how one of America's greatest movie franchises came to be. Caseen Gaines' in-depth research and unprecedented look at Robert Zemeckis' series proves that the journey to make a perfect movie is anything but perfect. It's a must read for any true *Back to the Future* lover and anyone who wants to peek behind the curtain to see how films get made." - Adam F. Goldberg, creator of ABC's *The Goldbergs*

"Read this book, then watch the movie for the umpteenth time. You'll appreciate *Back to the Future* all the more thanks to Caseen Gaines' muscular reporting and conversational writing style." - Michael Davis, New York Times bestselling author of *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street*

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“Impressively exhaustive...[*We Don't Need Roads* is] an enthusiastic and thorough oral history.” —NPR

“A must-read for Future fans, media studies students, aspiring filmmakers, and time-travel buffs.” —Library Journal

"An incredibly revealing look at a film series that helped change Hollywood...if you love movies, you should pick this book up." —io9.com

"Even if you are a hardcore fan, this book can at times feel like a revelation; like hitting-one’s-head-on-the-edge-of-a-toilet-and-suddenly-understanding-flux-capacitors revelations." —Film School Rejects

"Even the most knowledgeable *Future* fans will find much to learn from this intricately detailed and exhaustively researched book. But it's not just the depth of Gaines's knowledge and the scope of his interviews that impresses; he clearly adores these films and understands their importance to popular cinema, and that love and understanding shines through the text." - Jason Bailey, author of *Pulp Fiction: The Complete Story of Quentin Tarantino's Masterpiece*

“The 30th anniversary of the *Back to the Future* trilogy is the perfect time for a book celebrating and examining the greatest comedy science fiction time travel trilogy ever made. With over five hundred hours of interviews with key cast and crew members, Caseen Gaines’ book is a delightful way to travel back to the

future and relive those wonderful times with Marty McFly, his family, friends, and enemies – not to mention the inimitable Doc Brown. Strap into your DeLorean and get ready for the ride of your life!" - Marc Scott Zicree, author of *The Twilight Zone Companion*

"We Don't Need Roads is essential for any *Back To the Future* fan. Not only does Caseen Gaines offer up a meticulously crafted and entertaining account of one of the most beloved time-traveling franchises in movie history, but he uses his access to take an incisive look behind-the-scenes of Hollywood filmmaking. A must read for all pop culture aficionados."
Larry Landsman, author of *Planet of the Apes Revisited*

About the Author
Caseen Gaines is a popular culture historian. He is the author of *Inside Pee-wee's Playhouse: The Untold, Unauthorized, and Unpredictable Story of a Pop Phenomenon*, which received the 2012 Independent Publisher's Book Award - Silver Medal in the Popular Culture / Leisure category, as well as *A Christmas Story: Behind the Scenes of a Holiday Classic*. Caseen also directs theater and teaches high school English in New Jersey, where he lives. He aspires to be a Renaissance Man and fears being a jack of all trades.

NJ Advance/Landov

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Thursday, January 23, 2014

Murphy's Law—noun: The theory that, moments before an interview with Robert Zemeckis, one's audio recorder will malfunction.

At nine months into the research phase for this book, I knew I had put off calling Robert Zemeckis as long as I could. I was nervous about speaking with the creative brain behind some of my favorite films like *Forrest Gump*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and, of course, that epic time-travel trilogy. There were a million things I wanted to query him about, most of them having to do with the project I was working on. It wasn't so much that I was starstruck by the prospect of speaking with him, but when you have a chance to chat with a visionary whose work you respect and admire, it has a way of putting you on edge.

Or, at least, that's what I attribute my feelings to in hindsight. More likely it was because I had tangible evidence of the benefit of having Robert Zemeckis—or Bob Z, as he's known to friends, colleagues, and *Back to the Future* aficionados—on board for this book. A few weeks earlier, when I reached out to Christopher Lloyd's manager, he asked me if Zemeckis was on board. A line was drawn in the sand: The day I spoke to the director would be the day an interview would be scheduled with the Doc.

Challenge accepted. I hung up the phone with Lloyd's rep and retrieved the index card with Zemeckis's agent's phone number written on it, a three-by-five piece of card stock that had been haunting me ever since I'd scribbled on it four months earlier. Without jumping through too many hoops, I got a hold of Zemeckis's assistant, who promptly scheduled a half-hour interview for us, with only one request: "We respectfully ask

that you contain the time to the thirty minutes which we have allotted." No big deal, I thought, until a week later when it was six minutes before our scheduled interview and the software I use to record Skype calls on my computer stopped working.

It was 12:24 P.M. Pacific Standard Time. I was based on the East Coast, but had grown accustomed to working my day around what I reductively referred to as "Los Angeles Time." Each second became more and more important. There was no way I was going to call Bob Z late. Bob G—Bob Gale, cowriter and coproducer of *Back to the Future* and its subsequent sequels—had told me that Zemeckis rarely does interviews on his past work. His rep's words raced through my head, an LED sign outside the New York Stock Exchange. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster, with the print getting larger and larger—THIRTY MINUTES WHICH WE HAVE ALLOTTED. THIRTY MINUTES WHICH WE HAVE ALLOTTED. THIRTY MINUTES. THIRTY MINUTES. MINUTES. MINUTES.

By 12:29, I was stuck with no choice but to use my plan B. I took out my cell phone, deleted a few apps to ensure I had a surplus of memory, and called Zemeckis from my computer, silently praying the microphone on my handheld device was catching everything. I had consolidated all of my questions into six or seven bullet points of topics, deciding it might be easier to let the colloquy unfold naturally, while making sure I got what I needed within the confines of his schedule. And everything did work. Not only was the director a pleasure to speak with, but he was also refreshingly direct about his thoughts on the films and his contributions to cinema in general. Of the many takeaways from our conversation, the most substantial was his continuing pride and astonishment with the enduring legacy of a story that he and Gale had created more than three decades earlier, which wouldn't have seen the light of day were it not for their tenacity and unwavering commitment to their project.

Set up a Google alert for the words "Back to the Future" and a day won't go by without a headline from someplace in the world using the title, often without having any connection to the film. Like *Jaws* a decade earlier, *Future* set a new precedent for how to create a winning summer blockbuster. As Bob Gale likes to remind aspiring screenwriters, the three things that matter most in a story are characters, characters, and characters. For all of its special and visual effects, the true success of the film lies with Zemeckis and Gale's airtight script, and the distinctive characters that were brought to life by their talented cast. For the thirty years that followed the first film's release, the trilogy has continued to capture the imagination of a generation who, in turn, passed these movies on to their children like beloved family heirlooms.

I'm just young enough to have missed the film's theatrical run, but thanks to one of my aunts—who had what seemed like hundreds of VHS tapes when I was growing up—I had the fortunate and, for many *Future* fans, rare experience of being introduced to Hill Valley's inhabitants for the first time in a triple feature. It was a school day, but I had a slight fever and was sent home by the school nurse. With both of my parents at work, my Aunt Stacey, who worked nights, picked me up. "I think you'll enjoy these," she said as I sat on her couch under a blanket with some chicken soup beside me. I doubt she had any idea just how much I would. She put the first film in the VCR as I studied the cardboard sleeve of the box. The design, with that guy I recognized from TV with one foot in this strange vehicle and fire running between his legs, seemed magical. I couldn't stop studying it, looking for clues about what was going to unfold over the next few hours. I knew I was in store for a movie unlike anything I had seen before. As the end credits for the first and second installments started, I raced to switch the cassettes, trying my best to continue the story as quickly as possible. When the words "THE END" appeared on the screen in the last moments of *Part III*, I decided to let the credits roll in their entirety. By the time my mother came to pick me up, my fever was all but forgotten. I couldn't wait to go to school the next day and tell my friends about Marty McFly, his friend Doc Brown, and the wild adventures I had spent close to six hours watching them get into.

I have always been an avid reader of behind-the-scenes books about my favorite films and television shows,

as they went into greater detail than the standard promotional “making of” shows that would occasionally pop up on television in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the thirtieth anniversary of *Back to the Future* approached, I couldn’t believe that a comprehensive book on the making of one of the most culturally significant movies of the past three decades had yet to be written. My goal was to change that, not only by chronicling the filmmaking process, but also by showing how these three films left an indelible stamp on the United States and many other countries around the world.

When I set out to write this book, it was important for me to speak with as many people who were associated with *Back to the Future* as possible. The trilogy has been well documented for the past thirty years, in magazines, fan clubs, featurettes on VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray, and countless websites like BacktotheFuture .com, the digital hub for all things about the franchise. As one person put it to me, “What else can you say about a movie that has been written about continuously for the past thirty years?” But even with that abundance of information available, the mythology always felt somewhat incomplete to me. Too few people had retold the same stories too many times. A lot of the behind-the-scenes tales have become so commonplace, whether or not you know them has become a pseudo litmus test among the diehards to determine how big a fan of the film a new member of their tribe is. And I had a feeling that these stories may have been missing some of their original verve.

Throughout the researching process, I found that my suspicions were true. Many of the anecdotes that have been repeated over the years had been scrubbed clean, condensed to omit significant details, and/or told with minimal context. While interviewing my subjects, I encouraged them to push beyond their stock stories and really remember the past. Or, perhaps more appropriately, the *Future*. And they did. I could feel people discovering things they had long since forgotten, often with startling accuracy. It’s difficult for someone to remember everything they did last week, let alone three decades ago, but the more people I spoke to, the more stories were corroborated, and a comprehensive picture of what it was like to be a part of the team that made cinematic history became clearer.

As I learned working on my previous two books, there is rarely a person who works on a film who hasn’t accumulated an interesting anecdote or two. To that end, I was fortunate that so many people found it worth their time to spare a few minutes for me. In addition to Robert Zemeckis, Bob Gale, and Christopher Lloyd, whose manager came through on his promise, more than fifty additional people from all facets of production, including actors, producers, members of the camera crew, editors, graphic artists, costumers, and those involved with special and visual effects, signed on to make this project the largest *Back to the Future* reunion ever assembled. I also spoke with some people who didn’t work on the movies, but who are experts on the trilogy’s impact, including movie critics, documentarians, and fans who have gone beyond the call of duty to keep the embers glowing for their favorite franchise.

In writing this book, I relied heavily on more than five hundred hours of interviews I conducted over a twenty-one-month period. All of the quotes that appear in the pages that follow come from those conversations. Some of the quotes have been corrected for clarity, which was done extremely judiciously and with significant care for each interview subject. In scenes where conversations are reconstructed, the dialogue comes either from the account of one person or the synthesis of more than one person’s recollection of events. All of the information included has either been corroborated against other sources or reflects what had likely happened based on my appraisal of the validity of each speaker and the veracity of their memory. The result is a reconstructed time capsule of the making of the *Back to the Future* trilogy, by those who were there to have experienced it.

As my interview process progressed, I began to realize that this project isn’t simply about the making of one film trilogy, but is also about how some of the titans in the movie industry came into being. Even readers who are only casual fans of the films will find interesting pieces of information about the movie business,

from the perspective of some of Hollywood's best. At your leisure, look at the list of credits that *Future* alumni amassed prior to and since working on the films. While you may not recognize every person's name, virtually everyone I spoke with worked on other movies that have received a substantial bit of attention over the years, such as *Avatar*, *Blade Runner*, *Fight Club*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the original *Superman* franchise, and *Titanic*, to name just a few. They are incredibly talented visionaries, some of whom were already veterans when filming began in 1984, and others who were just getting started in the business. Regardless of their previous experience, they worked together to make a truly timeless film about time travel.

What follows is an amalgamation of their truth—a profile not only of a film series but, as I was reminded when I spent a half hour on memory lane with Zemeckis, of the beautifully normal and ordinary people whose creativity and passion produced an extraordinary trilogy. Some of the decisions they made were unconventional, yet they paid off, despite the odds. The trilogy has forever changed the landscape of cinema by redefining what a summer blockbuster could be, who could star in one, and under what improbable circumstances a trio of films could have a major impact around the world. You may not believe *Back to the Future* is the most important film trilogy of all time now, but after reading this book I bet you will.

So buckle up, because if my calculations are correct, when this baby hits eighty-eight miles per hour, you're going to see some serious shit.

1. THINK, MCFLY, THINK

Sunday, December 30, 1984

Filming had only been under way for less than a month, but already something wasn't quite right. On what should have been his day off, Robert Zemeckis made his way into the double-wide trailer that would remain parked behind the Amblin Entertainment compound for the next several months. Since all the editing rooms inside the studio offices were delegated to other projects, Steven Spielberg had arranged for coeditors Arthur Schmidt and Harry Keramidas to make the temporary structure their permanent workspace as they pieced together *Back to the Future*, Universal Pictures' film scheduled for release Memorial Day weekend.

The director made his way through the bullpen, which normally would have been buzzing with assistants and apprentices filing film trims and outtakes into the large cardboard boxes that lined the wall. But because it was a weekend, it was a virtual ghost town, with the exception of the two other living souls in the building, Schmidt and Keramidas. The editors were tucked away in the former's makeshift office, seated in front of a modestly sized monitor. Next to them sat a chair—the most comfortable chair in the office—that remained empty except during these visits from Zemeckis. Increasingly, these meetings had become fairly commonplace by this point in the shooting schedule, weeks after their November 26 start date. The production team expected principal photography to wrap after about twenty-two weeks of filming, meaning there would be fewer than three months between the last shot being captured and *Future*'s late May release date. As if the timeline weren't tight enough to begin with, there were several optical effects that would have to be added in postproduction by George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), further constricting the schedule.

To expedite the process, Zemeckis would come into the cutting room at the end of his shooting days and on weekends to look at scenes in the process of being put together. Zemeckis grew to trust his editors, especially Artie, who had been nominated for an Academy Award a few years prior for his work on *Coal Miner's Daughter*, another Universal release. His meticulous editing skills led him to be hired after a serendipitous meeting a few months earlier. "I was working on a film at Paramount called *Firstborn*, and we had two

young teenage boys in the movie," he says, likely referring to Christopher Collet and Robert Downey, Jr. "Bob was looking everywhere for somebody to play Marty. He called up the director, Michael Apted, and asked if he could see some film of the two boys. Michael didn't want to let the film out of the cutting room because he was still shooting, and I was close-cutting it as we went along, so he asked Bob to come look at the film on the editing machine with just me."

Zemeckis went over with his producers Bob Gale and Neil Canton to watch the three or four scenes Artie had prepared in advance. The editor ran the film, which, afterward, was met by silence. It seemingly grew louder by the second, until the visitors heard it broken by their host.

"What do you think?"

"I don't think either one of those boys is right for Marty McFly," Zemeckis said. "But I really like the way those scenes were edited." Schmidt's face filled with color, embarrassed that he may have been perceived as fishing for a compliment when he was merely trying to speed up the session and get back to work. He thanked the director for the kind words and the group went on their way. The seemingly inconsequential meeting took on new importance when, about three weeks later, Bob Z called for the editor to come over to his office at Universal for an interview. Schmidt went and was hired.

A second sit-down between Zemeckis and Schmidt soon followed. When there was a lull in the conversation, the editor asked who was cast in the role of Marty, since neither of the young actors they had scouted that fateful day was a match. "So far we haven't decided," Bob Z said. "The guy that I really want is . . ." He walked over to the coffee table in his office and picked up a teen magazine, which he opened to a page with a large photograph of a young heartthrob on it. "That's the guy that I really want to have to play Marty," he said, pointing at the picture. "But he's not available because he's doing his TV show."

Artie didn't know it at the time, but the search for the perfect Marty McFly was an arduous endeavor. When Universal Pictures green-lighted the film, the Bobs immediately set out to fill the pivotal role of *Future*'s protagonist. Although he wasn't in their minds as they wrote the screenplay, once it was finished, they both felt strongly that Michael J. Fox would make the perfect leading man. Today it seems that Fox was born to play Marty, but that was not the case when casting was under way in mid-1984. Yes, the Canadian actor was the linchpin of the popular television sitcom *Family Ties*, but to date he had only appeared in two major motion pictures—Disney's 1980 flop *Midnight Madness* and the moderately successful 1982 film *Class of 1984*, a film with a subtitle that foreshadowed the actor's eventual career-defining role: "We are the future . . . and nothing can stop us!"

In the late summer of 1984, even before the request was made to Michael Apted that resulted in Schmidt's hiring, Steven Spielberg called his friend, *Family Ties* producer Gary David Goldberg, to ask that Fox read the script and consider screen-testing for the role. Spielberg and Goldberg had met in 1979, after Kathleen Kennedy, who was the former's assistant and the latter's old friend from college, introduced the two. While Spielberg was in London filming *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Goldberg was flown overseas to join him, as the two were collaborating on a screenplay that was ultimately unmade called *Reel to Reel*, a semiautobiographical musical about a first-time director making a science fiction film. By the time *Future* was in preproduction, the two were not only friends, but also neighbors—they both owned beach houses within close proximity of each other in Malibu—and professional allies. Spielberg was one of the first people to see a rough cut of the *Family Ties* pilot back in 1982, and without any puffery, he told his friend that the show was guaranteed to be a hit and that his precocious actor playing the teenage son Alex was going to be a major star. When Zemeckis made it clear that Fox topped his short list of actors for Marty, Spielberg volunteered to give Goldberg a call directly, bypassing the traditional route of phoning an agent to broker a deal.

After a cursory perusal of the screenplay, the television titan decided that Fox wasn't going to be given the pages. Goldberg loved what he read and saw the potential for the film to be a success—but that threatened to derail all he had established with his sitcom. The show was experiencing a meteoric rise in the Nielsen ratings, from forty-ninth place in its first season into the top five within a three-year span, thanks in large part to *The Cosby Show* providing a strong lead-in. When Meredith Baxter, who played matriarch Elyse Keaton on the show, was pregnant with twins, the show's scripts were modified to rely more heavily on Fox's character. The twenty-three-year-old actor, who still had a boyish face and youthful demeanor, became a star, true to Spielberg's prediction, which led to increased attention for the show and teen magazine spreads like the one Zemeckis had on display in his office. Goldberg was confident that Fox would be interested in working on the film, thus distracting him and threatening the show's popularity. He wanted to help his friend, but Michael J. Fox, he said, was off-limits. The search for Marty McFly would have to continue.

So it did. As disappointed as the Bobs were with Fox's lack of availability, they were determined to press on and find the best second choice possible. Nothing about getting *Back to the Future* off the ground had been easy to that point, and as far as they were concerned, this was just the latest setback that they needed to overcome in the same way they always took on their problems—together.

The two had met on the first day of their Cinema 290 class in the fall semester of 1971 at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. A fast friendship soon followed. "We were among a handful of undergraduates in a mostly graduate class," Gale says. "We quickly discovered we had similar tastes in film. Bob was the only person I'd ever met who, like me, owned the soundtrack to *The Great Escape*."

They soon realized that, while the majority of their classmates were absorbed with the idea of creating highbrow cinema, they were more interested in making movies that average joes would want to see. More often than not, their free time was spent catching a showing of *Dirty Harry* or the latest *James Bond* flick, not discussing the leitmotifs throughout Akira Kurosawa's career. Movies, they believed, should be entertaining to the general public first and foremost; the added benefit would come when a person reflected on what they had just watched, and realized that there was more than they initially thought had met their eye. Zemeckis had aspirations of being a film director, while Gale dreamed of being a writer, and they decided to develop their common love for moviemaking as a team. Before graduation, they collaborated on each other's student films, including 1972's *The Lift* and 1973's *A Field of Honor*, as well as a screenplay for a horror movie Gale conceived about vampiric prostitutes, *Bordello of Blood*, which, little did they know at the time, would be turned into a movie more than two decades later with a completely rewritten screenplay by A. L. Katz and Gilbert Adler.

Their goal was for *Bordello* to become the first feature they would make together. The two continued to refine the script over their first postgraduate summer, but in order to get a foot in the door, they thought they might try their hand at television. Bob Z took to hanging around Universal Studios, having heard the legend that Steven Spielberg had done the same when he was a young wannabe filmmaker with a dream similar to Zemeckis's. Spielberg, the story goes, hung around the studios so much that he was eventually assumed to have been on contract and was offered a directing gig—a tall tale that makes for great Hollywood lore. While following in his idol's fabricated footsteps, Zemeckis overheard that the television show *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* was nearing cancellation, and established veteran writers were stepping away from the show. Perhaps, he thought, that could provide an opening for two hungry twentysomethings to try their hand at getting one of their stories on the air. The duo banged out a nine-page story treatment for an episode over a few weeks, which Universal purchased. It was the first moment of affirmation that their shared dream of being filmmakers just might come true, and that they might prove their skeptical parents wrong when it happened.

Success knocked swiftly twice more. The Bobs wrote an episode for *McCloud* that was optioned—industry

jargon for a producer officially reserving the right, for an agreed-upon time, to purchase a script at a later date—and another script for *Get Christie Love!*, a short-lived series perhaps best remembered now as being name-checked in the opening sequence of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. Universal saw potential in the Bobs to be great television writers and offered them a seven-year contract to pen for some of the company's NBC shows, netting each half of the team $50,000 a year through the length of the agreement. Gale's father, who, like Zemeckis's parents, already thought his son was nuts for enrolling at USC with the hopes of becoming a professional filmmaker, was convinced he had raised an idiot when he was told that the Bobs, under the advice of their recently acquired agents and lawyers, were declining the deal.

Instead of relying on that steady paycheck, the two abandoned television and decided instead to concentrate on their big-screen aspirations. They finished another screenplay they wrote on spec named *Tank* and brought it to fellow USC alum John Milius, an uncredited cowriter of the first two *Dirty Harry* films and *Jaws*, who was just a few years away from receiving an Academy Award nomination for his *Apocalypse Now* screenplay. The writer was under contract at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) with a deal to direct two films and produce two others. He was taken with the Bobs' screenplay, but thought they might have a better idea. They pitched another story they had been kicking around, a period comedy set in Los Angeles immediately after the start of World War II. By the end of the meeting, Milius agreed to produce the film, based primarily on the strength of their well-developed concept and enthusiasm. After the Bobs expanded their idea into a formal script, Milius pitched the film to Spielberg, who was already well acquainted with Zemeckis. The director bit, and *1941* began its trek to production.

Bob Z's relationship and friendship with Spielberg began when the former was a student at USC and the latter visited the campus to screen his first film, *The Sugarland Express*. Zemeckis attended the screening, approached Spielberg afterward, and asked if the director would like to see his 1973 student film, *A Field of Honor*, for which Zemeckis had won a Student Academy Award. Within a few days, the two were watching the fourteen-minute short at Spielberg's office. While Spielberg was still years away from becoming a household name at the time of his visit to USC, the director was already establishing a reputation as someone to watch. Sid Sheinberg, who was vice president of production for Universal's television division at the time, saw Spielberg's 1968 student film *Amblin'*, which later inspired the name of the director's production company, and offered him a long-term directing deal. Although *1941* followed the success of *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, it failed to replicate those films' profitability at the box office. The movie became Spielberg's first to not recoup its budget in domestic box office gross, though it did return a profit on the studio's investment with overseas markets factored in.

While *1941* was in production, Spielberg signed on to executive-produce *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*, a screenplay the Bobs wrote and which Universal picked up. This time Zemeckis would direct. The movie was released in 1978, and two years later Columbia Pictures released their second film, *Used Cars*. The Bobs put their hearts and souls into both, but while critics loved them, as with *1941*, the movies failed to connect with the general public. "It wasn't that *Hand* and *Used Cars* weren't well received—we had dynamite sneak previews for both," Gale says. "We simply never had audiences show up on opening day."

"Zemeckis's early films he made with his writing partner Bob Gale just have such an incredible kinetic energy," film critic Leonard Maltin says. "They seem to be supercharged with adrenaline. That's what I think about first and foremost. I love *Used Cars*, and I'll never understand really why that didn't become more. Even over the years it never really built the following that it deserves, but I don't know why. Is it too snarky? Too cynical? I don't know. Maybe just the name *Used Cars* connotes something that people don't find appealing."

Although Columbia Pictures only made a minuscule profit on *Used Cars*, with the movie earning $11.7 million against an $8 million budget, Frank Price, the head of the studio, wasn't ready to give up on the two

young filmmakers. The movie had received the highest ratings in test screenings in the studio's history, and what did it matter that few people saw it, really? Those who did thought it was hilarious—the studio head included. Shortly after the film was released, Price asked the Bobs to bring their next idea to him as soon as they had one—which, as it turned out, was sooner than expected, as an idea had been marinating between the two filmmakers.

Just a few weeks before Price approached them, Bob G was in his hometown of St. Louis to do some publicity for *Used Cars* and attend the local premiere of his film. While visiting his parents' house, he discovered his father's 1940 University City High School yearbook. Before he was the patriarch of the Gale family, Bob's father was the senior class president, a fact the filmmaker hadn't known until he stumbled across his dad's black-and-white photo. As Bob stared at the face on the printed page, he realized his own time as a student must have been very different from his father's. The younger Gale, who graduated from the same school in '69, would never have run for student government. Although he achieved straight-A's, he wasn't one of the eggheads. He loved music—not rock and roll, like some of the other students, but movie scores. His spare time was spent reading comic books or science fiction novels, making movies, or working in the art studio. Girls were interesting but expensive, so he didn't date until his senior year. As a student, he had a wide range of interests, but making speeches in front of his peers and hanging up GO WITH GALE or BET ON BOB posters in the hallways was not among them. The young filmmaker's mind went into overdrive while he stared at his father's yearbook photo. He couldn't help but wonder: If he and his father had attended school at the same time, would they have been friends?

The Bobs had been trying to come up with a time-travel story since they'd begun collaborating on scripts, having both been influenced heavily by H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, as well as Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* television series, but couldn't come up with an original idea worthy of being told. However, as Gale packed the yearbook away, he thought he had come up with the germ of a great idea. When he returned to Los Angeles, he shared his thought with his collaborator. Zemeckis saw the potential in the concept and started adding his own extemporaneous suggestions into the mix: *What if your mom, who always said she had never kissed a boy while a teenager, was actually the school slut?* They quickly fleshed out some additional details of their story and brought the idea to Frank Price.

It took the studio head less than three minutes to realize that their project was a winner. During the pitch, Gale sensed that Price was interested, but it took Zemeckis a bit longer to read the tea leaves. The director's enthusiasm led him to prattle on with minor plot details and gags that the duo had come up with. After a few minutes of monologue, his partner gave him a nudge, stopping Bob Z just long enough for the two to be offered a development deal at Columbia to expand their idea into a screenplay.

Within a few days, the two got to work. "Bob and I always sat in the same room, usually our office, and talked through everything," Gale says. "We would first outline the movie on index cards and put them up on a corkboard on the wall. Once we had a structure and plan for the film, we'd start with the first scene and talk it through. We'd work out the dialogue in each scene together, and I'd make detailed notes."

"It was a true collaboration," Zemeckis adds. "We were very much in sync, and when a good idea got sparked, it was pretty much just back-and-forth, talking everything through. We said everything that came to our minds; we were never worried that we might be saying something that wasn't a good idea or a valid idea. Anything that we thought of, we would run it up the flagpole for the other guy because you just never know. You never know what might spark another idea."

"Because I could type and Bob couldn't, each night I'd type up the day's work into script form," Gale continues. "When we started writing the first draft, I was using a manual typewriter which I'd had since I was a college freshman and I still have to this day. I don't recall if I made carbon copies as I typed, or if we

xeroxed the pages the next day. Either way, the result was that Bob Z had a copy of what I typed up. We moved into the next scene, and when I was typing that day's work, Bob would review the typed pages I'd given him that morning, making notes, revisions, whatever. I never read what I typed until there was a complete script. That way, I could read it from beginning to end and get a sense of the pace, which Bob could not do, since he dealt with it scene by scene."

This process continued until, on February 21, 1981, the two completed the first draft of *Back to the Future*. While the main crux of the story that materialized on-screen is present—boy has crackpot inventor friend, crackpot inventor has time machine, boy is accidentally sent back in time and disrupts his parents' first meeting—there are several significant differences between that screenplay and what made it to the screen. In this script, Marty McFly was a video pirate, running a secret black market operation with his friend Professor—not Doc—Brown, who had a pet chimpanzee named Shemp. His girlfriend's name is Suzy, his mother's is Eileen, Marty travels back to 1952, and his parents have their first kiss while the band Lester & the Moonlighters plays Eddie Fisher's 1951 single "Turn Back the Hands of Time" at the Springtime in Paris dance.

Frank Price still thought the general conceit of the movie was good, but believed the screenplay was too rough around the edges. The Bobs, ever hopeful, went back to their office with index cards in tow. "Inevitably, our opinion regarding our own first rough draft was that it was terrible," Gale says. "This was true with every script we'd ever written. We proceeded to revise, deconstruct, and overhaul the work."

A second draft was completed on April 7. Price thought their second go-around was better, but he passed on giving *Future* the green light. *Used Cars* was a raunchy comedy, Zemeckis's only R-rated film until 2012's *Flight*, and Price was hoping the Bobs would bring him another picture that fit that mold. A quaint movie about a kid trying to fix up his parents might make a good film, but as far as Price was concerned, he didn't know anyone besides himself who would be interested in seeing it. The script was given back to the filmmakers in what is known in the industry as a turnaround deal, an arrangement whereby a studio—for example, Universal—can purchase the rights to a script developed at another studio—like Columbia—so the original studio can recoup their initial investment.

Which was precisely what happened. The Bobs were free to take their script to other movie studios, which initially proved to be less than fruitful. From Paramount to Universal, 20th Century Fox to Warner Bros., every executive they met with asked them a variation of the same question: *What about Steven?* Spielberg was interested in executive-producing *Future*—he saw the potential in Zemeckis and Gale's script and the ingenuity of their idea—but the Hollywood heavyweight was asked to stand down during the pitch process. The Bobs liked working with him, but their first two films had underperformed. They were afraid that if that precedent continued, they would never be given an opportunity to make another for a major studio. Even worse, they would be perceived among those in the industry as two people who scored undeserved opportunities to waste studio money because of their friendship with one of the most profitable directors of the past decade. Thus, Zemeckis asked his friend for some space in an attempt to prove he could stand on his own two feet.

As the Bobs continued to shop the film around to every studio in Hollywood and back again, they frequently heard that *Future*'s script was too saccharine to attract the rebellious youth of the 1980s. Although history would ultimately prove them wrong, one can't fault the uniform thought process of notoriously risk-averse film executives. In the four years that it took for the duo to convince a studio to finance and release their picture, R-rated teen comedies like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Porky's*, and *Risky Business* were all huge hits at the box office. Not only that, but three time-travel films also hit cinemas—*The Final Countdown*, *Somewhere in Time*, and *Time Bandits*—and only the latter was a modest success. The record was set and well corroborated: raunchy comedies made money; time-travel movies did not. All of the studios

passed on it primarily for those reasons, except for Tom Wilhite, the vice president in charge of development for feature films and television at the Walt Disney Company, who had his own complaints. The suit was appalled by the scene with Marty and his teenage mother sharing a brief, awkward kiss in Doc's yellow Packard convertible. The movie was officially a nonstarter—too provocative for Disney and not provocative enough for any other studio.

Although the Bobs both hoped to see *Back to the Future* made, reality soon set in. It was nice to continue to pursue a dream, but it was better to have money so they could eat. The Bobs got an opportunity to set up *Gangland*, a gangster movie for a short-lived feature film division of the ABC television network, but about five weeks into preproduction the company killed the picture. The project wasn't one that either Bob was particularly jazzed about, but it was the final straw for Zemeckis. He was tired of running on the hamster wheel—developing an idea, writing a script, pitching to studios, and then repeating the process, only to watch a green light go red, or fail to turn green at all. He informed his partner that he would direct the next decent script that came by. Gale understood. No hard feelings.

As if he spoke it into being, a screenplay that appealed to Zemeckis's interests soon landed in his lap. He was offered to direct Michael Douglas, Kathleen Turner, and Danny DeVito in 1984's *Romancing the Stone*, a romantic comedy-action film about a woman from the big city embarking on an adventure that takes her through the jungles of Colombia. The film, which marked the director's first collaboration with Dean Cundey, was shot primarily on location in Mexico. Although the director and cinematographer got on well, the shoot was occasionally problematic, with Turner frequently becoming frustrated with Zemeckis's style of directing. She thought he was a bright-eyed kid fresh out of film school, more preoccupied with the cameras and special effects than he was attentive to his actors. The director not only failed to impress his leading lady, but he, more detrimentally, failed to win any accolades from the studio executives at 20th Century Fox.

"He wasn't the Bob Zemeckis that we all know now, with all the fabulous films. He had made those other two movies, which, financially, had not done well at all," Clyde E. Bryan, who served as first assistant cameraman on *Romancing the Stone*, says. "Instead, the studio executives were counting on a picture called *Rhinestone* to be a huge hit. It was with Dolly Parton and Sylvester Stallone. It was an awful combination, a terrible movie. They put tons and tons and tons of money into that movie. They spent almost no money on *Romancing the Stone*, and at one point they had sent the bonds people down there to pull the plug on it. It was, at that time, not a very expensive movie, nine or ten million dollars. They just had no idea about how it would perform."

"It was kind of a different film for the period," Cundey says. "When they saw the first rough cut of *Romancing the Stone*, one of the guys at the studio said that he thought the film was unreleasable." While the director continued to work with his editors on the final cut and reshoots, the bottom was falling out beneath him. He was pegged to direct another film for Fox, the science fiction/fantasy film *Cocoon*, but after the producers of that project received a tip that *Romancing the Stone* was anticipated to perform poorly in theaters, Zemeckis was fired. It was clear: Zemeckis's chances were running out. He needed a hit or he would be denied any further opportunities to direct another motion picture for a major studio.

Then, despite the forecast, the sky opened up. *Romancing the Stone* was released in theaters on March 30, 1984, earning a respectable $5.1 million in its opening weekend. The following week it performed even better. Contrary to industry expectations, the movie was not only a financial success, but it was Fox's only hit of the year. By the time the film ended its theatrical run, it had grossed over $76.5 million domestically, nearly four times what *Rhinestone* brought in. Almost instantaneously, Zemeckis became a director in demand, with *Back to the Future* becoming a hot property by extension. The Bobs were back and it was no longer a question of whether or not their time-travel movie would see the light of day. The only question was which studio would be financing it.

Zemeckis didn’t want to give any of his fair-weather Hollywood friends who had rejected *Future* over the preceding years the courtesy of producing his picture. The answer, then, was to go back to the only person who had believed in the project from the start—Steven Spielberg. He had recently entered the record books with *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, which had banked $359 million to surpass *Star Wars* as the highest-grossing film of all time. Although his stature in the industry had risen dramatically since he’d first read the Bobs’ *Future* script, the producer still wanted in. *Back to the Future* became the first project set up at Amblin Entertainment that Steven Spielberg would not direct himself—a testament to the trust the mentor had in his mentee.

After joining the *Back to the Future* team, the executive producer pitched the project to Universal, where the Amblin offices were located. Serendipitously, Frank Price was now president after having left Columbia in 1983. Spielberg held a grudge against the executive for passing on *E.T.* when he was still at his previous movie company, and stated that if Universal wanted to be a part of *Back to the Future*, Price would have to be involved as minimally as possible. “Frank Price never had an intimate relationship with Steven,” Sid Sheinberg says. “He was very much under the influence of a fellow by the name of Marvin Antonowsky who came from the world of research. The problem with the world of research is that sometimes you come to the wrong conclusions.” In a highly unusual move, Sheinberg appointed himself to chief executive in charge of looking out for the studio’s investment in the film. After four years of rejections, the Bobs finally got the green light they had been hoping for.

With the ball finally rolling, a production team had to be rounded out. With Spielberg came Frank Marshall and his former assistant Kathleen Kennedy, two producers who, in 1981, cofounded Amblin after they achieved success with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Although the Bobs had a relationship with Spielberg, it was clear that this was a project that would have interested the Amblin Trio even if it had arrived at their offices unsolicited. “I thought the screenplay was terrific,” Frank Marshall says. “I couldn’t understand why no one wanted to make it. It’s one of the best scripts I’d ever read.”

Frank Marshall suggested Neil Canton join the team, whom he had previously worked with on 1972’s *What’s Up, Doc?* “He had this script and asked me if I would read it,” Canton says. “I read it, loved it, called him the next day, and told him. It made me laugh. I was moved by it. The idea of a time-travel story was something that I totally was in love with.” Later that day, Canton, Zemeckis, and Gale met for lunch in Burbank. The three hit it off and the production team was complete.

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