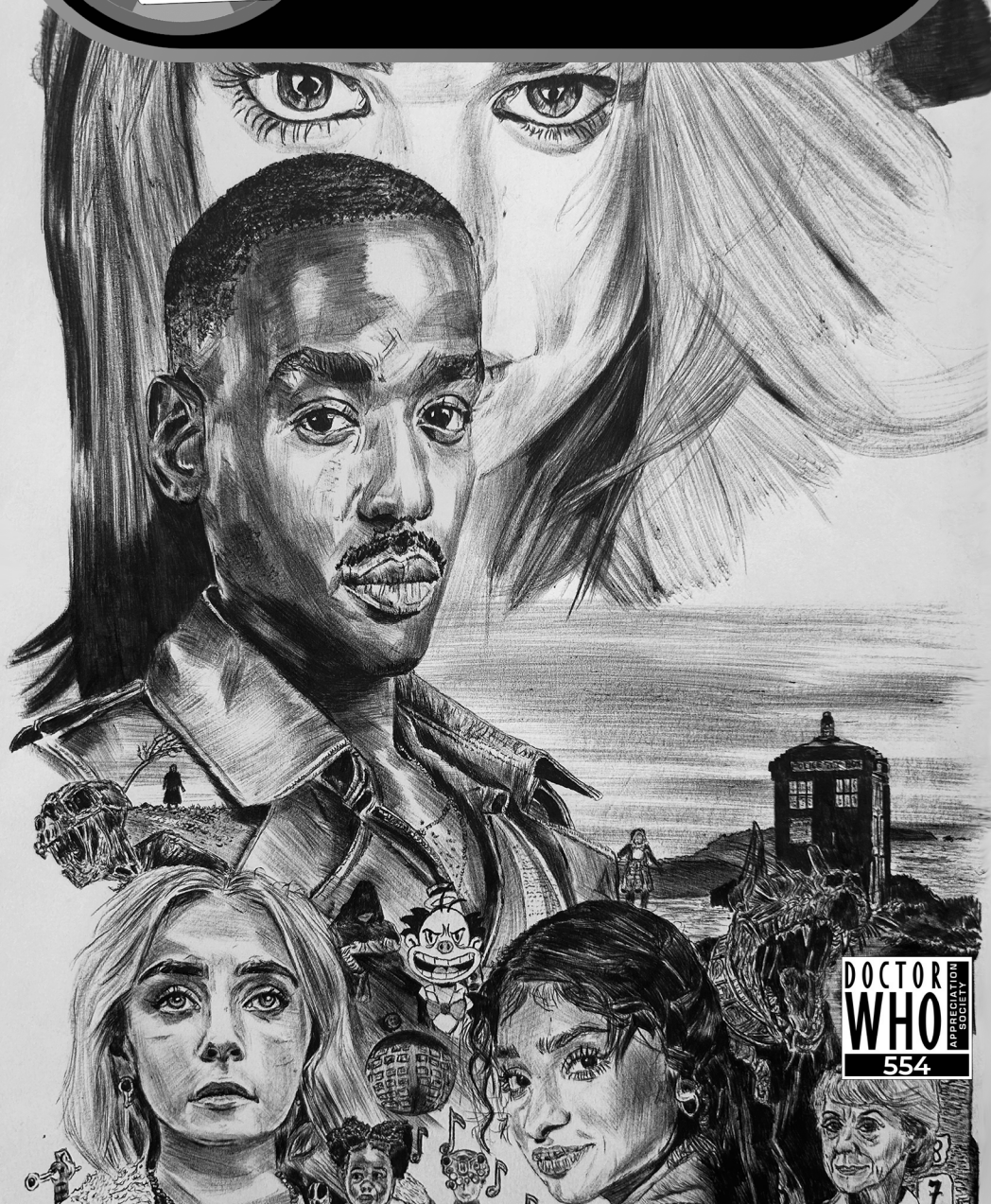




CELESTIAL TOYROOM



DOCTOR
WHO
554
APPRECIATION
SOCIETY



Hello there, and welcome to your September issue of *CT*! Once again, we've got another issue packed full of *Doctor Who* content for you to enjoy.

Top of the list, of course, is finishing off our coverage of Series 15, and the Ncuti Gatwa era as a whole! It doesn't feel like it was that long at all since *The Reality War* went out, but in this empty space while we wait for new *Doctor Who* it also seems like an age! Personally, I'm sad to have seen Ncuti Gatwa depart the role of the Doctor – he shaped his incarnation into one distinct from what had gone before, showing that after almost 62 years *Doctor Who* can still break new ground. With the most recent series shaping up better than the one that went before, it seems like a hypothetical Fifteenth Doctor-led Series 16 would have been firing on all cylinders. Of course, that's not to be – but it would be fascinating to find out what was intended.

The end of the most recent series has also meant that I've gathered in your opinions of recent *Doctor Who* for the annual poll. Overall, I'm mostly in agreement with the results but do think that *Space Babies* deserved to leapfrog a few other stories into a higher position!

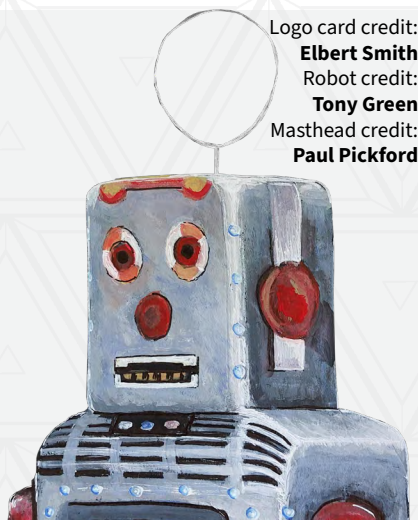
Polling aside, this issue also brings you *CT*'s regular mix of features, reviews and comment. The new New Adventurers are continuing their journey as they meet Professor Bernice Summerfield for the first time, while I spoke with author Una McCormack about her career and the process of novelising *The Robot Revolution*. I hope you'll find plenty to enjoy inside!

Best wishes,

James

ct@dwasonline.co.uk

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***Celestial Toyroom* 554**



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Editor: **James Ashway**

Front cover: [@Artfully Liam](#) on Instagram

Editorial Assistant: **John Ashway**

Honorary President: **Colin Baker**

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Celestial Toyroom

12 September 2025

Extra edition

3p

Goodbye Gatwa-Fifteenth Doctor regenerates!

The Fifteenth Doctor and friends successfully save reality, but not without cost

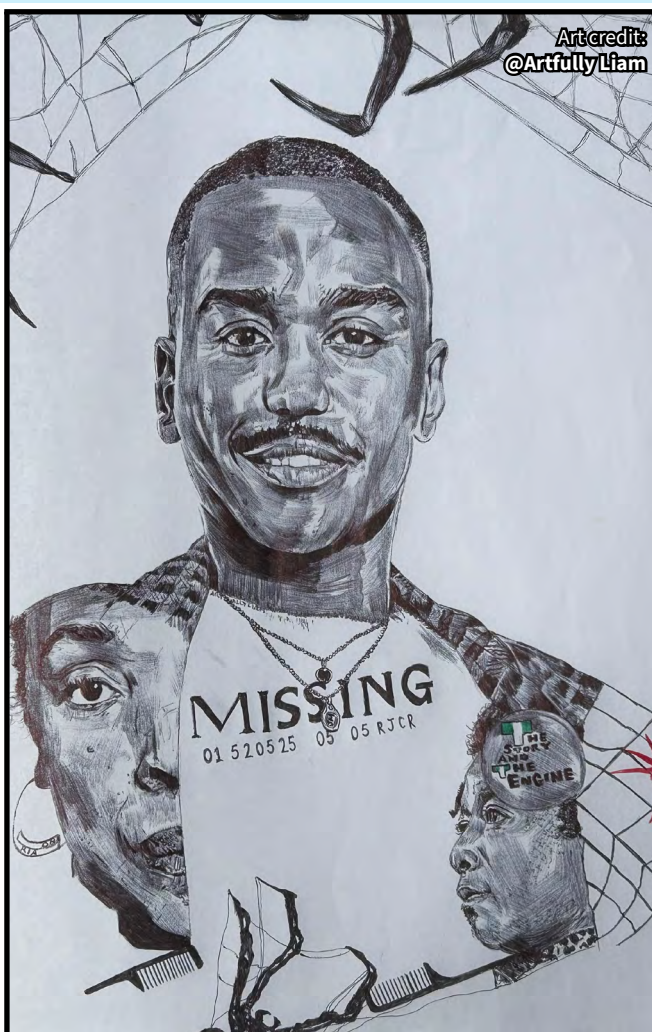
The Story & The Engine

Harry Jones

Reviewer At Large

Series 15 has been full of firsts, from the first TARDIS team of colour to the first animated villain. Now, *The Story & the Engine* has sent *Doctor Who* to somewhere it's never really been before – Africa. While there have been occasional forays to the continent in serials like *The Daleks' Master Plan*, there's never been a story set primarily in Africa until now. Written by playwright and poet Inua Ellams, the story draws on the culture of Nigeria, and Africa more widely, as *Doctor Who* breaks new ground.

Ellams' story draws upon his play, *Barber Shop Chronicles*, which explored the idea of the barbershop as a place for many Black men to talk freely without fear of persecution. These themes are introduced early on as the Doctor discusses the importance of the barbershop with Belinda before heading out into



Art credit:
@ArtfullyLiam

Lagos. It turns out that this sanctuary has been violated, however, and the Doctor's outrage at Omo for his part in this highlights how marginalised communities can feel when their spaces are lost.

What follows is something unlike any other *Doctor Who* story that has gone before. *The Story & the Engine* is a story of stories, and so its visuals have to be top notch. The window onto the stories, the striking visual of the barbershop on the spider and the use of braids in the final act all help to sell this world and incorporate Nigerian culture into the Whoniverse in a respectful and interesting manner. The only visuals I was a little unsure about were the use of further flashbacks to past Doctors. Although well-realised, the show may benefit from a 'less-is-more' approach.

It's also a story that's dependent on its characters, and once again *The Story & the Engine* delivers. Omo, Rashid, Tunde and Obio-ma all feel well-rounded and not stereotypical, even though the latter three only have the briefest of character sketches. The performances manage to elevate figures that could have just gawped at the Doctor's brilliance into more interesting roles. They work well alongside the performances of Ariyon Bakare as the Barber and Michelle Asante as Abena, who successfully transition their characters' viewpoints throughout the

course of the story. There's also time for a brief cameo from Jo Martin, and it's good to see the first Black Doctor in the first story that properly gets to grips with African culture. Nonetheless, I'd still like a bit more of an explanation about where the Fugitive Doctor sits in relation to the rest of *Who*.

"What follows is something unlike any other *Doctor Who* story..."

Looking back, my only real gripe with *The Story & the Engine* is the fact Belinda does not really feel at home in the story. There are some good attempts on Ellams' part to integrate her, whether it's Belinda talking about her family trip to India or the Doctor telling stories about her selflessness, but it still feels like any other companion could really slot in here. Sethu puts in a great performance with the material she is given, but I'd have liked to have seen some more character work.

Though I have some reservations, *The Story & the Engine* is ultimately successful in pioneering a new kind of *Doctor Who* story. It's a stellar example of how representation and diversity, in combination with strong writing and visuals, can lead to strong stories not just in *Doctor Who* but the wider media landscape.

Telling new stories

The Story & The Engine breaks new ground for *Who*

Kara Dennison

Columnist Extraordinaire

This is, truly, everything I want in a *Doctor Who* story. A script that speaks in the voice of its writer while also telling a solid *Doctor Who* story. A hat-tip to what's come before. A deep dive into all the fantastical places the Doctor could have gone and a look at what this Doctor truly longs for deep down in his hearts. The acting from the guest cast was incredible, too.

Most of all, though, I learned something. We can often forget that *Doctor Who* was initially intended to be educational about science, history and culture. *The Story & the Engine* showed me so many things I didn't know and how those things share a very human DNA with things with which I was already familiar. And that's sort of the point, isn't it? I will certainly be looking up *Barber Shop Chronicles* to learn more about the inspiration behind this story and the work of Inua Ellams.

From the National Theatre to *Doctor Who*



The Interstellar Song Contest

The *Interstellar Song Contest*, seemingly, was always going to be a contentious episode. A lot of naysayers online were already writing it off before it had even aired, presumably because of their aversion to Eurovision or camp. In contrast, Russell T Davies let it be known that this would be a darker and more complex episode than audiences might expect. In the end, *The Interstellar Song Contest* turned out to be a layered and fun visual treat, but one with a couple of flaws.

“...billed as the most expensive episode of *Doctor Who* ever made.”

When taking on the mantle of Eurovision, you have to go big. And *The Interstellar Song Contest* does, with the cost of its costumes, sets and CGI leading it to be billed as the most expensive episode of *Doctor Who* ever made. This budget allows for some breathtaking visuals, of which the most striking is the scene where the audience is pulled into space and frozen. From the tiniest details of liquid floating upwards to the wide shots showing the station open to space, the entire section is realised in grisly detail. Similarly impressive, but significantly lighter, is

the scene where the Doctor uses a confetti canon to get back to the space station. Although it swaps the cricket ball out, it's interesting to see how a similar sequence in 1982's *Four to Doomsday* (and its scientific inaccuracy) is updated for the 2020s.

Of course, strong visuals count for only so much, and Dawson's script attempts to explore the political aspects of song contests. The demonisation of the Hellions by the Corporation reflects how monolithic organisations and governments can perpetrate devastating violence but often face very few consequences. Similarly, the spilling over of conflict into non-violent

competitions represents how Eurovision and sporting championships can become political because of who is, or isn't, allowed to compete.

In this aspect, I think Dawson's script manages to explore parallels with ongoing wars in Ukraine and Palestine well. But when it comes to the Doctor's response to the attack of the *Interstellar Song Contest*, I'm conflicted. While this aspect of *The Interstellar Song Contest* demonstrates Ncuti Gatwa's range as an actor, and shows Belinda just how little she really knows the Doctor, I'm not sure how to feel about our protagonist torturing someone. Previ-



ous incarnations have occupied moral grey areas, such as the Ninth Doctor electrocuting the lone Dalek, but the groundwork had been laid out first. That wasn't present here, so it feels like the Doctor is just acting out of vengeance rather than justice or the preservation of life. It's possible that this questionable behaviour could be part of a longer-term arc from RTD, but I'm not convinced it is.

Fortunately, the story's cast of Hellions are able to smooth over some of these ethical issues. Iona Anderson, with little nods, con-

“...an episode that sometimes focuses too much on style over substance.”

veys Wynn's half-hearted commitment to the cause with deftness. Miriam-Teak Lee, as Cora, brings both an excellent voice and an emotional depth to a Hellion who's lived out her life on Trion. But most of the time is given over to Freddie Fox' Kidd, who is a strong voice in the story and brings the tragedy of the Hellions' past

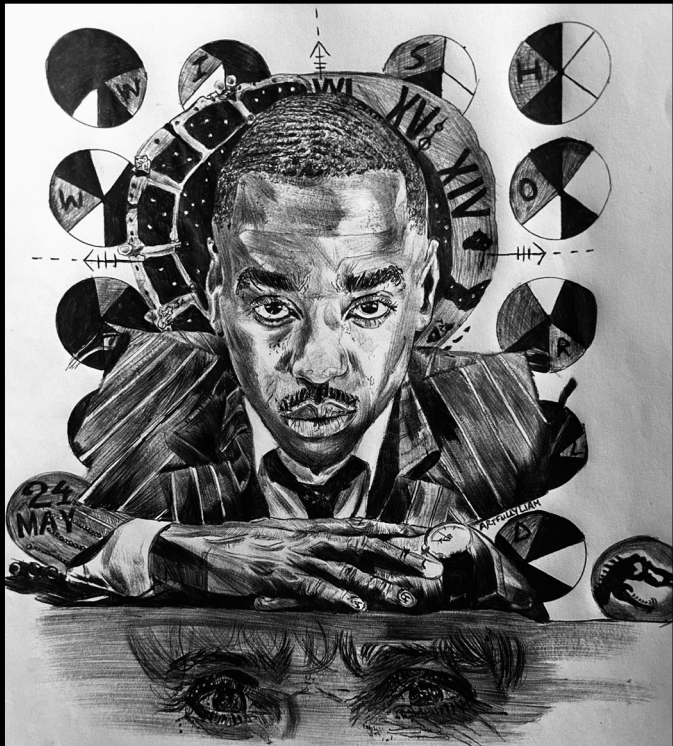
to bear. That said, he does come away as the least interesting of this trio, feeling a little too much of a caricatured villain in places.

Overall, *The Interstellar Song Contest* offered up some interesting but flawed commentary in an episode that sometimes focuses too much on style over substance – arguably like the very song contest it's based upon. While I can appreciate the visual spectacle and the return of Susan and the Rani, this episode raises a lot of questions that seem destined to never be answered.

Wish World

Modern *Doctor Who* is no stranger to bending reality, but it feels like it has been a while since this happened on such a large scale. *Wish World* is an interesting return to this style of story, feeling not dissimilar to *Human Nature*. Just as David Tennant's Doctor became a teacher at the Farringham School for Boys, Ncuti Gatwa's incarnation has integrated himself into life on Earth as familiar cast members play altered versions of their normal characters. But, 18 years on, does this approach still work?

“Time isn't wasted in setting up how cruel the Rani can be...”



Art credit:
@ArtfullyLiam

In my mind, the answer is yes. *Wish World* hits the ground running with a proper introduction to Archie Panjabi's Rani. Time isn't wasted in setting up how cruel the Rani can be as she turns a Bavarian family into violets, an owl and ducks. Panjabi's performance pays tribute to Kate O'Mara's acting choices while playing it her own way, tormenting the Doctor and his companion in a fantasy world of her own. Though I was slightly worried Russell T Davies was falling back on former glories when the Rani requested music, in a way similar to John Simm's Master, this incarnation of the Rani ultimately proves herself to be distinct from the other Time Lords.

The heart of the story, however, is focused on how the Rani's impact on reality has reshaped familiar characters. Ncuti Gatwa and Varada Sethu are excellent as ever, and dramatically adjust their characters to

suit this new world. Their unexplainable discomfort at their uncomfortably idyllic family life is well-realised, from Belinda's doubts over Poppy's existence to John Smith's gradual unravelling as the world's unreality becomes undeniable. The duo perfectly judge how to shift their characters as reality catches up with them, adding a real sense of unease into the story.

“...*Wish World* is a well-acted piece of television...”

The UNIT team are equally good, aided by pitch perfect costuming and set design. Jemma Redgrave, Alexander Devrient and Susan Twist blend well into their new surroundings as they become concerned about John Smith's questioning of their world. Millie Gibson and Ruth Madeley, meanwhile, form a good duo to

explore how Conrad's imagination overlooks certain aspects of society, giving them a very different perspective on proceedings.

If I have one complaint, it's that the reveal that the Rani is looking for Omega perhaps lacks punch. While Conrad had summarised who the Time Lord engineer was, I'm not convinced how much of an impact this will have on newer viewers unfamiliar with *The Three Doctors*, *Arc of Infinity* or various Big Finish stories. I'm also still a little scarred by the fumbling of Sutekh's return last season, and concerned that this plotline is destined to go the same way.

In the meantime, however, *Wish World* is a well-acted piece of television that allows new and returning cast members to show off their acting range. In a sea of strong performances, Archie Panjabi offers a show-stealing performance as the Rani. And now, it's time for the conclusion...

The Reality War

Appropriately for an episode called *The Reality War*, this was a story whose fictional narrative was dictated by events beyond the fourth wall. Rumours of reshoots and departures had persisted for a while before *The Reality War* made it to the screen, and these appear to have been borne out by the finished product. With villains to defeat, companions to

say farewell to and a Doctor to regenerate, there's a lot that it has to get through in very little time. And while *The Reality War* manages to answer many questions from the past two series of *Doctor Who*, it leaves many others open – the biggest being “what if?”

The Reality War is an ambitious tale that shakes up major parts of *Doctor Who* lore. The biggest, perhaps, is the revelation that the Time Lords are sterile.

While this idea has popped up previously in the Virgin New Adventures novels, it's the first time the concept has been brought into the show itself. However, a lot of the details around this major change are quite vague, including when this occurred – was it during the Time War, the Master's genocide or another event entirely? Regardless, this perhaps gives the Doctor, the Rani and other Time Lords interesting new motiva-

tions. Here, this motivation manifests in the Rani's desire to obtain Omega's DNA and the Doctor's attempts to save Poppy. While I know some fans will be angry at this lore change, I don't really mind it – it's an interesting addition, albeit one that seemingly won't come to anything.

Then there's Omega, the subject of the Rani's meddling with reality. While the skeletal creature is well-realised through CGI, the Time Lord engineer ends up being something of a footnote in *The Reality War*. While there's a good deal of build-up, he appears and is defeated very quickly. Though it's hard to know whether this is the result of rewrites, I do wonder whether a new concept might have fitted the brief better. It's also a shame that Archie Panjabi's Time Lord is disposed of by Omega so quickly. She was an excellent Rani, but it's now more unlikely she'll return to the role.

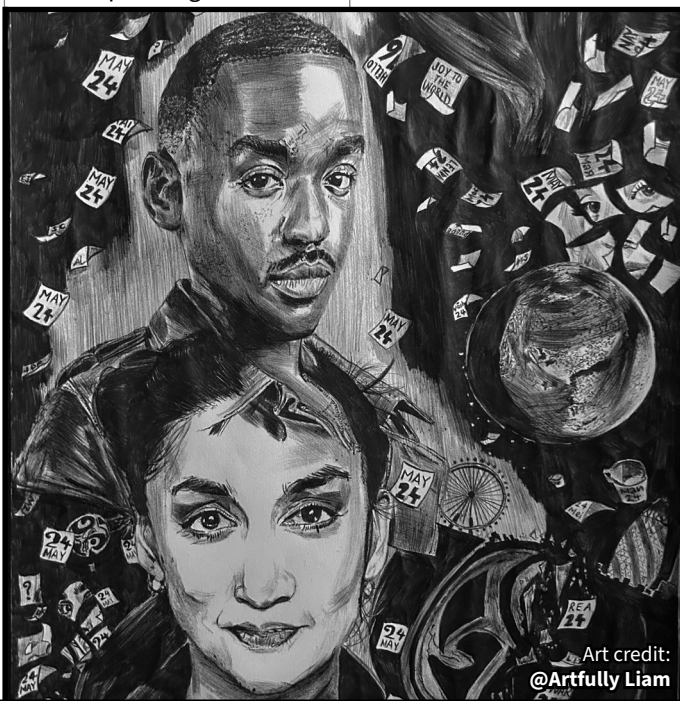
The story's other guest stars, from Gemma Redgrave to Steph de Whalley, continue to put in good performances. I found Millie Gibson particularly compelling as she shone a light into Conrad Clarke's misguided plans to rewrite the world. Her ability to give him a chance at a happy ending was a strong moment for the character and shows the inner strength she's had to develop. In contrast, I thought Belinda Chandra's swansong was ill-conceived. I thought that her being left

in the Zero Room for most of the episode robbed her of a lot of agency, as did imposing a child on an otherwise career-focused character. In fairness, a lot of this probably stems from hasty rewrites, and Varada Sethu did well with the material that came her way. Belinda and Poppy's goodbye scene with the Doctor, for example, was especially moving.

And now, the departure I felt least prepared for. Ncuti Gatwa has been an excellent Doctor and this episode was no exception. His great energy and chemistry with other characters has been a highlight of the past two series, and I was not ready to say goodbye this early. I went into the episode expecting rumours of a surprise regeneration to

be wrong, but when I heard the Doctor say "I like this face", I felt my heart sinking. Russell T Davies does his best to salvage the situation, assuming it wasn't the original plan, and ties into the themes of lost children throughout the Fifteenth Doctor's era. Even if it happened two seasons too soon for my liking, I can't deny that the regeneration scene itself is beautifully directed, scored and acted.

Having had some time to reflect on *The Reality War*, I think I feel better about it now than I did upon first seeing it in the cinema. In my mind, the story may always be tied to missed opportunities but, trying to view it dispassionately, I think it made the best of a bad situation.



Art credit:
@Artfully Liam

"We're all stories in the end..."

Art credit: Paul Pickford

Kara Dennison discusses how RTD's second era is in touch with the zeitgeist

Doctor Who has, on some level, always acknowledged its existence as a work of fiction. Nods to the show's status as a show run throughout the series, whether it's William Hartnell wishing "all of you at home" a Merry Christmas or the cheeky cut-off broadcast in *Remembrance of the Daleks*. When *Doctor Who* returned in 2005 it only doubled down on this, sending Christopher Eccleston's Ninth Doctor to a reality TV satellite and having the fictional Robin Hood tell the Twelfth Doctor "I'm as real as you are." Thus, it would take a lot to make *Doctor Who* acknowledging its presence as a television show seem new, bold or significant.

"[Doctor Who] was doing something truly wild... seeing itself as the fiction it was..."

Enter the RTD2 era, and somehow those signs are bigger and broader than ever before. I said in one of my first articles for *Celestial Toyroom* (see CT 548 – Ed.) that *Doctor Who* was due a bit of a firmware upgrade, as we've undergone 20 years of media evolution since its return in the noughties. A new platform, an actual global streaming presence and the return of a showrunner who knew how to navigate the production playing field all seemed like promising steps in that direction. At the start, it seemed the show was doing something wild. It was truly seeing itself as the fiction it was, the amalgamation of decades and people and genres and influences, and turning that discovery back outward toward audiences old and new. It all *seemed* that way. Until it didn't.

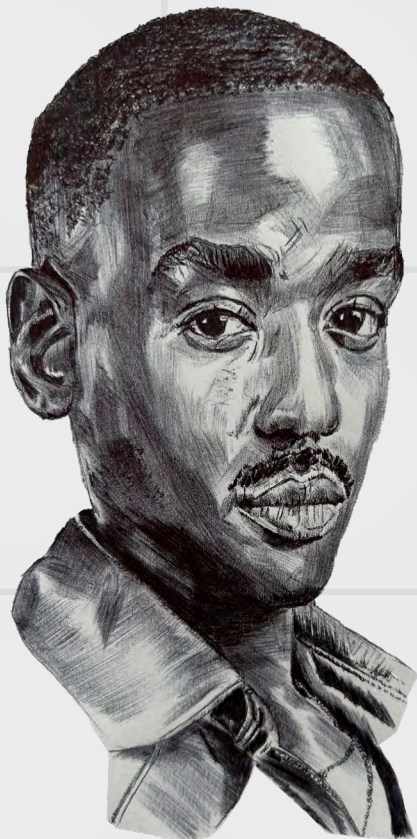
Starting from the appearance of Ncuti Gatwa's Fifteenth Doctor, references to this era being more self-aware and fourth-wall-breaking felt obvious. In *The Devil's Chord*, the Doctor comments that the music was non-diegetic. Mrs Flood, feeling more Iris Wildthyme than Rani, addresses the audience directly at the end of various stories. Most memorably, she dresses as Romana I at the end of *Empire of Death*, depicting the Doctor's adventures as something akin to a scary bedtime story. In *Lux*, the Doctor and Belinda *literally* break the fourth wall and meet *Doctor Who* fans in a scene that is later implied to have actually happened on

Doctor Who's nature of reality has changed in the current era



some level. And *The Story and the Engine* feels like *The Mind Robber* through the lens of African folklore: a bottle episode with a storytelling brain at its core.

And this is all without mentioning the many, many pastiches in this era of *Doctor Who*. From *Bridgerton* to *Black Mirror*, from *Star Trek* to *WandaVision*, so many of the Fifteenth Doctor's stories feel like they take very deliberate and visible inspiration from the television around it. It's notable that this is all happening at a time when the sonic screwdriver looks like a television remote. Russell T Davies may have insisted in *Rolling Stone* that this is to make it look less weapon-like¹, but this reasoning is less believable after watching the Doctor take down a giant Omega mummy with a gun-like instrument. *Doctor Who* is no stranger to pastiches, but rarely are they quite so thick on the ground.



Art credit: @Artfully Liam

This could all simply be a stylistic choice, reflecting RTD's desire to play a little more in the wider world of media in his second era as showrunner. However, the audience are being invited, if not *begged*, to notice it. Ruby's cries of 'Oh, my *Bridgerton*!' and the deliberate name drop of *Star Trek* in *Space Babies* make it very, very clear that this era of *Doctor Who* knows exactly where it lives. Again, it's not uncommon for *Doctor Who* to be aware of its placement amongst other media – read Andrew Hickey's *Black Archive* on *The Mind Robber* to see just how aware it can be. It's less common for the show to turn directly to the camera, literally in some cases, and check that we're noticing, too.

Similarly, this era seemed to be looking inward as well as outward. Television screens in-universe play out moments from the Doctor's life. Companions literally hold scenes from the past in their hands. And then there was the Memory TARDIS: an initially out-of-series conceit that became an important part of the series proper. Not only was *Doctor Who* standing visibly next to its contemporaries, it was throwing the doors wide on its own vast history. All these aspects come together to present a united front: *Doctor Who* is here, it is welcoming, it gives to and draws from the media around it and you can jump on at any time.

When I first pitched this article, the plan was to end with how this manifested by the end of Series 15. In that version of reality, I would have examined what the show looked like going forward, what questions were answered (if any) and what we had to look forward to. But that article is instead a victim of *The Reality War*. We're now in a strange limbo where Gatwa is gone, regenerated last-minute into a returning Billie Piper who may or may not be the 'real Doctor'. Belinda has been retconned into a single mother to Poppy, while the promise of a return for Carole Ann Ford as Susan Foreman has drifted into the background. None of us can truly know what happened to cause these reshoots, or indeed what's happening now. Should Davies ever decide to pen a sequel to his *Writer's Tale*, maybe we'll find out.

That said, we can at least observe the trajectory of Series 14. While Gatwa's first season bent over backwards to feel welcoming, the second felt filled to the brim with Advanced *Who*-ology. Long-standing fans wouldn't break a sweat at seeing the rapid-fire return of Susan, the Rani, Omega and the Fugitive Doctor. But newcomers were left adrift – a far cry from even the baseline work put into preparing for the return of Sutekh. Was Archie Panjabi a magnificent Rani? Yes. Would viewers who discovered the show via Disney+ have enough context to appreciate that? It's hard to tell.

“...at the end of the day, Doctor Who is a product made for television.”

All that being said, it seems obvious that the final hours of this era were overshadowed by ‘business’. Unfortunately, it becomes difficult to pry apart where baseline writing choices end and business starts. Was the plan to continue welcoming new fans at a workable pace, or did the excitement of old foes returning *en masse* overshadow that? Was there possibly a plan to explain Mrs Flood's awareness of the viewers and the reappearance of Poppy? Are those things still in play, or are they now lost to production changes?

When I saw how this era started, I was excited. I've long been a fan of how disparate pieces come together to make *Doctor Who* what it is. And behind-the-scenes goings-on are part of that – they're why we have John Hurt's turn as the War Doctor. I wanted to see *Doctor Who* acknowledge its existence as a show to display its grand history for a new generation. In the end, regardless of whether one loves, loathes or is ambivalent to Series 15's finale, I fear I may have gotten my wish. In this period of strained silence following the final minutes of *The Reality War*, we've received the strongest reminder we have in decades: at the end of the day, *Doctor Who* is a product made for television. Now we're experiencing everything, good *and* bad, that goes with that.

Dear CT,

I approached this episode expecting that I would hate it. I'm not a Eurovision fan and don't particularly like that style of presentation. It also annoys me when drama shows stop the flow of a story so their guest stars can perform a full song. All this, I feared, would plague this episode. I'm pleased to say, therefore, that none of my fears on the story's musical elements were realised. There were songs throughout the episode but at no point did it feel as if the action stopped whilst we were listening to them. It also managed to overcome some of the issues I've had with recent stories, such as *The Story & the Engine*, by giving the Doctor and Belinda equally-weighted plotlines and a host of decent guest characters to interact with.

It was all going fine until the Doctor started sadistically torturing Kid – the well-used phrase that the Doctor is “never cruel or cowardly” seemingly forgotten. Kid had been willing to commit a horrible crime, it's true, but his motivation came from the atrocities committed against his people rather than being a power-crazed maniac – not that I'm suggesting that mass murder is ever justified. Other enemies have done worse with less justification and without such a reaction from the Doctor. The only time that he has acted in any way like this was in *Dalek* – are we really saying that Kid compares to them? This stood out so much that it wrecked what was otherwise a really good episode.

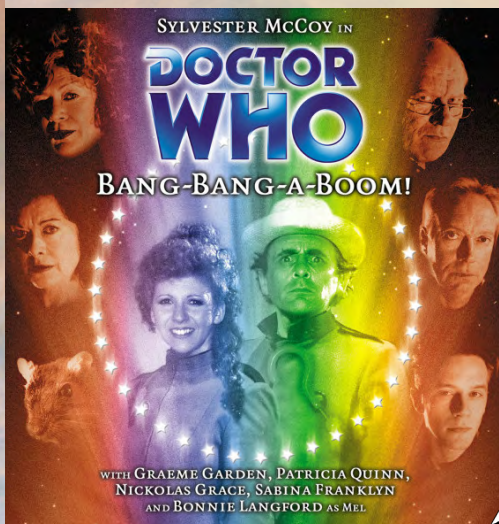
From Alan Darlington

The Interstellar Song Contest

SONGS | BANG-BANG- AND SPIES A-BOOM!

By Nick Smith

As the 2025 season has reminded us, *Doctor Who* can tell stories of many stripes, from cosmic creepshows to cartoon fables. However, goblin songs and Beatles impersonations aside, the televised run has rarely entered musical territory. It's a similar story for Big Finish, who have boldly gone down the singing route just a few times. *Doctor Who and the Pirates* sees the Sixth Doctor and Evelyn riff on Gilbert and Sullivan, while Jo Grant must suffer the musical machinations of *The Scorchies*. But Big Finish's musical run started off with *Bang-Bang-a-Boom!*, a satire of the Eurovision Song Contest. It is an eclectic, colourful and, at times, knowingly silly musical adventure. While it would be right at home as an early Seventh Doctor story, it's far more than that. In fact, it shows us a side of this incarnation of the Doctor that we've never seen (or heard) before.



Bang-Bang-a-Boom! sees the Seventh Doctor and Mel visit Dark Space Eight at a pivotal moment in universal history. While the singing may be frivolous, the potential cooperation of alien races such as the gaseous Gholos and the Valkyrian Angvians promises to bring harmony to a chaotic universe. When contestants drop dead, the Doctor and Mel kick into action as they try to secure the 'last best hope for peace' between the hostile empires. As murder mysteries go, this is a juicy one with twists and turns that make *Terror of the Vervoids* look weedy. In a story full of farce and satire, the murders are notable for largely being taken seriously by the cast of characters assembled on the space station.

When there's not a murderer to chase down, *Bang-Bang-a-Boom!* has more amorous intentions. The title is a cheekily obscure reference to the Lulu song 'Boom Bang-a-Bang,' which took joint first place with three other songs at 1969's Eurovision. The ditty is a frilly love song about Lulu's heart 'pounding away' when her beau comes close and makes her want to shout. It's appropriate, therefore, that love is in the air on Dark Space Eight, too. There's adoration, adulation, and mad passion – even the Doctor is susceptible, as Queen Angvia directs her considerable charms at the Time Lord. Purists might not like this turn of events, but it's fun to hear the Doctor's swooning over Angvia derail his usual machinations. Luckily, Mel is around to remind him there's a murderer on the loose – and it could be the woman his hearts are going bang-a-bang for.

Pease Pottage's finest also has her own burgeoning romance to deal with. Pop megastar Nicky Newman takes a shine to

Mel because she's the only woman he's met who doesn't recognize him. Nicky is similar to *Dot and Bubble's* Ricky September – handsome, talented, drowning in his ubiquity and incapable of living up to his flawless reputation. The go-getting Mel and the weobegone Nicky make a good pair of investigators and reflect the story's best assets: its disparate characters with their distinct personalities, agendas, and forms.

“It should be a big old mess but, like... Eurovision, it comes together beautifully.”

The motley bunch are brought to life by an excellent cast, including *The Goodies'* Graeme Garden, *Robin of Sherwood's* Nikolas Grace and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show's* Patricia Quinn. Quinn plays Angvia as a high-maintenance matriarch with an eastern European accent, channelling *Blazing Saddles'* Lili Von Shtupp by way of Boadicea. The rich writing makes every scene easy to visualise, partly thanks to parodies of sci-fi shows like *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Babylon 5*. Ship's doctor Eleanor Harcourt keeps a log; two alien races bring their feud to the station and there are references to *Trek*-like adventures. The nods are delightful, adding an extra layer to the chaos compounded by a Terry Wogan-like host (called Logan), an Ice Warrior juror, a bumbling boffin and secret identities for the Doctor and Mel. Oh yes, and spoons – they do get played. It should be a big old mess but, like the *mélange* that is Eurovision, it comes together beautifully.

While a story about an interstellar song contest can work without all these bells and whistles, the overstuffed mixture of ideas in combination with suggestions of a wider universe bring a curious reality to *Bang-Bang-a-Boom!*. Since it contains an array of self-referential jokes making fun of science fiction tropes (and spoons!), it won't be to everyone's taste. But fans of *Star Trek*, *The Orville*, Eurovision, and Sylvester McCoy's barmier episodes will all be pleased with this notable attempt to stretch *Doctor Who's* envelope.

Who on tour!

James Ashway reports back from Peter Capaldi and Ncuti Gatwa's appearances at Glastonbury Festival

Glastonbury Festival is world-renowned for its eclectic mix of music, comedy, performance art, circus shows and so much more. So, while I was expecting a varied experience at the 2025 festival, I wasn't expecting to see stars of *Doctor Who* featuring on the schedule!

It began on the Thursday, during the Pilton Palais' screening of the recent National Theatre production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Sitting in the audience was none other than one of its stars, Ncuti Gatwa, who then took to the front of the stage for a short Q&A during the interval.

The conversation discussed the production's costuming, queer and gaelic themes and directing choices, as well as Gatwa's love of the theatre. While there wasn't that much in the way of *Doctor Who*, beyond a brief mention of the then-recent regeneration, it was a talk that provided a fascinating insight into Gatwa's recent stage work.

The following day, I was part of the crowd enjoying the music of Franz Ferdinand during their session on The Other Stage when lead singer Alex Kapranos started talking about rumours of a certain Capaldi making an appearance at Glastonbury Festival. While many of the audience may have been expecting Lewis, who did appear on the Pyramid Stage that same day, I was beyond excited to see Peter Capaldi come out on stage instead!

Dressed in a sharp suit and dark sunglasses, it was almost as if the Twelfth Doctor himself had materialised the TARDIS backstage to join Franz Ferdinand out front. The audience were then treated to a Kapranos/Capaldi duet on 'Take Me Out', and the atmosphere was absolutely electric. It would be great if Doctor collaborations at Glastonbury become a regular occurrence – perhaps Tom Baker and The Rolling Stones for next time? In any case, if you haven't seen Capaldi's performance yet, treat yourself by watching the BBC's footage here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1KNCagkpk0

CREAM OF THE CROP

THE RANI ELITE

By Christine Grit

Cover credit: Big Finish

I've always been an admirer of the Rani. So, it had always been a shame that she only had two stories to her name – three if you include *Dimensions in Time*. When the original Rani, Kate O'Mara, passed away in 2014, it seemed like the end of the line. But Big Finish dared to recast the Rani (I understand with Kate's blessing), and so Siobhan Redmond took on the role instead. I remember quite enjoying *The Rani Elite*, the character's first Big Finish outing, back when it came out more than a decade ago. Now, in a world where there have been not one, but two new Rani incarnations on television, I thought it was a good time to revisit the story.

In the story, the Rani has set herself up at the College of Advanced Galactic Education where she is up to her old tricks. This time, she's running experiments to try and tempt people with the promise of new bodies and an eternal youth. You can understand why people are interested – everybody wants to avoid the handicaps, health and mobility issues of old age. And with Siobhan Redmond's performance, it's all the more tempting. This is a soft spoken Rani who seems so reasonable and convincing, even when she's saying the most terrible things. She sounds so trustworthy, and is all the more terrifying because of it.

While you might be concerned that the Rani is becoming another of Big Finish's Master-like characters, pulling cons to serve their own needs, don't worry. This Rani is as determined to focus on her experiments as ever, and manages to carve her own niche in the Whoniverse. Even though the show had only been going for just over 50 years at that point, it's still quite the achievement in such a long lasting series as *Doctor Who*.

Opposing the Rani is the Sixth Doctor, who makes a good sparring partner. Both are convinced of their own superiority, but go about it in different ways. This incarnation of the Doctor is brash, sure that he will stop whatever plans are in motion, while the Rani is more subtle and confident in her victory. It makes their conversations very funny, as neither really listens to what the other is saying. The Doctor is particularly guilty of this, though it's not always his fault. This Rani has already lived through the events of *Time and Rani*, so he's desperate to avoid learning about his future. She, on the other hand, is slightly disappointed that she can't continue her manipulations on the Seventh Doctor.

Overall, *The Rani Elite* is a worthy debut for a new Rani incarnation. While it's a shame that this version of the character has only two stories so far, I'm hopeful that the return of the Rani on television might provide an opportunity for Siobhan Redmond to make a comeback. Fingers crossed!



RAISON D'ÊTRE

PLANET OF THE RANI

By Michael Crouch

Big Finish have always been very good at picking up on plot threads and asides and developing them into something broader. *Planet of the Rani*, written by Marc Platt, does just that by picking up on a few asides from TV's *The Mark of the Rani*. For those who need a reminder, these are the references to the Rani's failed experiments on her planet of Miasimia Gorja, where the population were unable to sleep and became violent in response. There is a kind of cross-pollination going on between the two stories that enriches the knowing listeners experience without alienating those unfamiliar with the Rani's first TV appearance.

Before we get to Miasimia Gorja, however, we have a prison break. The first quarter of the story revolves around the Rani's incarceration in the Teccuroria Penitentiary, a prison for criminal scientists, where she has been caged for the past 97 years. In that time she has conspired to make herself the Governor, but one still trapped within its walls. Her imprisonment is due in no small part to the Doctor's influence and she tricks his sixth incarnation into a prison visit in order to set her revenge in motion. This sees her create a gateway to carry her back home, albeit one that has caused the deaths of over 900 prison staff and inmates. These prison episodes are the highlight of the story, seeing the Rani use all of her intelligence and guile to ensure her escape.

On her return to Miasimia Gorja, the Rani finds herself wrongfooted, unprepared for the level of chaos that has ensued since her departure. She immediately sets about trying to put things back to the way they were, with some of her old government

welcoming her with open arms while others are less forgiving. While this aspect of the story is less engaging, Siobhan Redmond continues to give a nuanced performance as the Rani, following on from *The Rani Elite*.

“...a satisfying story which balances the demands of its two Time Lords.”

Colin Baker is on similarly fine form, being both indignant and sympathetic at the same time. *Planet of the Rani* leans into familiar tropes from his era, with people being transformed into other creatures – this time, giant, metal cockroaches. The Sixth Doctor bounds through the story with aplomb, never giving less than 100% while facing all the challenges that Miasimia Gorja can throw at him.

Miranda Raison, meanwhile, brings Constance Clarke's slightly posh, 1940 sensibilities to bear on proceedings in what is only her second chronological Big Finish appearance. Her no-nonsense attitude is on full display, and we even get the chance to see her become a kind of companion to the Rani after she morphs into a metal cockroach herself. The two spark off each other nicely, even if it does mean that the new companion doesn't get much time to interact with the Doctor.

Overall, *Planet of the Rani* is a satisfying story which balances the demands of its two Time Lords. It's a worthy chapter in the chronicles of the Rani, providing a story that feels both modern while also firmly rooted in the Sixth Doctor's era. It's great stuff, and one I highly recommend.

Once, Upon A Time

With myths and legends having played a big part in the latest series, **Jez Strickley** looks at the influence of fairy tales in *Doctor Who*

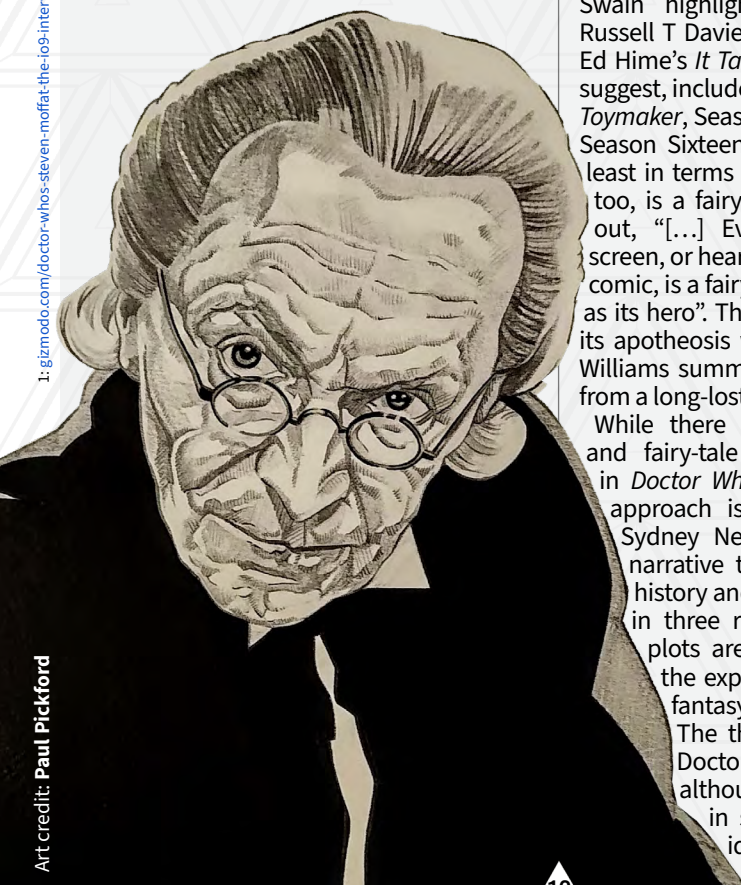
A daughter reunited with a lost parent; a girl whose family is restored to her; a mother whose dead child is returned to life and, by the way, everybody lives. These are some of the fairy-tale moments in the *Doctor Who* scripts of Steven Moffat – respectively, *Joy to the World*, *The Big Bang* and *The Doctor Dances*. For anyone who has followed his work on the series, it is clear that his stories have ploughed the field of fantasy and fairy tale with some vigour. He is

unequivocal on the matter, too. In a 2010 interview about *Doctor Who*¹, Moffat claims that “[...] It’s not that it’s like the old fairy tales, or that it resembles them, it’s the modern equivalent.”

Contemporary or not, fairy tales typically incorporate magical, make-believe elements which transcend conventional understandings of how the world works. They also include a face-off between the forces of good and evil, a challenge to be resolved, a moral lesson and a conclusion in which our heroes live ‘happily ever after’.

Moffat is not the only writer to draw on these motifs. In a 2018 article², Richard Swain highlights similar adventuring in Russell T Davies’ *Last of the Time Lords* and Ed Hime’s *It Takes You Away*. Earlier cases, I suggest, include Season Three’s *The Celestial Toymaker*, Season Six’s *The Mind Robber* and Season Sixteen’s *The Androids of Tara* – at least in terms of its characters. The Doctor, too, is a fairy-tale figure. As Swain points out, “[...] Every adventure we see on screen, or hear in audio, or read in a book or comic, is a fairy tale in itself, with the Doctor as its hero”. This portrayal arguably reaches its apotheosis with the newly-married Amy Williams summoning up a forgotten Doctor from a long-lost memory (*The Big Bang*).

While there is little doubt that fantasy and fairy-tale plots and devices appear in *Doctor Who*, it seems to me that this approach is some way removed from Sydney Newman’s original concept, a narrative to educate the public about history and science. I see this difference in three respects. The first is in how plots are resolved. The second is in the expectations we have of science fantasy versus science fiction. The third is in the framing of the Doctor’s character. I also argue that, although fairy-tale storytelling is in sharp contrast to Newman’s idea, it offers an important route for the series to explore.

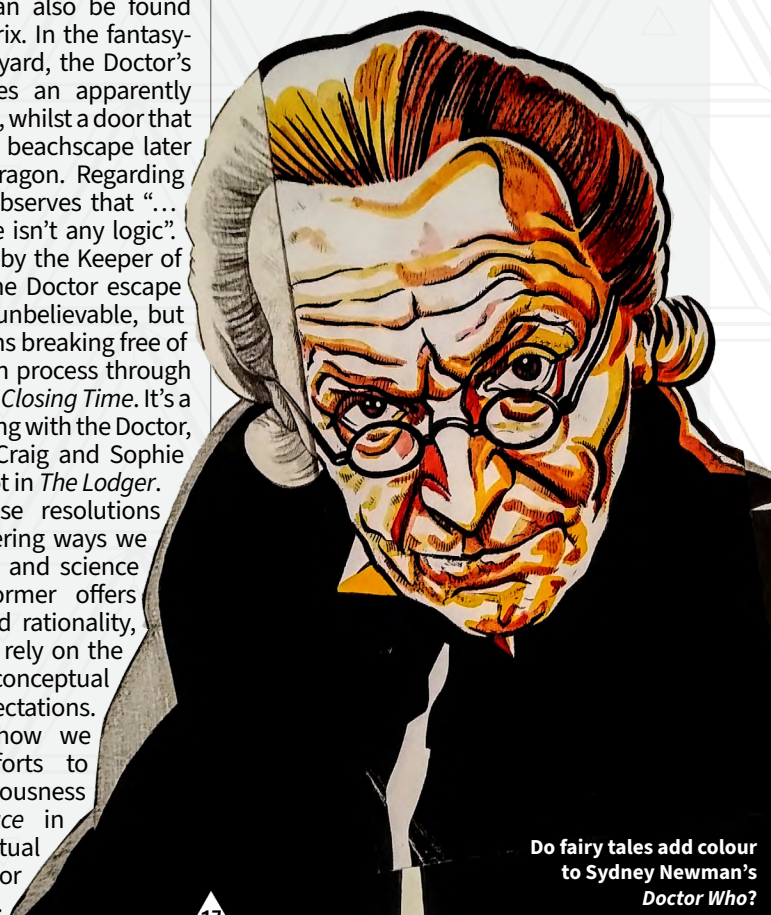


On plot resolutions, Newman has our heroes operating within the bounds of logic – for instance, Susan’s plan to deceive the Tribe of Gum with burning skulls. This is not always so in fantasy or fairy tale – consider the Toymaker, who traps the Doctor, Steven and Dodo in a realm of games where the physical laws of the universe do not apply. Seemingly animate beings are exchanged for inanimate objects as the line between possibility and impossibility blurs in a world where losing to the Toymaker condemns the player to an eternal hell. Likewise, the Doctor’s explanation to Donna that the Toymaker’s domain is “[...] governed by the rules of play” reveals a world outside the usual strictures of logic. How the Toymaker confounds UNIT also points to him operating in an entirely different kind of dimension.

Similar fairytale logic can also be found in the illusions of the Matrix. In the fantasy-scape created by the Valeyard, the Doctor’s loss of concentration sees an apparently solid tumbril simply vanish, whilst a door that previously opened onto a beachscape later reveals a fire-breathing dragon. Regarding this environ, the Doctor observes that “... the only logic is that there isn’t any logic”. This point is later echoed by the Keeper of the Matrix, which helps the Doctor escape death by drowning. Less unbelievable, but still fairy tale, is Craig Owens breaking free of the Cybermen’s conversion process through his love for his infant son in *Closing Time*. It’s a reworking of his first meeting with the Doctor, where the love between Craig and Sophie defeated the alien autopilot in *The Lodger*.

What we think of these resolutions relies, in part, on the differing ways we experience science fiction and science fantasy. Whereas the former offers degrees of plausibility and rationality, the latter pairing tends to rely on the incredible, thus creating a conceptual distinction in our expectations. Consider, for example, how we follow the Doctor’s efforts to defeat the Nestene Consciousness in *Spearhead from Space* in comparison to his virtual contest with Chancellor Goth in *A Deadly Assassin*.

In the first, we expect to find our protagonist fending off the invading menace through more or less believable means – on this occasion, an electroshock device. In the second, we have little or no idea what to expect, as the Doctor’s duel with the Master’s stooge veers from one bizarre incident to the next. This contrast is more pronounced in *The Mind Robber*, an almost metafictional outing where fictional characters come to life and where Jamie McCrimmon’s face is changed as easily as changing one’s clothes. As events unfold, the TARDIS crew faces a danger not unlike the Toymaker’s opponents. As the Doctor points out, “If we’d have fallen into the Master’s trap, we would have become fiction.” Such a disturbing observation indicates a reality quite apart from reason, so we too must suspend our traditional notions of logic.



**Do fairy tales add colour
to Sydney Newman’s
Doctor Who?**

This leads onto my third point – if the Doctor’s adventures can be separated from reality by the way they play out, or our expectations of them, then the dramatis personae themselves must also change between science fantasy and science fiction. By inserting a mystical aspect into the character of the Doctor, we find ourselves following a hero who is not just alien, but fantastic too.

“...is it any wonder Moffat tells us that *Doctor Who* is the ‘modern equivalent’ of the fairy tale?”

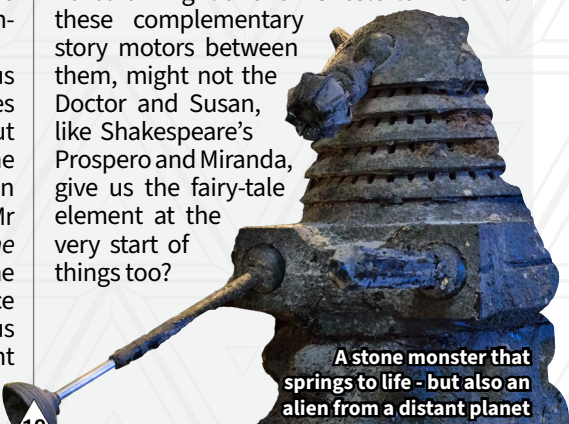
This is shown in a number of ways. In *The Big Bang*, Matt Smith’s Doctor takes on the aspect of a conjurer: his fez in place of a wizard’s hat and his sonic screwdriver in place of a wand. These visuals are complemented by what the Doctor tells us. At the climax to *Flatline*, he proclaims himself to be “the man that stops the monsters”, echoing his riposte to Madame du Pompadour’s question “What do monsters have nightmares about?” in *The Girl in the Fireplace*. The Doctor’s reply? “Me!”. How the Doctor endures trials and ordeals, like a figure from legend, is also part of this re-charactering. *Heaven Sent*, for instance, sees the Doctor ensnared in a recurring nightmare for seemingly billions of years, where his only means of escape lies in punching through a wall of diamond-like rock. The additions to the Doctor’s backstory in *The Timeless Children*, and the sweeping story-arc of Series 13, also contribute to this reformation. In fact, you could say that these changes to the Doctor result in the series being ‘re-enchanted’.

Ncuti Gatwa’s two-part swansong brings us full circle in this regard. There have been clues as to Davies’ direction of travel throughout the Gatwa era, whether it’s the return of the Toymaker in *The Giggle* or the introduction of fantastical villains like Maestro and Mr Ring-a-Ding. However, it’s *Wish World / The Reality War* that determinedly nudges the line between science fiction and science fantasy. Davies’ finale echoes previous extraordinary threats to reality, reminiscent of his aforementioned 2007 season climax, with a rejuvenated Time Lord villain intent

on creating an entirely new world. While we await to hear what’s next, this fantasy-slanted trajectory may yet prove pivotal to the show’s immediate future.

The blending of fantasy and fairy tale with *Doctor Who*’s historical fiction and science fiction origins offers a third strand for the programme to draw on. This offers grist to the mill as the mystical and mythical enter into the Doctor’s escapades, leavening the rational and empirical by way of a fantastic alternative. I appreciate that, at first glance, it may seem like *Doctor Who* is now so far distant from its origins as to be quite a different production. Certainly, there are fans who find themselves unreconciled with some of these alterations, which include the more pronounced use of fairy-tale adventuring. However, if this is the case, and the programme has indeed become a storytelling vehicle distinct from its earliest days, I think this is to its advantage. By exploring different narrative genres, *Doctor Who* remains not only a dynamic form of entertainment in an increasingly competitive media-scape, but it also challenges the viewer to adopt something akin to a growth mindset in their appreciation of it.

With its remarkable endurance and appeal, is it any wonder Moffat tells us that *Doctor Who* is the “modern equivalent” of the fairy tale? His comments highlight an instructive connection between the series and an ancient narrative tradition which, I think, has as much place in shaping the Doctor’s adventures as history and science. For if Newman’s Barbara Wright and Ian Chesterton mark off these complementary story motors between them, might not the Doctor and Susan, like Shakespeare’s Prospero and Miranda, give us the fairy-tale element at the very start of things too?



A stone monster that springs to life - but also an alien from a distant planet

It's the end - but was the moment prepared for?

Art credit: @Artfully Liam

Harry Jones reflects on the time we've spent with the Fifteenth Doctor

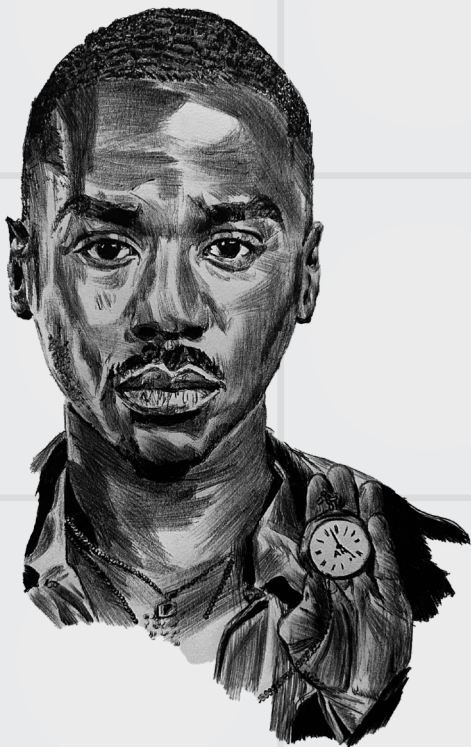
It's hard to believe that the Fifteenth Doctor arrived on our screens less than two years ago and has already gone. What began as a hopeful new start for the character ended up, to me at least, as a bittersweet ending. I'm not grieving for the character but it's sad to think there could have, or even *should* have, been more for the Fifteenth Doctor. Even if this distinctive era may have been cut short, now is as good a time as any to reflect on what we did get from the past two series of *Doctor Who*.

The Fifteenth Doctor

Ncuti Gatwa has been nothing short of stellar as the Doctor. When writing many of my reviews, I may have strayed into repetitiveness by commenting on how amazing his performance was. Gatwa managed to hit the main character beats of the Doctor within moments of appearing in *The Gigggle*, conveying authority, compassion and wisdom that would carry through to *The Reality War*.

As Gatwa went from the specials to his first series, he demonstrated not just his own range but the Doctor's too. Confronted with an exposition dump at the beginning of *Space Babies*, Gatwa was able to elevate the scene into one that conveys the Doctor's passion for life in all its forms. Then, in *The Devil's Chord*, we saw the Doctor running in fear from Maestro but still able to stand up to the God of Music with lines that conveyed the Doctor's age and wisdom: "But I have lived. And I have loved. And I can only smile like this because I have lost so much. I've experienced everything, every single thing". Later, in *Dot and Bubble*, Gatwa explored the Doctor's more vulnerable side after Lindy Pepper-Bean's racism meant she refused to

be helped. Though there have been complaints that there was perhaps too much of a focus on the Doctor's vulnerability, especially crying, I strongly believe it is important to depict male vulnerability. That said, I think a less-is-more approach could have helped to boost the impact of these scenes, as their frequency ended up diluting their meaning. Nonetheless, Gatwa continued to grow into the role as we moved into Series 15, becoming more assured with each passing episode. While this culminated in a well-performed and heartbreaking regeneration scene, I still can't help but wonder what could have been achieved with another series or two.



Returning to what was, a real strength of the Fifteenth Doctor was his chemistry with friends both old and new. He brought new aspects to the relationship between Kate Stewart and the Doctor, with the pair having a less formal relationship than the UNIT leader did with some of his previous incarnations. In *Rogue*, meanwhile, sparks flew as a result of the exquisite chemistry between Gatwa and Jonathan Groff. Even the tiniest echo of this relationship in *Wish World* gave Gatwa the opportunity to show off his acting abilities, consumed by longing for his lost love. Most importantly, however, was the Fifteenth Doctor's undisputed chemistry with both of his travelling companions...

Ruby Sunday

As a character, Ruby Sunday's success was largely tied to the mystery surrounding her. It's an approach that's not unheard of in *Doctor Who* – see, for example, the 'Impossible Girl' mystery surrounding Clara Oswald. And, in both these cases, it's an approach that has yielded mixed results. When a character is introduced more as a plot device, rather than as a person in their own right, it can leave audiences wondering why the Doctor would choose to travel with them. It also means that the mystery, however compelling, needs a good payoff at the end. In the case of Ruby Sunday, *Empire of Death* didn't stick that landing and ended up providing a confused resolution. It's not the fault of Millie Gibson, who gave some excellent performances in Series 14 – particularly in *73 Yards*. However, Ruby Sunday really only came into her own for me when it came to Series 15.

“...Gatwa continued to grow into the role [in] Series 15, becoming more assured...”

Having chosen to stay behind on Earth, Ruby Sunday enjoyed some excellent character-driven stories about abandonment. In *Lucky Day*, Ruby's need to be wanted nearly led to the fall of UNIT after letting

Conrad Clarke get too close to her. The entire episode rests upon Gibson's performance, and she delivers in spades. Her chemistry and antagonism with Jonah Hauer-King's Conrad subsequently takes on a new dimension in *Wish World* and *The Reality War*, where Ruby demonstrates her strength of character in giving her ex-boyfriend a happier ending.

Belinda Chandra

Compared to Ruby Sunday, Belinda Chandra was quite the contrast. I generally preferred this more relatable companion, who broke the mould of recent companions who always want to travel with the Doctor. This wasn't the case with Belinda, as she had found her vocation as a nurse and wished to stick with it. She stood up to the Doctor and demanded he get her home, creating a different kind of Doctor-companion dynamic.

Belinda was at her best in her first three stories, which felt like they were very much written for her. *The Robot Revolution*, *Lux* and *The Well* all use Belinda's background as a nurse to provide medical care, pick up on subtle cues and advance the plot. For example, the defeat of Lux simply wouldn't have been possible without Belinda noticing that projectionist Reginald Pye had nicotine-stained hands, and therefore the matches needed to burn the cinema's film. I was disappointed, however, that the character somewhat stalled after this. It felt like Belinda was pushed more into the shape of the adventure-seeking companion, as if she was being used as a stand-in for Ruby. She finds herself in a reduced role in *The Story & The Engine* and *The Interstellar Song Contest*, and ultimately ends up as a single mother by the end of *The Reality War*. I'm not convinced about single-parenthood being imposed on Belinda without her consent, especially considering that *The Robot Revolution* showed her rejecting a coercive relationship. It makes me wonder if, amid the rewrites, Belinda had taken on a role originally meant for her predecessor – Ruby and the Doctor did say that they wished they could be Poppy's parents in *Space Babies*, after all.

Whatever the case, Varada Sethu was amazing throughout Series 15. She was able to keep the character likeable in her first appearance even if she was more antagonistic towards the Doctor. Belinda's shell softened as she was drawn into the Doctor's world, and despite my reservations, successfully sold the idea of the Doctor, Belinda and Poppy travelling together. Sethu's range was on full show throughout her time on *Doctor Who*, and it's a shame it couldn't go on for longer.

The stories

While the main characters of the Fifteenth Doctor's era were stellar, the stories were more of a mixed bag. They're hard to fault from a visual perspective, admittedly, as the sets and CGI have always been amazing – a far cry from the wobbly set stereotype. However, the writing hasn't always been able to support this ambition.

While *Space Babies* was a middling start to Series 14, it soon kicked into gear. It was defined by its more experimental approach to storytelling, which some may have found jarring but led to some great stories like *Boom*, *73 Yards* and *Dot and Bubble*. Series 15 followed, and it felt like *Doctor Who* was in its element as it pushed

into new territory. Animation and African culture were showcased by *Lux* and *The Story & The Engine* respectively, while *The Interstellar Song Contest* sought to address the moral and ethical fallout from conflict. It never felt like RTD and the writing team were resting on their laurels.

“It never felt like RTD and the writing team were resting on their laurels...”

That said, I do think that one of the greatest weaknesses of the past two series was the tendency to fall back on mystery-box storytelling and *Doctor Who* lore at crucial moments. A lot was riding on *Empire of Death* to provide a satisfying conclusion to Ruby's parentage arc and Series 14's other plot threads, arguably too much for any one episode to handle. It led to a story that jarred between serious moments, such as the Doctor talking to a doomed woman, and big set-pieces like Sutekh being dragged through the vortex on a lead. It makes me wonder whether *Doctor Who* should stop relying on series finales to try and resolve all the different plot threads at once. When these episodes aren't well



received, it reflects badly on all the previous episodes in retrospect, and dampens enthusiasm for what's next.

“...the setup for the Rani and Omega could have been better handled...”

The Reality War a series later was arguably stronger, but seemed to suffer from last minute rewrites. Putting these to one side, the Series 15 finale had a deeper seated issue – its villains. While I thought it made a nice change to see the Rani and Omega as a devoted *Doctor Who* fan, I'm not sure how much of an impact they would have had on newer viewers. Though it might be a bit repetitive to rely on the Daleks, Cybermen or the Master/Missy for series finales, they're villains that have made a real impact on the public consciousness at large and need little explanation for their actions. While I applaud the attempt to get younger viewers into Classic *Who*, I think that the setup for the Rani and Omega could have been better handled to provide a lower barrier to entry.

Does *Doctor Who* need a rest?

With the future of the show uncertain, it's the question on many people's lips. Personally, I think the answer is no. Series 15 was a solid run of episodes, even with its bittersweet finale, and I'm in no doubt *Doctor Who* will be back. I'm not opposed to the show being rested when it needs to be, but now is not the time.

To me, it feels like the question of resting is so widespread because of the state of online discourse. It seems like there are certain 'influencers' that don't seem to want audiences to derive pleasure from television and film anymore, especially if it conflicts with their view of the world. It doesn't help that negative posts and videos tend to generate much more engagement than positive ones ever do, especially when someone is trying to stir up a culture war. The Doctor has always been forthright about their moral stances, and if stories

such as *The Green Death* or *The Sea Devils* had debuted in 2025 I'm sure Jon Pertwee would have been declared 'Jeremy Corbyn in velvet' by the tabloids and social media commentators.

It's especially frustrating that many of the leaks, rumours and speculation that have spread online seem to have been borne out to some degree. It gives credence to narratives about what's next for *Doctor Who*, which has spread across social media in the vacuum of information about the show's future. It makes it that little bit easier for people to be taken in by hearsay, however far-fetched it might be. I, for one, would be overjoyed if *Doctor Who*'s reality was so badly damaged that it turned out the Fifteenth Doctor never left after all. But, ultimately, I have to face facts and acknowledge that this won't happen. It's the new reality war we all face – one where we can choose difficult truths, or comfortable lies. And I hope, whatever comes next, that *Doctor Who* is prepared to face that.



The future of *Doctor Who*?



DWAS decides: Doctor Who ranked

As the dust settles after Series 15, **James Ashway** reveals what you thought of the Fifteenth Doctor's era

In a time of uncertainty for Doctor Who, what better way to console ourselves than in the arms of cold, hard statistics? After its relaunch last year, the *Doctor Who* Appreciation Society's series polls have returned for what's turned out to be the end of Ncuti Gatwa's era. All readers of the last issue were invited to participate by ranking the episodes of the latest series, and those of the complete Ncuti Gatwa era, in order of preference. Their votes were then used to produce an overall ranking for both series in isolation (with Series 14 including *The Giggle* and *The Church on Ruby Road* while Series 15 encompasses *Joy to the World*) and a combined ranking of the RTD2 era so far. Without further ado, here's what you thought of the most recent series of *Doctor Who*:

***The Giggle* – Overall ranking: 4th, Series ranking: 3rd**

Though Ncuti Gatwa's Fifteenth Doctor only appears towards the end of *The Giggle*, it emerged as one of the best rated stories of his era as a whole. The combination of Tennant, television history and the Toymaker was a hit among our voters.

***The Church on Ruby Road* – Overall ranking: 7th, Series ranking: 4th**

Ushering in a somewhat musical era of *Doctor Who*, the Fifteenth Doctor's first full-length story did respectably in the polls. Though 'The Goblin Song' wasn't quite enough to edge it into the podium position for Series 14, this Christmas special came away with a solid mid-tier ranking.

***Space Babies* – Overall ranking: =19th, Series ranking: =10th**

Having come dead last in the 2024 polls, *Space Babies* improved its position this year by only coming joint last with *Empire of Death*. While it's difficult to say whether opinion of this series opener improved, or the series closer worsened, it's one to watch!



***The Devil's Chord* –**

Overall ranking: 14th, Series ranking: 7th

The first of the Eurovision specials has dipped somewhat in popularity since last year, falling one spot in the Series 14 poll. There's not a twist at the end of this summary either, as its placing in the series poll was pretty similar to its overall ranking.

***Boom* –**

Overall ranking: 3rd, Series ranking: 2nd

Steven Moffatt's return to *Doctor Who* continues to enjoy a lot of love, leapfrogging *The Giggle* into second place in the Series 14 poll. It got a bronze medal overall, with *Lux*'s animated antics pipping it to second place.

***73 Yards* –**

Overall ranking: 1st, Series ranking: 1st

Our undisputed champion of the Fifteenth Doctor's era is *73 Yards*! This Ruby Sunday-focused episode came first last year, and despite new competition has retained the top spot. It shows that *Doctor Who* and horror are still a winning combination even decades after *The Daemons*.

***Dot and Bubble* –**

Overall ranking: =10th, Series ranking: 5th

Dot and Bubble has fallen one place since 2024, but the social media-focused episode still enjoys a solid showing overall. Callie Cooke's outstanding performance ensures this is one episode that won't be forgotten.

***Rogue* –**

Overall ranking: 11th, Series ranking: 6th

Rogue was Series 14's biggest climber, rising two places from eighth to sixth since the last poll. With their rose-tinted spectacles on, this tale of Regency romance has seemingly charmed its way back into our voters' hearts.

***The Legend of Ruby Sunday* –**

Overall ranking: 15th, Series ranking: 8th

Falling behind *Rogue* this year, *The Legend of Ruby Sunday* continues to languish near the bottom of the rankings. It can at least console itself that it's the best rated of the series finale episodes.

***Empire of Death* –**

Overall ranking: =19th, Series ranking: =10th

Voters weren't happy with Sutekh's return last year, and they were even less enamoured in 2025. It has now fallen into joint last place in the Series 14 poll, and taken joint bottom spot in the overall rankings as well. While the other two-part finale's episodes sit next to each other in the rankings, it's interesting to see that *The Legend of Ruby Sunday* is considered significantly better than what followed.

***Joy to the World* –**

Overall ranking: =10th, Series ranking: 5th

While *Empire of Death* may not have impressed, Steven Moffat's first Christmas special since *Twice upon a Time* enjoyed a much better reception. Though it hasn't troubled the top of the leaderboard, *Joy to the World* sits right in the middle of both the series poll and overall.

***The Robot Revolution* –**

Overall ranking: 13th, Series ranking: 7th

The combination of 1950s-style robots, a new companion and the start of a new series seemingly wasn't enough for our voters, who put *The Robot Revolution* on the lower end of the Series 15 rankings. It fared a bit better in the overall poll, leapfrogging stories from the previous series to move away from the bottom.

***Lux* –**

Overall ranking: 2nd, Series ranking: 1st

Alan Cumming's turn as the God of Light was very well-received among our voters, emerging as the best of Series 15. The animated and fourth-wall-breaking adventure wasn't quite enough to get to first place overall, but shows that a fun and well-executed concept can go a long way.

***The Well* –**

Overall ranking: 5th, Series ranking: 2nd

Doctor Who's unexpected return to the planet Midnight was almost as successful as the previous episode, ending up in second place in Series 15. Though it slipped behind some Series 14 episodes overall, this tense thriller has more than earned its acclaim.

Lucky Day –

Overall ranking: 8th, Series ranking: 4th

After the acclaim received by *73 Yards*, expectations for this Millie Gibson-focused bottle episode were high. Though it wasn't quite as well-received as its horror-inflected forebear, *Lucky Day* nonetheless enjoys some good rankings. It also managed to pull of some heavy lifting for the rest of the season with the debut of Conrad Clarke and the return of UNIT.

The Story & The Engine –

Overall ranking: 12th, Series ranking: 6th

Doctor Who set out to explore Nigerian culture from inside an interdimensional barbershop in this tale, the first episode of the show to be set largely in Africa. Despite a cameo from Jo Martin's Fugitive Doctor and strong performances from the rest of the cast, this story ended up in the middle of both the overall and Series 15 rankings.

The Interstellar Song Contest –

Overall ranking: 6th, Series ranking: 3rd

While voters may have cooled on *The Devil's Chord*, *The Interstellar Song Contest* fared much better than its musical predecessor. It's claimed that this *Doctor Who* story has the biggest budget of any episode, which may have helped it climb the rankings above its rivals.

Wish World –

Overall ranking: 16th, Series ranking: 8th

Despite its name, this story did not live up to the wishes of our voters. *Wish World* fell narrowly behind *The Legend of Ruby Sunday* in the overall poll, even with a new Rani and a host of returning faces from the recent series and beyond.

The Reality War –

Overall ranking: 17th, Series ranking: 9th

Series finale episodes seem to have suffered in the polls, and *The Reality War* was no exception. The return of Omega in his new form wasn't well received by our voters, but did end up doing better than Sutekh's comeback in *Empire of Death*. A touching regeneration may have helped to bump this story up the rankings.

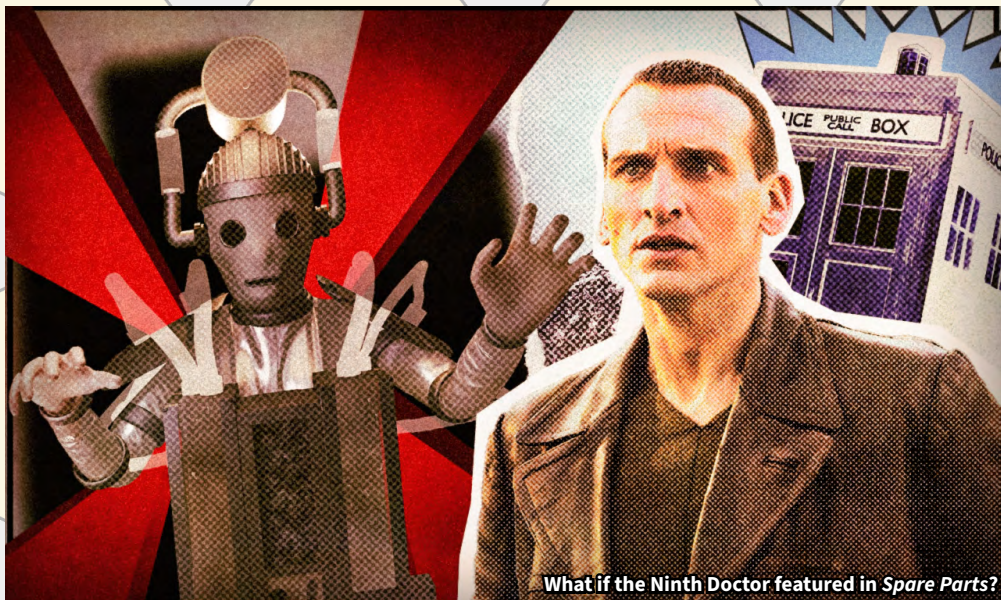
All Fifteenth Doctor episodes (2025 poll)

1. *73 Yards*
 2. *Lux*
 3. *Boom*
 4. *The Giggie*
 5. *The Well*
 6. *The Interstellar Song Contest*
 7. *The Church on Ruby Road*
 8. *Lucky Day*
 9. N/A
 10. *Dot and Bubble/Joy to the World*
 11. *Rogue*
 12. *The Story & The Engine*
 13. *The Robot Revolution*
 14. *The Devil's Chord*
 15. *The Legend of Ruby Sunday*
 16. *Wish World*
 17. *The Reality War*
 18. N/A
 19. *Space Babies/Empire of Death*
- Series 14 and The Giggie (2024 poll)**

1. *73 Yards*
 2. *The Giggie*
 3. *Boom*
 4. *Dot and Bubble*
 5. *The Church on Ruby Road*
 6. *The Devil's Chord*
 7. *The Legend of Ruby Sunday*
 8. *Rogue*
 9. *Empire of Death*
 10. *Space Babies*
- Series 14 and The Giggie (2025 poll)**

1. *73 Yards*
 2. *Boom*
 3. *The Giggie*
 4. *The Church on Ruby Road*
 5. *Dot and Bubble*
 6. *Rogue*
 7. *The Devil's Chord*
 8. *The Legend of Ruby Sunday*
 9. N/A
 10. *Space Babies/Empire of Death*
- Series 15 (2025 poll)**

1. *Lux*
2. *The Well*
3. *The Interstellar Song Contest*
4. *Lucky Day*
5. *Joy to the World*
6. *The Story & The Engine*
7. *The Robot Revolution*
8. *Wish World*
9. *The Reality War*



What if the Ninth Doctor featured in *Spare Parts*?

Top of the Docs

Huw Turbervill considers whether *Doctor Who* should reboot itself by focusing on its greatest hits

Doctor *Who*'s history has been one of continuity. For 26 years between 1963 and 1989, it told a linear story. Despite large gaps, this throughline has continued into Paul McGann's TV Movie and *NuWho* from 2005 onwards. Even though this Disney co-production with Davies has been branded 'Series One', Ncuti Gatwa is the Fifteenth Doctor, the latest in an unbroken line of regenerations.

The disadvantage of this is that the show is laden down with heaving baggage and has contradicted itself numerous times. For example, *The Deadly Assassin* showed a clearly different Gallifrey to the one we had seen in *The Three Doctors* and *The War Games*. Davros didn't really tie in with what we'd seen in *The Daleks*. And so on...

Things could have been very different if the 1996 film had led to a series. Plans were afoot for the rebooted series to revisit and remake a variety of episodes from

Classic *Who*, including *The Gunfighters*, *Tomb of the Cybermen* and *Earthshock*. As we know, that never came to pass – but what if it had?

If the show were to rest again now, I think a new start, rather than resuming with the Sixteenth Doctor, should be considered. It's not unheard of. Think of James Bond resetting itself with the arrival of Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*, or Henry Cavill's Superman in *Man of Steel*. Both still feature the same character, with similar motifs, but are new and bold takes on the source material.

"...if the 1996 film had led to a series... plans were afoot for [it] to revisit... a variety of episodes..."

I thought it would be rather good fun to imagine what a new series could look like. I've assumed an initial run of two seasons, each made up of 10 episodes that form a 'greatest hits' collection for the Classic Series with a few updates where needed.

I'd start with a two-parter adapting the first episode of *An Unearthly Child* which then runs straight into *The Daleks*. This version would cut out the flab, similar to the recent redux edition but without the horribly rushed ending. Having brought back the Daleks, the Cybermen would then get their turn in a television adaptation of *Spare Parts* – one that's more faithful to the source material than *The Age of Steel/Rise of the Cybermen* were. The reintroductions would continue in the fourth episode, bringing back the Yeti and the Great Intelligence for *The Web of Fear*. It's always been a thrilling adventure, whether as a novelisation or the rediscovered episodes, so is sure to draw in viewers. Last but not least, the halfway mark of the series would be *The Ice Warriors*. We'd keep the wonderful creature design and evocative setting, but do without the original's funeral pace.

For the second half of the series, we'd begin with *Fury from the Deep*. With chilling seaweed monsters that can control and poison humans, and with obvious parallels to the current green transition, we could surely tempt the kids off their iPhones. *The Mind Robber* would be a nice change of tone to follow, and educate the audience with some great literary references. Then it would be time to dive into the Doctor's

past in *The War Games* – again similar to the recent cutdown version. I'd love to see who they'd cast as the War Lord and War Chief. Last but not least, a two-part *Dalek Invasion of Earth* could round things off – I'll always be a sucker for people exploring a strangely deserted London.

“...time for *The Ark in Space* to add a bit of horror... – can you imagine... the Wirrn now?”

After a first series mostly made of First and Second Doctor stories, the second would see more from other eras. We'd kick things off with *Spearhead from Space* and introduce the Autons, the Master and UNIT. There aren't that many department stores about now, but maybe the Autons could burst out of a vape shop! The run of Third Doctor stories would continue with *Inferno*, *The Claws of Axos* and *The Green Death*. Their environmental themes are as relevant as ever, but we could maybe make a few tweaks – sewage works rather than a mine for the latter, perhaps?

Following a run of UNIT stories, it'd be time to head back to space. The Sontarans could make their debut in *The Invasion of Time* and be freed from the shackles of the

The Thirteenth Doctor and Yaz star in *The Ark in Space*



The Fifteenth Doctor, Rose Noble and Belinda Chandra in *The Daleks*



Dear CT,

Despite being better than Series 14, this series was in no way a success. I thought *The Story & the Engine* was good and that *The Well* was worthy of a second viewing – the rest just didn't work for me. *Lucky Day* was a decent episode as well, but it wasn't really *Doctor Who*. Instead, it was a backdoor pilot for *The War Between the Land and the Sea*, which I thought was a waste of an episode in such a short season!

Like its predecessor, this series attempted to shoehorn new continuity into previous characters while missing the point of them. The Rani was name-dropped as an “amoral scientist”, for example, but this aspect of the character was totally ignored. Meanwhile, Susan was wasted in a cameo and *The Reality War* featured Omega in name only.

To me, Series 15 felt the least *Doctor Who*-like of all seasons, forgetting that to tell a good story you need to put plot first. Aside from the episodes mentioned above, there's nothing worthy in this series. Frankly, I'm glad this period is over and I shan't be watching it again. I can only hope we get something better in the future.

From Peter Witney

Want to share your thoughts?
Write to ct@dwasonline.co.uk

New series thoughts

Vardans this time around. Then it would be time for *The Ark in Space* to add a bit of horror into the show – can you imagine what they could do with the Wirrn now? Updated creature effects would also be a boon for *Terror of the Zygons*, before we give *Pyramids of Death* and *Robots of Death* another whirl. Both stories will never stop working, and the designs for both can largely be copied across wholesale. Last but not least, we would finish with *State of Decay*, introducing vampires ahead of their more prominent role in a third series. It'd also be nice to throw *City of Death* into the mix for a lighter story – perhaps a Christmas special?

Going forward, there's all kinds of stories and creatives that could return. Joe Ahearne might come back as a director, and it would be great to try and tempt the Oscar-winning James Acheson back as designer – health and age permitting. Anyway, that's my pick for a *Who* reboot – but what about you?

In Memoriam

Christopher H. Bidmead

Born 18 January 1941

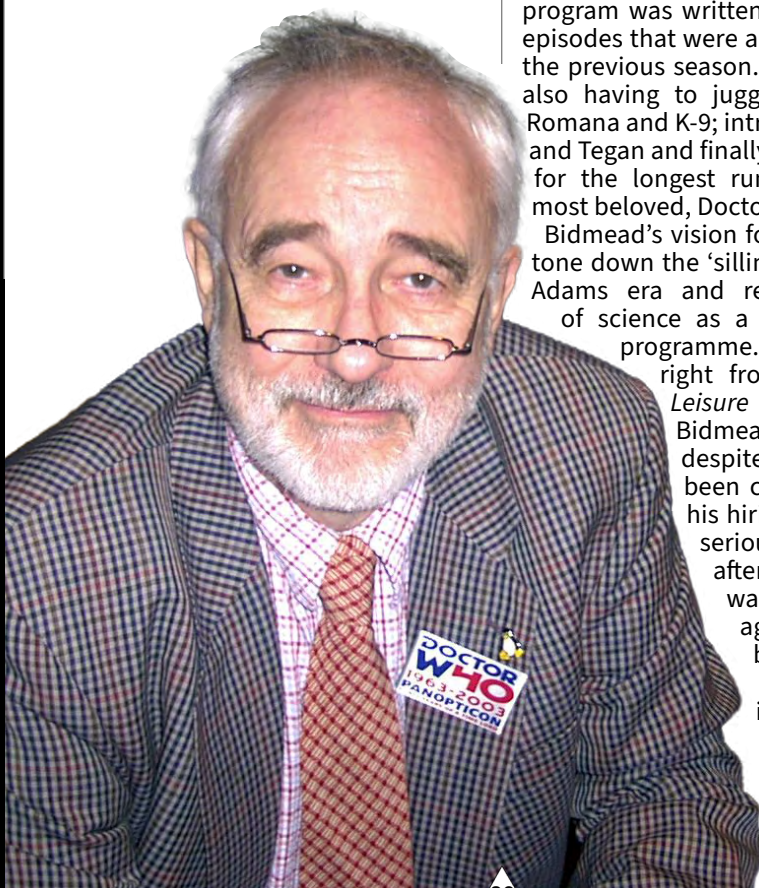
Died 6 August 2025

John Ashway looks back at the late script editor's contributions to *Doctor Who*

I am very sad to hear of the death of much-loved *Doctor Who* writer and script editor Christopher H. Bidmead, who was the first script editor of *any* show that I was really aware of. While I was familiar with certain recurring writers in classic

Doctor Who, the New Beginnings DVD box set (which collected *The Keeper of Traken*, *Logopolis* and *Castrovalva*) introduced me to the idea of a script editor as someone with a vision for what stories the show should tell and guiding the scripts to match that vision. As script editor for Season 18, Bidmead supervised one of the most sudden and distinct changes in how the program was written, producing a run of episodes that were a world removed from the previous season. He did all this while also having to juggle the departure of Romana and K-9; introducing Adric, Nyssa and Tegan and finally writing a swan song for the longest running, and arguably most beloved, Doctor of them all.

Bidmead's vision for *Doctor Who* was to tone down the 'silliness' of the Williams/Adams era and re-introduce the use of science as a key element of the programme. We can see this right from the start in *The Leisure Hive*, which has a Bidmeadean sheen to it despite this story having been commissioned before his hiring. The tone is fairly serious, whether it's the aftereffects of a nuclear war or the way that the aging of the Doctor by the Tachyon Recreation Generator is played completely straight. While the scientific function of said machine is vaguely conveyed, its focus on a real scientific principle,



the hypothetical faster-than-light tachyon particle, is characteristic of Season 18. Later stories will highlight further concepts such as lingual drift, micro universes, unusual life cycles and, perhaps biggest of them all, entropy. While the science of these stories isn't always accurate, the concepts nevertheless spark intriguing and original storylines.

“Under Bidmead, science wasn’t just informative and practical – it could also be magical.”

Despite a stronger focus on science, the latter portion of Season 18 also contains stories with unusual, almost mystical elements which are all the more striking due to the more grounded world around them. The white void and through-the-mirror environments of *Warriors’ Gate* are dreamy and strange, providing strong contrast with the mundane drudgery of life aboard the slavers’ ship. The planet of Traken, meanwhile, is protected by a very unscientific-sounding “shield of goodness” that is ultimately powered by a machine that can be bypassed or shut down like any other. Finally, in *Logopolis*, the universe is held together by the chanting of the monk-like Logopolitans, but they repeat mathematical equations rather than any mystical incantation. Perhaps the most iconic example of this union of contrasts is the Watcher, a portentous, ghostly figure who is seemingly an omen of the Doctor’s death but is later revealed as some (admittedly unclear) part of regeneration. Under Bidmead, science wasn’t just informative and practical – it could also be magical.

Some of the most fascinating moments in Season 18, at least from a production perspective, come when Bidmead’s aims conflict with those of other creatives. It’s most apparent in *State of Decay*, where the tension between Terrance Dicks’ take on a classic vampire story and Bidmead’s scientific focus becomes the story’s greatest asset. It’s neither full Hammer horror or scientific thesis, instead gaining a unique flavour that cements its position as a land-

mark in *Doctor Who*’s mythology. Ultimately, vampires are defined not as supernatural horrors, but an alien threat large enough to warrant aggressive action from the Time Lords. The rebel villagers, trying to understand and utilise technology in their fight against vampiric oppression, represent the power of knowledge and education against the forces of ignorance and suppression – a great statement for *Doctor Who* as a whole.

The other tale that perhaps sits somewhat awkwardly in Season 18 is *Meglos*, which almost seems like a throwback to the previous year. The Gaztaks could easily be dropped into *The Creature From the Pit*, for instance, and there’s no attempt to explain the logic of the immensely powerful Dodecahedron. But what I find telling in this tale is the character of Lexa, played by original companion Jacqueline Hill. This overzealous priestess is treated as a figure of scorn, but never of ridicule, while her beliefs are genuine rather than a power-seeking sham. I’m not sure we’d have received such a sincere take on this character under Douglas Adams, nor such a stoic response from the Doctor and Romana to *Meglos*. Their enemy may be a cactus, but it’s treated with enough seriousness to lend more credibility to the story as a whole.

“...his contributions to *Doctor Who* cemented a legacy that continues to this day.”

If the script editor’s role is indeed to guide and shape a vision for *Doctor Who*, then the vision for Season 18 is one I find particularly appealing. Bidmead’s reinvention saw *Doctor Who* take itself a little more seriously once again while incorporating imaginative ideas, new writers and a more scientific outlook. Even after stepping down as script editor after Tom Baker’s departure, he was able to introduce us to Peter Davison’s era with his customary sincerity and imagination in *Castrovalva* before returning with the excellent *Frontios* in Season 21. Though Christopher Bidmead’s story is now over, his contributions to *Doctor Who* cemented a legacy that continues to this day.

The TARDIS Library

We've been given access to the Doctor's collection of literature from across time and space. This month, we're reading:

Nick Smith discusses a new analysis of the Fifth Doctor's debut

As an impressionable 10-year-old, I took my TV shows very seriously. After being primed by the repeats of *The Five Faces of Doctor Who*, I was raring to watch the Fifth Doctor in action by the time *Castrovalva* rolled around a month afterwards. While this incarnation got off to a slow start, I wasn't disappointed by the time he took to recover from his regeneration thanks to his distinctive companions and the intriguing dilemmas they faced. Beyond the modern music, the special effects and the melodrama, ideas reigned. *Castrovalva* was a kingdom of concepts, a study in magical science. It was, in its TV budget-bound way, glorious.

Writer Andrew Orton explores the story's characters and concepts – and just what makes *Castrovalva* special – in a new Black Archive. Orton wrote a previous volume about *The Deadly Assassin* and was also a visual effects artist for *The War Games in Colour*, so if anyone should appreciate the construction of an Escher-style kaleidoscopic city it's him. His book takes an intriguing look at the 80s adventure, bringing fresh perspectives to a venerable tale.

The book starts off with a conversational tone – almost too chatty, which had me worried that this Archive would lack the



methodical, scholarly depth of its predecessors. Before I could run off and de-stress in a zero cabinet, however, the subsequent chapters proved my concerns to be unfounded. Orton is consistently thoughtful, tracing the lead-up to *Castrovalva* via season 18 and, in particular, *Logopolis*. “For perhaps the first time since *The Edge of Destruction*,” Orton writes, “the TARDIS becomes a vehicle for the story, rather than just a vehicle to park the Doctor somewhere in space and time.” Orton extrapolates that this is the first era to truly mythologise the series as a whole, using elements such as the TARDIS and regeneration in intertextual ways. In *Castrovalva*, for example, the Fifth Doctor slips back into previous incarnations like an interstellar senior citizen lost in his memories, acting as both a nostalgia trip for fans and a showcase for Peter Davison’s acting.

“...you’ll find yourself recursively watching the story again, with many new layers to appreciate.”

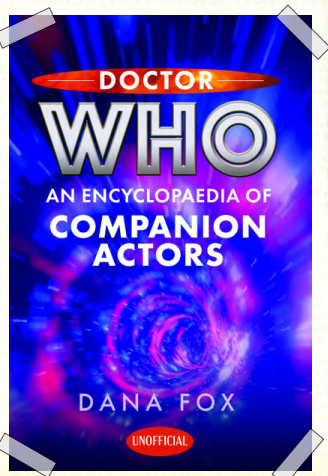
The story’s self-referentiality ties in with the soap opera aspects of the show at the time, providing a sense of continuity that previous seasons often lacked. Tegan has lost her Aunt Vanessa, Nyssa has lost her father and her home and Adric is replaced

by a fake. So far, so *Dallas*, with the Master as the resident J.R. Ewing. But, where 80s American super-soaps rely on glamour and shock twists, *Castrovalva* has mind-blowing ideas instead. Orton explores those ideas in a systematic fashion, with references to the nature of being, rationalism, creationism, recursion and 'scientesque imagineering.' In his attempts to avoid technobabble, Bidmead creates concrete names for fantastic concepts. Block transfer computation sounds scientific and works in context, even if it doesn't hold up to Orton's scrutiny.

Orton's overview of the serial also takes in the practical construction of the town of *Castrovalva*, a chapter which I found the most engrossing of all, as well as a look at the Master's somewhat confused motives. All of these topics, and more, are treated with maturity and respect. Read this book and you'll find yourself recursively watching the story again, with many new layers to appreciate.

Black Archive #77: *Castrovalva* by Andrew Orton is available from: obversebooks.co.uk

We're also reading:



Steve Claringbold on a new guide to the people behind the companions

I was looking forward to reading *Doctor Who: An Encyclopaedia of Companion Actors*, as what is the Doctor without their companions? These characters are a conduit for the audience, providing exposition and, in most cases, the human element that help us relate to the story being told. This is a neat little book that does a decent job at exploring the lives of the people behind the companions, but it's not as substantial as I would have liked.

Right at the start, author Dana Fox has to define exactly what a companion is. It's not as easy as it sounds, because every rule has its exceptions. If they have to feature in multiple stories, does Sara King-

dom count? And if they have to travel in the TARDIS, where do the UNIT regulars fit in? In the end, Fox has had to impose some pretty strict rules to ensure that the book didn't get out of hand, so there are some notable characters that some would class as a companion omitted. However, by explaining why these decisions were made, Fox sets the scene and heads off any potential complaints before they can be made.

With introductions out of the way, the book begins. What follows is a very brief Wikipedia-style biography of each companion, consisting of two to three pages, that starts with Carole Ann Ford and finishes with Varada Sethu. Fox says from the get-go that controversy, rumour and speculation are going to be avoided, so everyone is treated with the same level of respect throughout. Rightly or wrongly, this also means that any negativity is avoided.

“...a good concept, but one that hasn't quite reached its true potential.”

Interspersed among the biographies are nine interludes which contain interviews with various actors, their relations and fans. These interviews are, without a doubt, the best part of the book. As well as hearing from the likes of Peter Purves and Sophie Aldred, to name but a few, we also get insightful commentary from a variety of Whovians and figures like John Ainsworth of Big Finish fame.

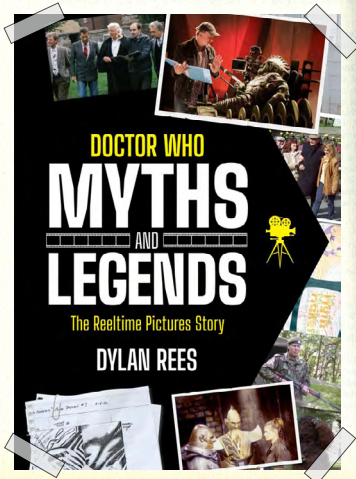
This book took me a couple of days to read, and while it was perfectly pleasant, I ultimately came away feeling like something was missing. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I think that perhaps it could have done with a bit more content to make this book truly unmissable. The pieces on the actors felt too brief and the information contained throughout is often freely available. The interviews are the exception, but some still felt too brief and left me wanting to hear something a bit more in-depth. I also think there's some room

to push the envelope of companions to include companions from Big Finish and other spinoff media to make the book that little bit more special.

Overall, *Doctor Who: An Encyclopaedia of Companion Actors* has a good concept, but one that hasn't quite reached its true potential. It provides a fair overview of many of the show's stars, but I would have liked it to have aimed a little higher.

***Doctor Who: An Encyclopaedia of Companion Actors* by Dana Fox is available from: pen-and-sword.co.uk**

We're also reading:



Chris McAuley delves into the history of Reeltime Pictures

Doctor *Who Myths & Legends* is a love letter to one of the longest-running, most endearing contributors to *Doctor Who* fandom: Reeltime Pictures. Dylan Rees' detailed chronicle doesn't just document four decades of low-budget brilliance, it celebrates the grit, creativity and sheer passion that fuelled a cottage industry of spin-offs, documentaries and actor interviews during *Doctor Who*'s wilderness years.

Let's start with the heart of it all: Keith Barnfather. This book gives the man his due – not just as the brains behind Reeltime, but as a determined creative who turned budget constraints into opportuni-

ties. It's hard not to admire someone who forged ahead with tape decks, cobbled-together gear and a cast of like-minded fans to create content that kept the *Doctor Who* flame alive when the BBC had all but snuffed it out.

Indeed, readers will enjoy learning about all aspects of Reeltime thanks to Rees' infectious enthusiasm. He's not just rattling off production trivia, but inviting you to remember your own experiences. It might be the first time you discovered *Myth Makers* on VHS, or watched *Wartime* and thought, "Wow, UNIT's getting its own moment!" Rees' personal connection to the material, and the way *Myth Makers* inspired his own media career, adds extra emotional weight.

"...a must-read for any fan who grew up scouring VHS convention tables..."

The book is well structured, with each chapter charting the evolution of Reeltime's output from the early, DIY interviews to ambitious spin-offs and new ventures like *Sil* and *the Devil Seeds of Arodor*. Every production is given thoughtful coverage of its challenges, innovations and legacy, and it's incredibly satisfying to see productions like *Downtime*, *Daemos Rising* and *Mindgame* get the respect and context they deserve. Whatever you might think of them, these productions were lifelines for fans hungry for more stories in the Whoniverse during the wilderness years.

There are plenty of humorous anecdotes too, from Janet Fielding shooing the crew away early in the morning to the chaos of Carole Ann Ford's multi-camera shoot. There's also coverage of the infamous 'Doctor In Distress' music video (which, bless it, *tried*).

But what really stands out is how Rees emphasises the importance of *preservation*. Reeltime may not have had BBC budgets but it did what no one else was doing – capturing the voices, memories and behind-the-scenes stories of the actors, directors and creatives who were

Doctor Who. Without these efforts, many recollections may have been lost forever.

In short, *Doctor Who: Myths & Legends* is a must-read for any fan who grew up scouring VHS convention tables or cherishes the spirit of fan-made storytelling. It's detailed, heartfelt, and unapologetically celebratory. Rees and Barnfather remind us that *Doctor Who* isn't just a show – it's a shared history. And Reeltime Pictures? It's part of the legend.

Doctor Who Myths and Legends: The Reeltime Pictures Story by Dylan Rees is available from: [telos.co.uk](https://www.telos.co.uk)

We're also reading:



Kara Dennison reviews a new adventure for the Fifteenth Doctor

While there's always something delightful about seeing a familiar face in a *Doctor Who* story, the true strength of the historicals is their ability to bring us closer to lesser-known pockets of history. Whether these are moments all but lost to time or occurrences we may miss solely for geographical or cultural reasons, the Doctor can bring any of them to our doorstep. Tie-in books wield this strength particularly well, with the space to explore historical happenings that might not feel 'blockbuster' enough to be televised. Rosa Parks and Agatha Christie are the stuff of prime-time television, but Grace Darling

doesn't carry that same global name recognition. Though, after reading *Fear Death by Water*, one might wonder if perhaps she *should*.

Emily Cook (known for her work on *Doctor Who Magazine* and her orchestration of many lockdown watchalongs) brings her passion for the series to this solo Fifteenth Doctor story set sometime between *Joy to the World* and *The Robot Revolution*. The companionless *Fear Death by Water* sees the Doctor dropping in on the night that Grace Darling helped to rescue eight survivors from the wrecked ship *Forfarshire*. Bookended by modern moments, this tale is as much a tribute to *Doctor Who* as it is a portrait of a heroine who never asked for the recognition she received.

"...a tribute that's at times jubilant and at others sedate and wholesome."

The adventure begins at the very real RNLi Grace Darling Museum, where the Doctor picks up a strange energy signature. His investigations reveal that he was there on the night of the *Forfarshire* shipwreck, and it's a good thing, too – something else is lurking off the coast of Northumberland. A Leviathan of biblical proportion haunts Grace's mind, but that isn't all. Aliens from a distant ocean are also present, and while they're more than willing to help tame the beast, their ideas (and actions) are very different from the Doctor's.

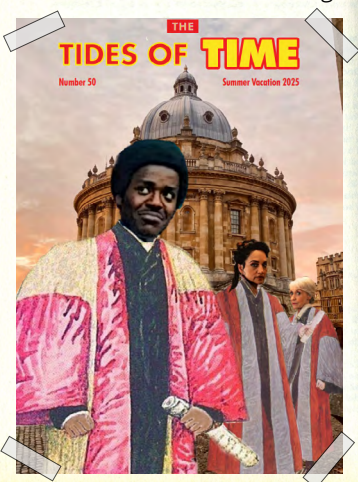
Despite this mixture of elements, the plot of *Fear Death by Water* is relatively straightforward, and that's a good thing. It allows for plenty of focus on, and characterisation for, the solo Fifteenth Doctor, and Cook nails Gatwa's passionate performance. There are also plenty of Easter eggs scattered throughout, from clever chapter titles ('John Smith and the Common Men') to scarves, sonic sunglasses and yet another fluid link issue. But these little moments aren't throwaways: Cook works them into the broader book, making each clever inclusion meaningful. The result is a tribute that's at times jubilant and at others sedate and wholesome.

As an American, I was unaware of Grace Darling's amazing work, and *Fear Death by Water* has led me to learn more about her and all of her achievements. For as much as it's an entertaining and well-crafted read, it is far higher praise to acknowledge this novel's potential to educate readers about the lives and work of real historical figures. That was always part of *Doctor Who*'s early mission, and in that respect (among so many others) *Fear Death by Water* exists firmly in the spirit of the show's long history.



***Fear Death By Water* by Emily Cook is available from all good booksellers**

We're also reading:



James Ashway celebrates a landmark issue of the Oxford fanzine

Before I start this review, I should say that I'm connected to this particular fanzine. In fact, I was the editor of the previous issue to this one, published back in 2023 at the end of Jodie Whittaker's era. That said, I've had absolutely nothing to do with putting *The Tides of Time*'s landmark 50th issue together, so it was a delight to sit back and read the labours of many at the Oxford *Doctor Who* Society.

“Matthew Kilburn’s insightful articles into... William Russell and Barbara Clegg are excellent...”

With more than two years having passed since #49, this was a bumper issue of *Tides*. At 132 pages long, it's more of a novella than a fanzine in some ways, albeit one that features everything from opinion polls to poetry. The meat of the first half

is mostly concerned with catching up on everything that's happened since the last issue, with a focus on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Doctor's runs from the specials to Series 14. Some of this has become somewhat outdated since it was written, but it's still an interesting time capsule of what fans thought at the time. It's an issue that's generally unaware of Series 15, having come out shortly after *The Reality War* aired, but as any fanzine editor knows it's always good to have content for the next issue!

"The mixture of reviews, features and much more is a testament to [the] editors..."

As a somewhat lapsed member of the Oxford *Doctor Who* Society, I found the summary of the club's events a good way to keep up to date with what's happening among the dreaming spires. There's everything from accounts of talks by Russell T Davies to the full set of questions from a recent Varsity Quiz, but the true highlights of the issue lie in the features in *Tides* #50's second half. Matthew Kilburn's insightful articles into the Oxford careers of the late William Russell and Barbara Clegg are excellent, and show the true value of smaller fanzines. The focus may often be more local in scope, but they can really delve into the details to produce some fascinating results.

All in all, I'm glad to have picked up a copy of *Tides* #50. The mixture of reviews, features and much more is a testament to editors Matthew Kilburn and Adam Kendrick. Now they've got their feet under the door, I look forward to seeing where future issues take them.

The Tides of Time #50 is available from:
oxforddoctorwho-tidesoftime.blog

Coordinator's Corner



SV7 credit:
Elbert Smith

Welcome to Limbo Land. With *The War Between The Land And The Sea* seemingly not being broadcast until next year, the previously alluded to news on the future of *Doctor Who* has - for now at least - been kicked into the long grass.

The announcement from the likes of BBC Chief Content Officer Kate Phillips that the show is "going nowhere" and will still be on the BBC with or without Disney didn't provide any actual facts about the show's future. Similarly, Jane Tranter's statement that *Doctor Who* is a BBC show at its heart and will keep going one way or another leaves us in no man's, or woman's, land.

No, it's definitely not 1989 but this is the first time since September 2003, when the return of the programme was announced, that we've faced such a 'void'. That's 22 long years, blimey. My hopes from CT 553 that we'd have learnt more about the future of *Doctor Who* by now have certainly been dashed. Am I being too concerned? Quite possibly. As always, time will tell.

In the interim, we continue to share all things *Doctor Who* with our social media presence, which never ceases to amaze me. We now have in excess of 31,000 followers - thank you for your wonderful support both online and in person at our ongoing events. Till next time, all the very best!

Tony Jordan

Mistress of the Land of Fiction

Image credit: Una McCormack

Since the 1960s, the Doctor has featured in unnumerable adventures away from television screens. Author **Una McCormack** reveals how *Doctor Who* goes from script to screen and onto the printed page.

Interview by **James Ashway**

Your writing career began in fanfiction. What was it that made you want to start writing?

Generally, I find that people start writing fanfiction because they're really, intensely involved with something and there's not enough of it, or that they'd like to change what exists in some way. I'd always loved *Blake's 7* from quite an early age, and so my first fanfiction was actually stick man cartoons of the characters from the show. My older sister was quite involved with the fan clubs that were around in the early 1980s, such as Horizon, and so she used to bring back fanzines when she went off to conventions. So, from an early age, I was aware of this television show that wasn't on the air anymore, and that I could write my own stories. I probably started drawing my cartoons when I was around the age of eight or nine, and then in my teens they started becoming proper stories. When I was in my late teens, I found out that Horizon still existed so I joined up and started writing for fanzines. Then the internet happened shortly afterwards, and it really escalated from there. So, really, I've been writing pretty much since the year dot.

As you wrote fanfiction, what did you learn from it?

I was really lucky that, when I went online, I joined a couple of *Blake's 7* mailing lists and there were some extremely

From fanfiction to Firefly, and Deep Space Nine to Doctor Who, Una's writing crosses many fictional worlds.



smart people there. I think there were a lot of postgraduate students like me who were looking for something to do that wasn't our PhDs. Everyone brought their different skills, whether writing or reading, which helped to improve everyone else's work. When I started to write *Deep Space Nine* fanfiction, my beta reader (that's what you call your editor in fan fiction, essentially) was a professor of English literature. So, I developed a very competent first draft style and an ability to write quickly. Back then, people on the mailing list might say that they were feeling a bit down and looking for a story with these three elements, and then you'd put that together in a spare hour. And when you were posting online, you'd get responses almost immediately. You don't have to wait for a fanzine or a book to be edited, published and reviewed – the feedback comes straight away. I think you get a bit addicted to that.

I also had some very good people nudging my drafts. My English professor friend took me through my first long story, which was around 35,000 words. It was like a sort of informal Creative Writing degree but it was full of Cardassians or the Liberator. You get all the kind of things you'd get on a graduate course in terms of critical response, so it really meant I learnt to write and then was ready to commission.

Today, we take access to our favourite shows for granted. How was it writing fan fiction when streaming and home media weren't available to consult?

It could be a challenge! *Blake's 7* was notoriously off air, essentially forever, so you had to find copies somehow. I was in St Helens and I had friends in Southport who would lend me tapes and we'd co-ordinate over the landline. If it was a show like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, on the other hand, the UK was waiting as much as a year for it to be broadcast after it had gone out in the United States if you didn't have satellite TV. So, you'd meet at someone's house, shut all the curtains, eat crisps and slowly boil as you marathoned a parcel of tapes that had been sent in from America. They'd have to be converted from NTSC for-

mat to PAL, so some of the quality would be lost. As a result, you'd be watching these grainy versions of the real thing, but it was so exciting. Then, early *Doctor Who* started to pop up on UK Gold and a few VHS releases, so that started being available too. But while it was getting easier, you still had to rely on the community of fans for their memories of a particular story or character, or access to their tape collections.

“...posting [fanfiction] online, you'd get responses almost immediately... I think you get a bit addicted to that.”

When you started writing professionally, did that communal atmosphere transfer across from fan fiction?

I'd drifted away from *Doctor Who* fandom just before the New Adventures kicked off, which was a shame. I even turned down an offer of an interview from Virgin because I was about to start a Master's Degree! I really regret that.

It sounds like your *Turn Left* moment!

Yes, exactly that! I might not have got it, but it was possible.

Instead, I went into *Star Trek* and that really took off. After I'd been doing that for a while, and *Doctor Who* had come back, I thought about asking if I could write anything for them. It was during the changeover between David Tennant and Matt Smith that I got in touch. I remembered Justin Richards from his *Blake's 7* fanzines back in the day, and the name stirred something in my memory. So, I sent him a letter addressed to something like 'Justin Richards, care of the BBC' and laid out my CV. I said I'd had something published in *Doctor Who Magazine* in the 1990s, and that I'd done a lot of tie-in work for *Star Trek*. Luckily for me, he commissioned me and so I found a way in. I think Gary Russell was also involved, and he's been very kind to me in helping open the door at Big Finish too. So, it was also a combination of luck, timing and hard work.

Speaking of Big Finish, do you find that writing for audio is particularly different than prose?

I've always loved writing dialogue, and I think that was part of the reason I was drawn to fan fiction. On the other hand, I'm not very good at descriptions, as I'm not that visual a person. So, audio has been quite a gift, really. I think I developed a prose style that coped with my deficiencies in descriptions, and that transferred well to audio. What you can't do, of course, is show what a character is thinking or describe what they're seeing except in dialogue. It can then be a challenge to make it all sound natural, because you don't want to write something like, "Doctor, there's a mountain!" "Good spot companion, that is a mountain." You have to work on making it naturalistic. Part of that is relinquishing a bit of control and leaving things up to the director, the acting choices and the sound designer, but you can nudge things in the direction you want with the right lines in the script. If you put those cues in, then the brilliant audio teams can then make it a reality. You're there to direct the shape of the piece, its themes, its symbolism and the voice of the character, and I think those play to my strengths.

You've now written for the Eighth Doctor through to the Fifteenth, putting Fourteen to one side. When you write, are you visualising those characters in your head first?

With the *Star Trek* novels, I think that character is normally the first thought because you decide to put two characters together and see what happens. But in *Doctor Who* novels and Big Finish audios, I tend to think of the setting first because the soundscape really affects what you can do in audio. Of course, a setting without people isn't very interesting. Think of the planet Midnight – it's not that interesting a place until the people arrive. Then, it's an incredibly scary place. There's a feedback loop between them, but the setting is taking the lead. In *Doctor Who* particularly, you're plonking the TARDIS down somewhere and then populating that setting with the guest char-

acters of the week. They've been conditioned by their setting, so that affects how they behave. In essence, *Doctor Who* is a sitcom, but the 'sit' keeps on changing.

Of course, probably the most difficult thing about writing *Doctor Who* is the Doctor themselves. They're a problem solver, and it's hard to contain them. The story has to try and work against their presence, and that's where the setting really comes in handy.

When you got the call to novelise *The Robot Revolution*, how did you approach novelising the episode?

First of all, I had a read through the script and then, a little later, I got to see an early cut of the episode. It was quite clear that I was going to have to add a fair bit, even though the script already had quite a bit in it that didn't make it to the screen. There was a lot more prologue, and a few other scenes here and there, but it was probably around 13-14,000 words. The book, however, needed to be around 35,000.

With Targets what's on screen needs to be faithfully represented in the novelisation. But, within those constraints, I really went for it. Most of it was informed by the tone, and so I leaned into something that I think has ended up part Russell T Davies, part Douglas Adams and part me. Occasionally I had moments where I pushed it a bit too far and had to go back and cut it back towards the televised

**Douglas Adams
was an influence
on *The Robot
Revolution*
novelisation**



episode, but I also had a lot more freedom around the edges than I anticipated. Prose gives you the ability to provide feelings and context and background that you can't as easily convey on screen, so that's what I wanted to go for.

Because the story is pretty continuous once it gets going, there wasn't a lot of opportunity to add a lot to the action. Instead, I focused on backstory. I took a lot of cues from what was on the page and the screen, and ended up adding a lot of detail to Belinda's flatmates as well as Sasha and Manny on Missbelindachandra One. We also know that the Doctor has spent six months on the planet, so I got a few thousands words out of that too! [laughs] I then sent it all off to Steve Cole, my editor, and he said, "I love this, so let's hope Cardiff does too!" Fortunately, they did. In the end, I think you're about a third of the way through the book before you get to the end of the credits sequence, so job done! [laughs] I had a real riot with it.

You mentioned adding to characters such as Sasha 55, which was an aspect of the novel I really appreciated. What inspired your decisions when growing existing characters?

I started from what was on the script, but I took a lot of details from the performance of Evelyn Miller as Sasha in the episode. I try to think about the reality of a person who's having to juggle a very dangerous situation with being an undercover resistance agent and becoming beguiled with the Doctor. I thought they were someone quite steady, with a lot of nerve, and they had all the qualities of a future companion like curiosity, compassion and a good heart. If you'd got to the end of the episode and Sasha had been whisked away in the TARDIS, you would have been delighted. Of course, poor girl, that didn't happen. As for Manny, I thought about who would be the kind of person willing to leap through a ceiling! Then I paired him together with Sasha to give both of them extra depth and get more emotion out of Sasha's death.

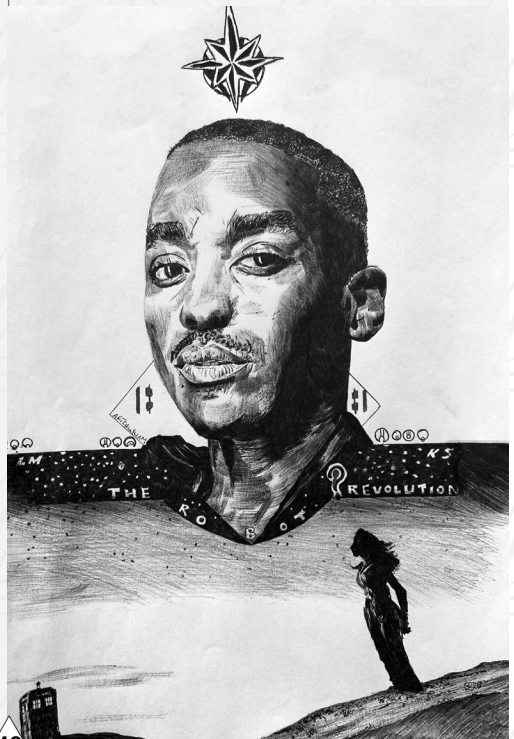
In contrast, there wasn't really a lot about the flatmates so I just went with the kind of

people who'd still be in a flatshare in their thirties in London. So, I thought about postgrads, actors, underpaid public sector workers and highly-paid people who are squirreling money away so they can retire early. It was a nice opportunity to have a bit of fun.

***The Robot Revolution* also features Mrs Flood. Were you tempted to expand her part in the story?**

Not really. I suspect if I'd tried to expand her role, it probably would have ended up being cut because of the arc that's going on during the series. I didn't know what it was at the time, and so if I'd put together my own ideas it probably would have got in the way of where things actually went.

Mrs Flood also breaks the fourth wall when she turns to the audience and says, "You ain't seen me." We tried to get that into the novelisation, "You ain't read me" or something similar, but it just didn't work. It was just too arch, so in the end we just had to drop it. I wish we'd found a way.



In terms of what you knew and didn't know, the Doctor's travels in Belinda's timeline seem to reference Poppy. Is that something you had been made aware of?

That was all from the version of the script that I got. They clearly wanted those bits in, because otherwise I imagine I'd have seen a different version. The stuff about the jathakam, Belinda's horoscope, inspired me to think about the parallels between Belinda and Sasha. So, I gave Sasha a life plan and that all developed the themes of things being written in the stars. But it all came from the original script. I saw Scott Handcock [*Doctor Who* script editor] the other week and he said that it was really nice to see all the stuff they hadn't had time for come back in. One day I'm sure the scripts will end up on the BBC Writer's Room and everyone will be able to see what I was working with.

"...probably the most difficult thing about writing *Doctor Who* is the Doctor themselves."

I also really enjoyed the chapter titles, which are a mixture of everything from pop songs to puns. Where did you get the ideas from?

Well, 'Padam Padam' was the bit that started it all off. The script is tongue in cheek, so I thought the novelisation should be as well. So, I just decided to run with it, following the lead of Jenny Colgan's *Christmas Invasion* novelisation. It helped that I have a playlist dedicated to songs about robots and outer space so I decided to add a few in. I couldn't get all of them to work, but a curated playlist goes a long way.

Another chapter title, 'Tombo and the Robots', sits a bit oddly. It makes sense when you know that the script was called 'Belinda and the Robots' when I got it, so that's where that came from. 'Paranoid Android', meanwhile, is a reference not to the Radiohead song but the song that Marvin from *Hitchhiker's*

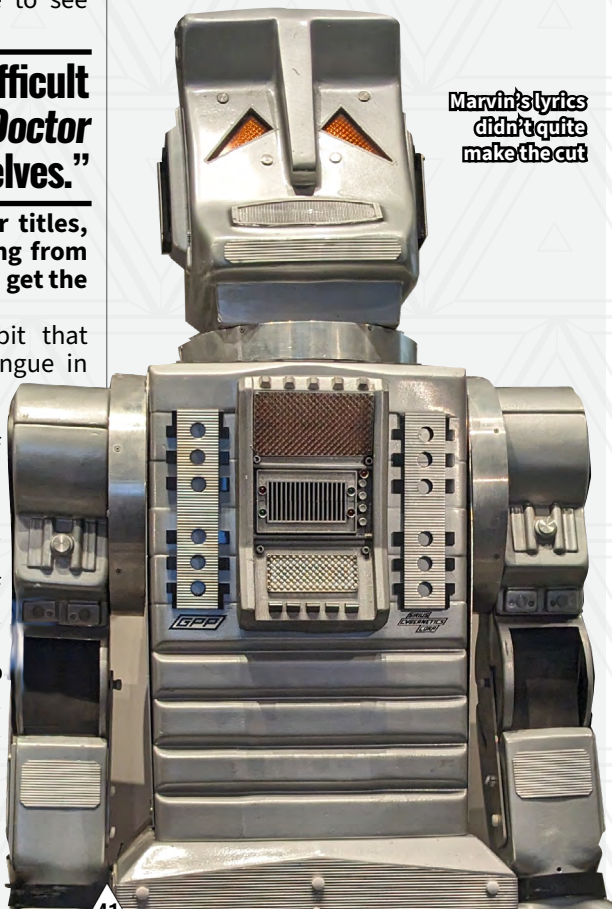
Guide to the Galaxy sings. Originally, the chapter was called 'Solitary Solenoid' but you have to pay if you want to use lyrics. As you don't for song titles, 'Paranoid Android' it was. I'd have much rather it was 'Solitary Solenoid', but there you go.

Now that the novelisation is out, what's next for Una McCormack?

Well, there's a new audiobook for the Fifteenth Doctor that I've written, *Counterstrike*, that's due out in October. There's also a new *Deep Space Nine* novel with Jake Sisko, and hopefully other things still to come as well.

Una McCormack, thank you very much!

Marvin's lyrics didn't quite make the cut



On Target: Reviews of recent releases

Empire of Death - Eoghan Daly

The Fifteenth Doctor's first two-part season finale comes to print under the umbrella title *Empire of Death*. Script editor Scott Hancock takes the reins on this adventure, granting readers a fresh look at RTD's apocalyptic finale and expanding on what was shown originally on screen.

With the deft touch that only a script editor can provide, Hancock provides the novelisation with an abundance of material omitted from the finished cut. The original opening of *The Legend of Ruby Sunday* is reinstated, bringing readers on a series of excursions with the Doctor and Ruby as they search for answers in locations as diverse as Nevada, USA, and a Zarbi colony. Additions like these help to establish the story's scale, making Sutekh's later destruction of time and space all the more impactful. Other additions clarify what was seen on screen, such as the now infamous scene of Ruby's mother pointing dramatically at the Ruby Road street sign.

Hancock's novelisation also attempts to iron out certain elements of the finale as televised, including the Time Window and the Memory TARDIS. While Hancock explores the reasoning behind these elements in more depth, his explanations only highlight the flimsy logic that underpins them. The attempt to add clarity is appreciated, but can draw more attention to the original flaws than it actually resolves.

This is somewhat symptomatic of how busy *Empire of Death* is as a novel, reflecting the pace and density of the original episode. Hancock's writing style is straightforward and snappy, which works well in keeping the plot moving briskly. Unfortunately, this often results in the prose veering towards becoming a sequential listing of events. Even as a seasoned fan of

the *Doctor Who* novelisations, there were points where reading this felt more like scrolling through a well-written selection of TARDIS Wiki entries than experiencing a fully immersive narrative. It means that the atmosphere of certain locations and the emotional weight of key moments are sometimes lost in translation, leaving the novelisation feeling hollow in places. Characters seem defined by their history, rather than their actions in the novel at hand, leaving them a bit one-note and in many cases surplus to the story being told.

Ultimately, this novelisation fails to fully recapture the spectacle and emotional resonance of *The Legend of Ruby Sunday* and *Empire of Death*. While it is full of intriguing cut material, the limited development of its ideas beyond this means that this retelling falls short of its potential. That said, while it doesn't match the best of the novelisations, it still offers fans valuable insights into this ambitious – if flawed – finale.



192 pages

Format:
Paperback
and E-book

RRP: £9.99

The Robot Revolution - James Ashway

Doctor Who's companion introductions are always a tricky beast, needing to establish a brand new character while also getting on with the business of entertainment. Novelisations of these episodes, meanwhile, have the opposite problem – how to add new details about an existing story and its characters without derailing the plot. Being approached to novelise such a tale as *The Robot Revolution*, therefore, is quite the challenge. Fortunately, the combination of Russell T Davies' ideas and Una McCormack's prose produces another winning entry for the relaunched Target range.

As you might expect from her *Doctor Who* debut, *The Robot Revolution* novelisation focuses on bulking out the character of Belinda Chandra. It's something that plays to McCormack's strengths as an author, allowing her to show off her focus on characterisation as well as providing room for a few witty asides. Belinda's inner monologues reinforce the caring yet sarcastic character that Varada Sethu brought to life on screen, while taking advantage of later episodes to provide some retrospective continuity. This is particularly the case when the diplomas touch during the climax, allowing the novelisation to make some nods to plot developments that were yet to be broadcast when *The Robot Revolution* first aired.

It's not just Belinda who benefits from being fleshed out in the novelisation, either. Her family and flatmates get far more attention now that the story is freed from the constraints of set episode lengths, helping to make Belinda's life on Earth feel more lived in before she's whisked away to Miss-belindachandra One. McCormack is also working her magic on that distant planet, developing the characters of Sasha 55 and Manny 58 in parallel with events on Earth. She does an excellent job at presenting Sasha 55 as a companion in the wings, with all the traits that would make her a worthy traveller in the TARDIS. As we know that this will never be, this novelisation makes Sasha 55's death all the more affecting.

Then, of course, there's Alan Budd. *The Robot Revolution*'s antagonist is treated somewhat sympathetically by the novelisation, presenting him as someone to be pitied. Alan's actions are given some grounding, but McCormack doesn't pull her punches when it comes to highlighting just how twisted he's become. As a result, those who complained about the Doctor's reaction to Alan being swept away won't find any sudden changes here – *The Robot Revolution* is very certain that its villain got what was coming to him.

“...McCormack doesn't pull her punches when... highlighting just how twisted [Alan]'s become.”

All in all, this is a solid adaptation that's a worthy addition to any *Doctor Who* shelf. It doesn't reinvent the wheel when it comes to novelisations, but fleshes out the characters of *The Robot Revolution* in pleasing and organic ways. Its pages breeze by, and it's testament to McCormack's prose that you could easily devour this in a single sitting. If you're looking to add Belinda to your Target collection, then there's no reason not to start here.



192 pages

**Format:
Paperback
and E-book**

RRP: £9.99

Doctor Who and the Ace of Clubs

Jamie Hailstone presents his Target Book Club report

It is customary when reviewing any event with the word 'club' in the title to quote a certain 1999 film, starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, in which the first rule is that one should never talk about said club. Well, stuff that. The name of the Target Book Club should be shouted from the rooftops for being one of the most splendiferous conventions of the summer.

"The name of the Target Book Club should be shouted from the rooftops..."

Organised by author and producer James Goss, it brought together some of the finest *Doctor Who* writers to celebrate the wonder of the Target novelisation range in the cosy confines of the Abbey Centre in Westminster. For any readers unfamiliar with the range, these novels were very much the missing episode animations of their day. They filled a valuable gap in the 1970s and 80s, bringing to life stories which were never likely to be seen again on terrestrial television. These pocket-sized adventures were perfect to slip into a school satchel; a well-thumbed copy of *Doctor Who and the Day of the Daleks* was always guaranteed to relieve the boredom of the school library on a wet Wednesday afternoon. While the Target range went on hiatus in the 1990s and 2000s, it roared back to life in 2018 and the range continues to this day.

The Target Book Club marked 50 years of the range in 2023, and the celebration of the range has returned for 2025. Goss really did the audience proud with this year's event, which included a selection of talks and readings by range authors such as Una McCormack, Matthew Sweet and Gareth L. Powell.

Nev Fountain, meanwhile, made an attempt to steal the show with his hilarious talk on Alan Willow, who illustrated several Target books during the 1970s. Some of Willow's illustrations were, shall we say, a little on the exaggerated side. It could also be argued, and Fountain certainly did, that some of the characters may not have looked exactly like their television counterparts and that key scenes were made to seem far more dramatic than they really were.

"Alan Willow has produced lies that would have made Baron Munchausen blush," Fountain told the audience. "He sits on a throne of lies, and it's a throne he drew himself to look much more impressive than the actual one."

Fountain then proceeded to create a fictional *Doctor Who* story, based on Willow's drawings, in which hipsters under the influence of the evil alien Deliveroo attempt to conquer the Earth by animating takeaway food. This hilarious tale was almost worth the price of admission alone and was a timely reminder why Fountain is one of the wittiest writers around.

Nev Fountain – "...one of the wittiest writers around."



However, his attempt for the day's most memorable talk was narrowly beaten by writer Stephen Gallagher, who discussed the tortuous journey of his Fourth Doctor epic *Warrior's Gate*. He was only 23 when he wrote the original television script, which Gallagher described as a "feverish mishmash of all the science fiction I've absorbed in my life". While "everybody seemed happy" when he handed in the draft script, all classic *Doctor Who* fans know that was not the end of the story.

"...after taking the long way round Gallagher's epic science fiction tale is finally home."

"Script editor Christopher H. Bidmead and director Paul Joyce took the scripts off to work on them," he told the audience. "What I did not realise was just how savagely they were cutting them down to make the scripts useable for television."

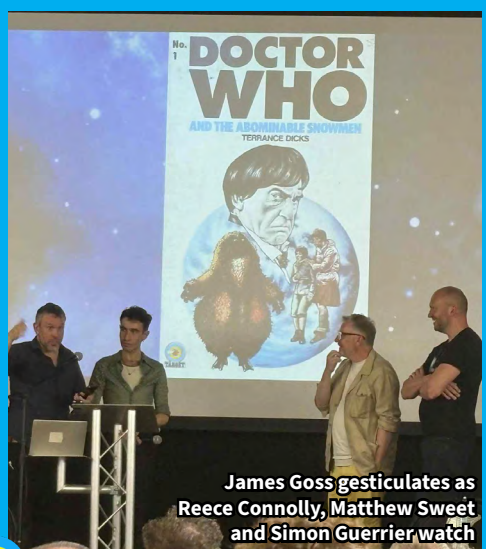
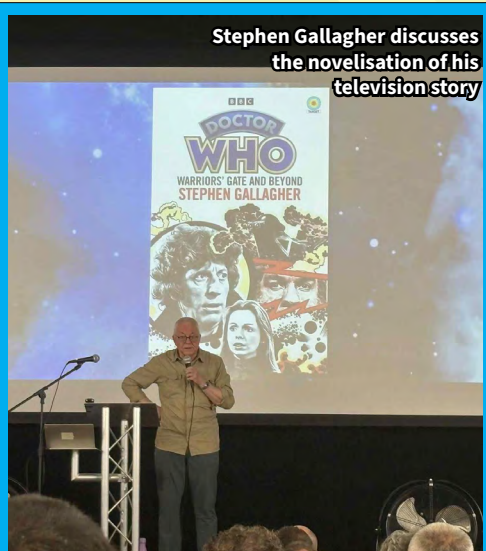
It is no secret that Gallagher was unhappy with some of the changes made, and he gladly took up the offer to novelise *Warrior's Gate* shortly afterwards. He said that this was initially closer to his original vision of the story, but that changed after *Who* producer Jonathan Nathan-Turner read the manuscript.

"John Nathan-Turner was not happy, because I had done a lot more than the TV version contained. So, at the eleventh hour, as the book was going to press, I had to take the original manuscript and television script and do a literal cut and paste job."

This novelisation of *Warrior's Gate* was released in 1982, with Gallagher using the pen name of John Lydecker. But he kept all the snippets excised from the manuscript in the hope that a complete version could one day be released.

This eventually happened in 2019, when BBC Audio released an audiobook of the restored manuscript read by Jon Culshaw. But it was not until 2023 that *Warrior's Gate and Beyond*, as the updated version was known, was finally published in paperback along with two extra short stories. It may have taken more than 40 years, but after taking the long way round Gallagher's epic science fiction tale is finally home.

It's an optimistic note to end this review on, with the future looking bright for the Target range. A collection of novelisations have just been published for Ncuti Gatwa's Doctor, with more stories to come in 2026, and Simon Guerrier is working on a book about the Target range's guv'nor Terrance Dicks. There's much to look forward to, and with luck, the doors of the Target Book Club can open again next year to celebrate the ongoing legacy of *Doctor Who*'s prose.



The greatest display in the galaxy

Michael Crouch on the new *Doctor Who* exhibition at Peterborough Museum

Adventures in Time and Space is a new unofficial *Doctor Who* exhibition currently running at Peterborough Museum until 2 November 2025. It's a thoughtfully curated display made up of several rooms lined with costumes, monsters and props spanning the entire history of the series, and is worth dropping by.

One of the biggest draws of any *Doctor Who* exhibition are the costumes of the Doctor themselves. There are the more familiar outfits worn by William Hartnell, Tom Baker and Colin Baker as the Doctor, as well as a variety of clothing worn by all manner of Time Lords and Gallifreyan guards. Interspersed among these more familiar sights are a few rarities, such as the fetching green tunic of the title character from the lost 1963 epic *Marco Polo*. There is also a tunic worn by one of the many short-lived Doctors featured in the Comic Relief sketch, *The Curse of Fatal Death*, as well as the one worn by Rowan Atkinson. K-9 is the dutiful guard dog watching over this particular display, making sure his Master's possessions are kept safe and sound.

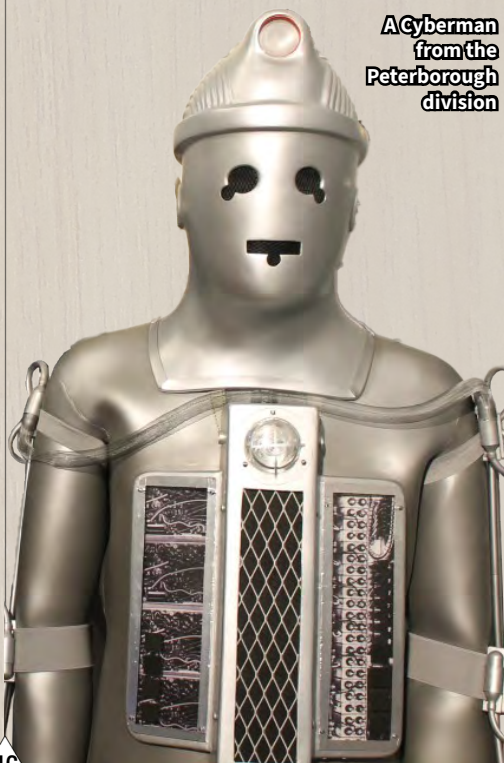
The monster displays are also thoughtfully arranged, grouping the different aliens together in largely chronological order so visitors can see how the designs have evolved. For example, the first main set of monsters you encounter after stepping through the police box doors are the Silurians and the Sea Devils. The various iterations of both are displayed against backdrops designed to give the impression of cave walls, spaceship corridors and similar, lending an air of drama to the displays.

Next up are the Cybermen, with the display grouped into a few different battalions including the early models, the 80s rede-

sign and the modern versions. Visitors can get up close with these metallic menaces and take in all the details, admire the creativity in the costumes and pose for selfies (if, unlike me, they remember).

The Cybermen are accompanied by a number of different cyber guns, and other props are dotted throughout the exhibition. There are an eclectic range of items on show, and I won't list everything so that there are still a few surprises if you go to visit. Nonetheless, expect to see police boxes, an early TARDIS console and the Gallifreyan space station from *The Trial of a Time Lord* – a large model that looks every bit as impressive as it did on screen.

A Cyberman from the Peterborough division



Back to the costumes, and the penultimate display features a selection of creatures and foes. While all of the displays are static, there are a few sound FX and music tracks playing in the background to provide a bit of atmosphere. These help visitors to cast their mind back to the classic era as they see the original Sutekh sitting in his pyramidal prison while a Foamasi, an Argolin, an Ice Warrior and numerous others stand guard nearby. The new series doesn't miss out either, with creatures such as the Sycorax and Judoon making an appearance.

The final room is the largest, and as you might expect, it's time for the Daleks. There is a small army on show, so you are certain to find your favourite version on show somewhere. Davros lurks among his creations, while an Ogron protects an impressive set piece featuring the Dalek Emperor from *The Evil of the Daleks*. If that all gets a bit much, don't worry – there's also a welcome leather sofa to hide behind.

While *Adventures in Time and Space* probably isn't the biggest or most interactive of *Doctor Who* exhibitions, it is an impressive display of wonders from the series' long

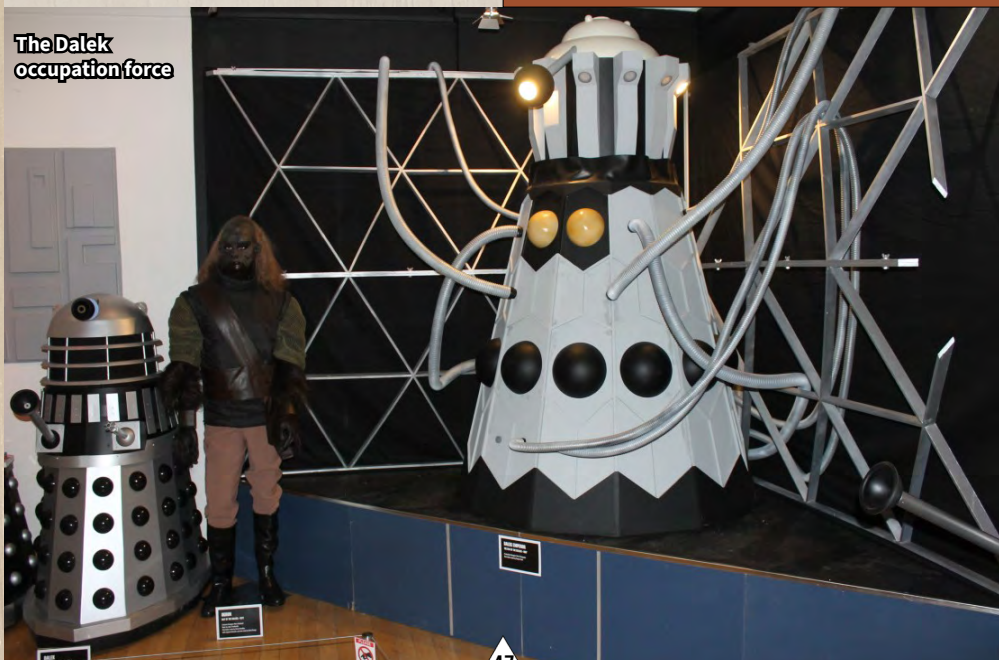
history. It's also proven popular, and if you intend to visit, it's worth ordering an advance entrance ticket from Peterborough Museum's website. Numbers are restricted each day, but if you can find a slot there is plenty of time and space (pun intended) to see everything up close without the place being overrun.

“There are an eclectic range of items on show, [including] a few surprises...”

Once you've finished your visit to the *Doctor Who* displays, the rest of the museum is definitely worth a visit too. The free-to-visit displays on Peterborough's rich history fill three floors, including a particularly atmospheric display of a Napoleonic prison and a ship's deck. There's also a small gift shop too, with a number of *Doctor Who*-related items available. You know the Doctor – they love a gift shop!

Tickets are available for £5 from:
peterboroughmuseum.org.uk/events/adventures-in-time-space

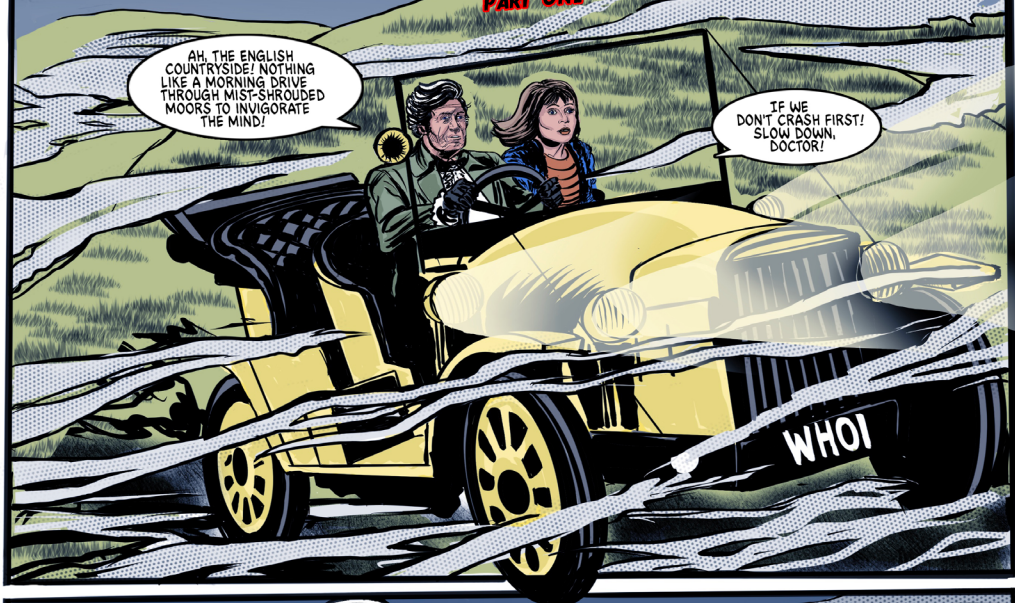
**The Dalek
occupation force**



DOCTOR WHO

THE SCREECHING HORROR!

BY ELBERT HENRY SMITH
PART ONE





Jon Pertwee's magical mystery tour

Jamie Hailstone listens to some lesser-known Pertwee

After last year's Tom Baker collection, Demon Records have released another fine compilation – this time celebrating the Jon Pertwee era. Available on both vinyl and CD, it's another worthy purchase – but it might not be the one you are expecting.

While the Tom Baker Collection was comprehensive, featuring the audio version of *Genesis of the Daleks*, *Exploration Earth* and more, the Third Doctor's radio adventures (*The Paradise of Death*, *The Ghosts of N-Space*) are notable by their absence. Instead, the bulk of this new release consists of two abridged novelisations dating back to the mid-1990s. Originally issued on cassette in 1995, these audio versions of *The Curse of Peladon* and *Planet of the Daleks* are both narrated by Jon Pertwee himself. While they have been on CD before, as part of the *Tales from the Tardis* releases in the early 2000s, it's the first time they've been released on vinyl.

The Third Doctor would be right at home at Goodwood



Being vintage audiobooks, these stories might not have the sound effects that listeners raised on Big Finish might be expecting. Nonetheless, Pertwee makes an excellent host. He seems to be having an absolute blast with all the different voices, particularly on *Curse of Peladon* where his version of Alpha Centauri is almost worth the price of admission alone. It's no wonder he was so in-demand on the radio during the 1950s and 1960s alongside such equally legendary performers as Ronnie Barker and Lesley Phillips. He has less opportunities to have fun on the *Planet of the Daleks* audiobook, but listeners do get to hear his impression of a Dalek – something which is unlikely to give Nicholas Briggs any sleepless nights.

“...[Pertwee's] version of Alpha Centauri is almost worth the price of admission alone”

Aside from the stories, this collection also contains a series of interviews, sketches and other ephemera. There's a radio interview between Pertwee and DJ Simon Bates in which the actor describes the Third Doctor as a “sci-fi James Bond”, which feels like the perfect description for the character's combination of a stiff upper lip, showmanship and penchant for fast cars. Another of the excerpts features Elisabeth Sladen and Jon Pertwee getting up to some hijinks at Goodwood in May 1974. It's pure pantomime, with the time-travelling duo on good form. One aspect which ages it slightly are the constant references to British Leyland, who presumably were event sponsors. Younger listeners will likely never have heard of British Leyland, while some older listeners will probably wish they had never heard of them either.

Dear CT,

A bit *WandaVision*, a bit Faction Paradox. There was a lot about *Wish World* that was interesting, and in particular Archie Panjabi getting to flex her muscles as the Rani. It's really not a modern *Who* villain entrance if there isn't a big dance, I suppose, but the Rani felt equal parts correct and incorrect.

Getting to see a return to John Smith, a moment of the Doctor approaching domesticity, family and (at least by Conrad's reckoning) normality was interesting for this lonelier, more open interpretation of the Doctor. Seeing a further lean into magic was also interesting. I haven't minded the fantasy elements, but it really all depends on what this is building towards.

After watching *The Reality War*, however, those original intentions are murky. This new run of *Doctor Who* feels like watching someone in the process of knitting a gorgeous sweater, only to panic and quickly turn it into an awkward-looking shawl at the last moment. You know it was meant to be something else, you can still see the shape of what it was about to become and you have a lot of questions about how those stray threads were tucked in.

This is an episode for which a purely Watsonian analysis simply won't do. Much like *The Black Orchid* and *The Mind Robber*, this episode can only really be comprehended when looked at through the lens of production. There are answers we likely won't get for years – possibly not until Davies adds a new volume to his *Writer's Tale*. The abandonment of Rogue, the gas-lighting of Ruby and the forcing of motherhood upon Belinda are all troubling... to the point that Billie Piper's return feels like the least urgent discussion topic on the table.

From Kara Dennison

Wish World and The Reality War



Fast forward to the 1990s, and we find an excerpt from the 1990s BBC radio sketch show *The Skivers*. Pertwee could be a commanding and serious figure at times, but this is one occasion where his tongue is firmly in cheek. It also has the dubious honour of being the *Doctor Who* and *Great British Bake Off* mash up you never knew you wanted, as the Third Doctor auditions a young Mel Giedroyc as his new assistant. It's a fascinating insight into how *Doctor Who* was viewed by the public at large in the 1990s. The Doctor was a figure of fun, and not to be taken seriously. How times have changed!

Last, but by no means least, is Pertwee's epic 1972 single 'Who Is The Doctor?'. It's a strange mix of T-Rex-style glam rock and William Shatner's infamous spoken word recordings. It is quite bonkers and, yet, strangely listenable. If you have ever wanted to own a copy of this gem, this is your chance. This is, after all, a judgement-free zone.

This is not the kind of compilation which offers any fresh revelations into the character of the Third Doctor, nor the actor who played him. It's more of a 'rarities and B-sides' affair, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. If you are lucky enough to own a turntable and can get the swanky vinyl version, this is well worth adding to your collection.

Convention Confidential: Projections in Time: *Traken*

James Ashway reports back from the Trakenite outpost at Riverside Studios

On 3 August, Riverside Studios was once again full of the sounds of *Doctor Who* fans gathering for the latest DWAS convention. This time, it was *The Keeper of Traken*'s turn to receive the big screen treatment, an event heralded not by an elderly man in a teleporting chair but DWAS' social accounts instead. With such a masterful story on show, in more ways than one, the convention had to be able to match its quality. And, once again, DWAS delivered.

"I think there's something special about being contained within the studio..."

The day was partly the brainchild of Matthew Waterhouse, who had suggested the idea of this screening at a previous Riverside event. Invitations were then sent out to guests both near and far, bringing a host of cast and crew including Waterhouse himself (Adric), Sarah Sutton (Nyssa) and Sheila Ruskin (Kassia). Such is the love for *The Keeper of Traken* among its creatives that even those who couldn't make it made their presence known – Graham Cole (the Melkur), for example, introduced the story via video message. And after the first two episodes had breezed by, the first panel made their passion for the story clear.

"It was a rather lovely job to have been offered and one that I really enjoyed doing," Ruskin recalls. "I think there's something special about being contained within the studio, so while we're restricted in area I think the creativity of everything comes together and finds its way through."

"I remember getting quite pally with the other actors," added Roland Olivier, who played the duplicitous Neman. "As TV was more theatre-like at the time, you got into a good relationship with everyone."

The Keeper of Traken also had other benefits. Olivier said that there was an electricians' strike at Television Centre during one of the days of filming because they weren't allowed to use the car park. As a result, shooting had to be rescheduled and the cast got paid for another day!

Tony Burroughs, the story's designer, also spoke fondly of the serial at his first *Doctor Who* convention. He said there was "kudos associated with different shows, so it was fun to be offered a *Who*."

"It was on my wishlist," Burroughs added. "I was ambitious and it was a way to climb the ladder."

Stephen Cranford interviews Roger Limb, Sheila Ruskin, Roland Olivier and Tony Burroughs



With the strength of his designs, it's no wonder that he went on to win a BAFTA as well as being nominated for many other awards. He discussed drawing on the art nouveau influences of architects like Gaudi in his designs for *Traken*, hiring a variety of furniture from Pinewood and other studios to bring the world to life.

Indeed, the world was so realistic that it lived on even after *The Keeper of Traken* was over. Ruskin recalled going to a nightclub in Manchester one evening and seeing something strangely familiar.

"It turned out the Melkur statue had been sold to them," Rukin revealed. "It was just standing in the corner. I thought I was going mad! It turned out the owner was a *Doctor Who* fan and he'd bought the set wholesale!"

Roger Limb, who provided the story's distinctive incidental music, has also encountered *The Keeper of Traken's* legacy.

"I went into a cafe in St Albans and the girl who worked there was called Nyssa," Limb remembered. "I asked where she got it from, and she said her parents were *Doctor Who* fans! So, I imagine there must be a few Nyssas around the UK!"

Speaking of Nyssa, Limb said that his inspiration for Nyssa's theme came via his son, who was learning to play some simple pieces by the composer Bartok. He took that idea of a gentle theme for Nyssa and ran with it, producing a distinctive leitmotif for the character.

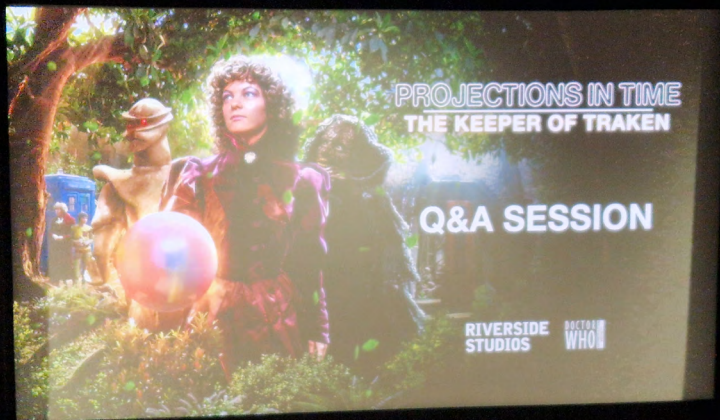
After the first panel drew to a close, everyone stretched their legs during the customary photo session before returning for a more unusual event. Geoffrey Beevers, *The Keeper of Traken's* Master, had generously donated a range of scripts and other items signed by his late wife Caroline John, who played Third Doctor companion Liz Shaw. These were auctioned off to raise money for the Anthony Nolan Trust and Princess Alice Hospice, raising almost £1,100 in total.

Once the auction was said and done, it was time for the second half of the serial. After we saw the Master claim Tremas' body as his own, it was time for Waterhouse, Sutton and Beevers to take to the stage for their panel interview.

Waterhouse recalled it being a "fabulous serial with a wonderful story", noting that it was "blissfully happy" compared to the episodes he'd previously appeared in.

Image credit: James Ashway

Robert Dick talks to Geoffrey Beevers, Matthew Waterhouse and Sarah Sutton



"It was stressful to make the E-Space trilogy so this was a lot more fun," Waterhouse said. "There's a Doctor/student relationship here [that *Doctor Who*] had never really done before, and I think it's really sweet."

Waterhouse, of course, was already an experienced companion in comparison to Sutton, who was making her *Doctor Who* debut. She said that she didn't think it had been decided that she was going to become a series regular while filming the first episode, and said she must have been told later.

Beevers, meanwhile, remembers being cast by director John Black. While the pair hadn't worked together before, he ended up being cast because he did a lot of radio drama. This allowed him to deliver deliciously evil lines via audio before making his on-screen appearance later in the serial.

Though it was just a one-off role at the time, Beevers has since returned alongside many other *Who* actors through the magic of Big Finish. Traken has also featured in these audio adventures, and it's clear that the story that started it all continues to be well-regarded by fans. With *The Keeper of Traken's* themes of endings and beginnings, this timeless tale is particularly pertinent while *Doctor Who* finds its future uncertain. Perhaps the television show could find a way to return there in the not too distant future.

Dear CT,

Whenever there's a sci-fi event in the north-east, especially if it's heavily grounded in *Doctor Who*, then I've got to go. This time, my outing took me to the Queen's Hall Art Centre in Hexham, where Neil Cole's Museum of Classic Sci-Fi was showing some of his special collection. While this would already make a great visit, it became a miniature convention for one day only on 20 July.

The day consisted of guest interviews, prop demonstrations, cosplay, stalls, autograph sessions and photo shoots. While these may seem to be standard fare, Sci-Fi Monsters Live went beyond that because the interviews were actually live recordings of three new editions of Reeltime's *Myth Makers* series.

It started with Sophie Aldred interviewing the man behind *Myth Makers* – Keith Barnfather. Neil Cole then interviewed Rob Allsop, a multi-talented prop and costume designer, before Neil was himself interviewed by Sophie. They were all very entertaining and, being a bit old school, I'll snap them up when they are released on DVD.

All in all, this was a very entertaining day out, and a very friendly one too. If there are more events like this in the near future, I'll be there.

From Steven Arnold



Sci-Fi Monster Live

NEW

THE NEW

Doctor WHO

ADVENTURERS

ILLUSTRATED
BY ELBERT
SMITH

IDEA BY RICHARD UNWIN, COMPILED BY JAMES ASHWAY

A team of explorers are undertaking a journey too broad and too deep for the small screen. Their mission: to read the Virgin New Adventures novels from beginning to end, to see how a group of relatively younger fans react to that particular slice of the Wilderness Years. This time, all's fair in the New Adventures...



John Ashway is 32 and founded the [Big Who Listen](#), a blog reviewing each Big Finish Main Range story. He is shocked that *Love and War* is not the tennis-based epic he had imagined.

Georgia Harper is 31 and based in Kent. She is still shocked that this novel, her second Virgin New Adventure, has done the impossible by making both love and war.



Evan Jones is 30, lives in Warwickshire and runs [The Brain of Mobius](#), a blog mainly focused on maths in *Doctor Who*. His experiences of both love and war have been mercifully brief.

Filip Wieland is 29, based in Kent and has entirely too many hobbies. Between basic human decency and the Geneva Convention, he does not believe that all is fair in love and war.



LOVE AND WAR

BY PAUL CORNELL • PUBLICATION DATE: OCTOBER 1992

Heaven is a paradise for both humans and Draconians – a place of rest in more ways than one. The Doctor comes here on a trivial mission – to find a book, or so he says – and Ace, wandering alone in the city, becomes involved with a charismatic Traveller called Jan.

But the Doctor is strenuously opposed to the romance. What is he trying to prevent? Is he planning some more deadly game connected with the mysterious objects causing the military forces of Heaven such concern?

Archaeologist Bernice Summerfield thinks so. Her destiny is inextricably linked with that of the Doctor, but even she may not be able to save Ace from the Time Lord's plans.

This time, has the Doctor gone too far?



Ace attends her friend Julian's funeral, recalling their car trip along a road to nowhere. Afterwards, she meets up with Shreela before heading to the TARDIS.

Evan: It's nice to see Shreela from *Survival* once again!

John: Some time has passed since *Nightshade* – Ace has presumably gotten over the 'incident' at the end of that book.

Filip: The Ace vignettes are a nice touch, showing how she'd have a hard time settling back down after travelling with the Doctor. However, the fact that the impulse is still there shows an amount of dramatic tension. Loss and grief are being signposted as the themes of this book.

Georgia: I love this book already, but Ace is already having a bad time.

Far from Earth, a trio of space fighters encounter an organic sphere as it emerges from hyperspace. It seizes control of

the chief engineer and kills the crew. All three ships are destroyed in the ensuing chaos.

Filip: What I like about this is that, even in these novels, we have spaceship control panels exploding in response to events elsewhere on the ship that aren't that related to them.

Professor Bernice 'Benny' Summerfield wakes on the planet of Heaven, used as a burial ground for humans and Draconians. She stares up at the subject of her investigation – a 10-storey tall arch.

Filip: The first chapter is called 'Heaven's Gate' which sets a very fitting tone – a cult of the same name would become very well known a few years after the book's publication.

Georgia: Hey, I recognise that name! I'll be honest, I'm really not up on my Summerfield lore. Is this her first appearance or has she shown up in previous VNAs by now? [One Google later] Well, at least I'm starting in the right place...

The TARDIS arrives in Joycetown on Heaven, and Ace meets a group of nomads known as Travellers. She's taken with one member, called Jan, but a gang of soldiers chases the Travellers away before they can get too acquainted. The Doctor intervenes to stop the military from attacking Ace.

Filip: We're being led to believe that Jan has a deep dark secret but honestly? He probably just needs to clean his guitar more often.

John: More romance for Ace? Jan couldn't really seem any more different than Robin from the previous book...

The Doctor and Ace visit a library of forbidden texts in search of The Papers of Felsecar. The librarian, however, doesn't have what they're looking for, so the pair leave.

Filip: Is this some sort of contrivance to let the Doctor know about Bernice Summerfield?

In Joycetown's Vacuum Church, Brother Phaedrus sacrifices a member of the congregation. The corpse becomes a brown, lumpy creature as a fungus takes over.

Filip: I did wonder at this point if the planet Heaven is actually the same celestial body as the sphere from the prologue.

John: Ooh dear, that'll be our nasty alien for this novel then.

The Doctor explains the great mystery of Heaven to Ace – buildings and roads were found when colonists first arrived, but no remains of its native inhabitants have ever been discovered. Ace decides to buy a horse and meet Jan, while the Doctor approaches an Earth military facility.

John: That great mystery sounds like the kind with a horrifying solution...

Georgia: Ah, we're doing Ace romance again – at least Robin gets a mention! One advantage of the novel format is being able to explore the characters' inner thoughts and feelings a bit more without the clunky exposition it can turn into on TV.

Filip: Ace's complaint seems to be that the Doctor always insists on taking off before she's had a chance to sleep with anyone, which is very direct but ultimately fair. That said, we do get a decent examination of how alien the Doctor is and how different his feelings are to Ace's.

Ace arrives at the Traveller camp and is introduced to the rest of the group, including Roisa, Máire and Christopher. Benny, meanwhile, captures a white fibre which moves on its own. Ace tells Benny she is a time traveller.

Filip: Bernice Summerfield's characterisation seems to start out as "Indiana Jones but in space and also a woman".

Evan: "...and she likes to have the occasional alcoholic drink."

Georgia: Benny being introduced to Ace as "the Professor... she's completely insane" is a massive (and presumably intentional) Doctor parallel. More of this please!

John: The Travellers are definitely a close-knit group, but one trying to welcome Ace as best they can.

Roisa, an expert in Heaven's fauna, investigates the white fibre. It leaps against the glass and smashes it. Roisa stomps on the fibre before going for a walk in the forest. She meets Phaedrus in the forest, who tells her that she has been infected by the fungus.

Filip: How did Phaedrus know that Roisa had been infected? He seems to have just... appeared. I wonder if that will become relevant later.

Evan: This is certainly an extremely convenient plot point.

John: So the fibres are part of the fungus... and Phaedrus is probably infected too and maybe linked to Roisa now?

Ace and Benny arrive at the dig site under the arch, where a door has just been revealed. Ace decides to head back to the Traveller camp, reflecting on Julian as she does so. She decides to join the group.

Filip: I like that Ace is getting a lot of agency here and that she gets to talk about what she wants. Now, wanting to get into a poly-cule with the hot Traveller leader is not the most complex of desires, but it's much more reasoned and clearly stated than Belinda's motivation from Series 15!

Evan: I chuckled when I saw Paul Magrs's name as one of the crew. This would be like watching the TV show and learning one of the supporting characters was called Mark Gatiss.

The Doctor is brought up to speed on the destroyed space fighters and taken into the confidence of the local Earth military commander, James Miller. The Doctor is taken by helicopter to the dig site.

Filip: Any time the Doctor is interrogated it tends to swiftly become a two way conversation at best, and an exposition dump from the interrogator at worst.

John: I'm very glad we're skipping a lot of pointless conflict and the commander is just going to listen to what the Doctor has to say!

Georgia: "The oncoming storm" is from this!?! I'd assumed it to be a *NuWho* invention!

Evan: It feels very timey wimey for a *Nu-Who* fan to read "The Oncoming Storm" in a book from 1992.

Ace and the Travellers connect themselves into a virtual reality known as Puterspace. In the virtual reality, Jan tells Ace about his hatred of the Vacuum Church. He also talks about his past, revealing he and Christopher were part of medical experiments when they were in the military. Jan received an unspecified ability, while Christopher gained powerful psychic powers but lost his sex organs. Ace and Jan begin to kiss, but are interrupted by Roisa. She takes them to a virtual meeting place known as the Great Wheel, but a large fungal orb arrives. Christopher manages holds it off while the others leave Puterspace, but ends up dying.

Filip: This novel was published a few years before *The Matrix* came out but we already have the concept of people plugging into computer realities with sockets in the back of their heads. *Love and War* seems to drawing on a lot of inspiration from the same well as other cyberpunk novels roughly contemporaneous with it, such as *Snow Crash*. I just wish Cornell had picked a better name than Puterspace.

John: The arrival of the orb is very portentous and menacing, so despite the virtual world setting the stakes feel very high!

Georgia: "We enter a collective hallucination, a computer-generated reality" – ah, so 2025 Google then. Also: way too many romantic sub-plots.

Evan: I'm struggling to take Puterspace seriously because puter is such a meme-y word these days!

The Doctor meets Benny, and the pair open the mysterious door together. Inside, they find the skeleton of a large Heavenite chained to the wall. The air in the room smells faintly of mushrooms. As they leave, they're shot at. Benny fires back, severing the shooter's arm.

John: I think everyone should be grateful the fungal spore aren't small enough to be inhaled!



Filip: Most of the archaeology here is just an excuse for the Doctor to show off in front of Benny, which makes him being useless while Benny does the shooting even better.

The Travellers bury Christopher. Ace and Jan go into the woods, where Jan plays on his guitar. They decide to sleep together, and rush back to Jan's tent. Jan reveals he has the ability to generate and control fire. Afterwards, in a dream, Ace sees the Doctor cut a deal with Death for her life.

Filip: The story of Jan, Christopher and Roisa would be a poignant one except for Christopher "losing his sex" to gain psychic powers – not that he became infertile or impotent but that he *literally lost all sexual characteristics*. It's a weird side effect and it being portrayed as a negative probably wouldn't fly these days. I think a better approach would be for Christopher to lose *his capacity for love*, which would fit the narrative just as well. It would be more powerful as a critique of what being in the military can do to someone and it wouldn't have resulted in questionable gender politics 20 years down the line.

Georgia: Waiter, waiter, there's a sex scene in my *Doctor Who* novel! Jokes aside, the dream sequence is really powerful.

The next morning, Ace heads into Joycetown. She convinces a group of children to give her one of the white fibres, which she keeps in a flask. Ace then meets up with the Doctor to bring him up to speed on events. Afterwards she heads to the library to continue the search for The Papers of Felsecar, which the Doctor says are crucial.

Filip: There's a real tension in how Ace and the Doctor see their relationship, with the Doctor trying to be the paternal, protective figure and Ace wanting him to be more of an equal. I like the attempt but, at the moment, Ace comes off as a bit of a whiny teenager. Isn't she supposed to be older in these books?

Georgia: I have to admit it's a relief to not be trying to keep track of two essentially separate stories...

John: The white fibres are turning up all over the place aren't they?

The Doctor talks to Jan about Ace, and then enters Puterspace. He researches Heaven's history through the data stored here, but is attacked by assassins. Fortunately, he is saved by Christopher, who's still alive in virtual reality. However, Phaedrus activates a program that drags the Doctor into a representation of the Third Doctor's regeneration. The Doctor refuses Phaedrus's offer of a quick death, and is left to suffer virtual radiation poisoning.

John: [With a jaunty beat] Puterspace is a dangerous place, it's a dangerous place to go. Always beware of virtual worlds, which you'd think *Doctor Who* would know!

Filip: Unfortunately this book appears to have continuity with *The Trial of a Time Lord* and I cannot support that.

Georgia: The Doctor being all parent-like and intervening to try and protect Ace from Jan is equal parts endearing and cringe-worthy; which I think is the intention. The Third Doctor taking years to die in *Planet of the Spiders* – which as far as I know is a new addition from Cornell – is brutal.

Evan: Cornell really shows his all-encompassing vision of the *Doctor Who* canon here. We're about a third of the way through and we've had bespoke references to Daleks, Time Lords, Sontarans, Draconians, *Survival* and *The Trial of a Time Lord*.

Back in reality, Ace finds the Doctor's body. She enters Puterspace and finds the Doctor, but the programme recalibrates itself to Ace. The virtual reality generates her house in Perivale and her mother. After an awkward chat with her mum, the Doctor and Ace head down the road to meet Julian. They convince the

Julian programme of his fictional nature and get him to bring Christopher to them.

Filip: I liked the little speech Ace gave when asking for a terminal. And again, it's weirdly prescient of Cornell to talk about how computers would have trouble with half-remembered little details, something that used to be very prominent in earlier image generation AI and is still, to some extent, a problem today.

Georgia: "Alien monsters to fight." "Are they worse than the ones here, then?" ... "No, they never are." This is getting very bleak very quickly.

John: Some really lovely stuff here about different perspectives on the same people. Ace learns that Julian got to see a more empathetic side to her mother than she'd realised existed.

The fungus creature realises their trap is failing, and sends Phaedrux back in. Phaedrux kills the virtual Julian with a sword, and gets into a duel with Ace. Ace severs Phaedrux' connection to the real world, allowing the Doctor, Ace and Phaedrux to escape the trap and Puterspace. While they recover, Roisa gives the Doctor a drink from a Heavenite goblet in her possession.

Filip: Sword fights where the swords are computer programmes is similar to *Snow Crash* (but Neal Stephenson did it better). Incidentally, all but the Doctor's trap memories are centred around loss and grief. His trap memory is about being stuck in pain for a really long time.

Georgia: Dying twice – it's really not Julian's day.

Evan: Phaedrux schemes. Phaedrux attacks. Phaedrux retreats. Phaedrux repeats.

John: The Doctor escapes Phaedrux' trap here only to fall right into another...

The Doctor, Ace and the Travellers break into the library and encounter Vacuum Church assassins. Our heroes discover Benny has The Papers of Felsecar.

Filip: This is one of a significant number of moments in the book that read like they've been written as scenes for a video game.

Evan: Yeah, something like *Tomb Raider* or *Assassin's Creed*, and yet this book predates both of these years!

John: The librarian is very brave before his untimely death, and Ace rightly calls attention to it. It does feel strange nobody thought to ask the archaeologist about this very important book though!

Agents of the fungus disable the military's orbital station, cutting off Heaven. On the way to Benny, the Doctor reveals his fears about Ace leaving.

John: Hmm, cutting off the comms is one move you probably could have predicted, Doctor.

Filip: This may be the first time I've seen the Doctor resentful of Susan for leaving his company to fall in love with a human ("like marrying a mayfly").

Evan: It's interesting how expanded universe writers reviewed the emotional impact of past stories on the Doctor in light of subsequent introductions to the canon.

Georgia: "I didn't have it off with a bloody Dalek!" Don't give the writers ideas, Ace...

The Doctor reads The Papers of Felsecar while Ace and Benny catch up. Later, when Benny and the Doctor leave the Travellers' camp to continue their investigations, Christopher manages to animate his corpse to talk to Ace.

Georgia: Which future incarnation do we think wrote the Draconian annotation in felt-tip? I'm going with the Eleventh Doctor. Or Billie Piper.

Evan: My bets are firmly placed on the Fugitive Doctor.

John: I do enjoy a good bit of future preparation as long as it's used sparingly and not for the main resolution!

The Doctor and Benny discover that the corpses being sent to Heaven are full of fungus. They're determined to dig out the base of the arch, but they find out the orbital station has been set to crash into Heaven.

John: The crashing orbital station is a strong parallel to the fungus orb from Puterspace descending and bringing destruction!

Evan: The conversation where Benny asks the Doctor if he has a girlfriend, boyfriend or model train set has absolutely sent me.

Georgia: Muuuuum, the Doctor is giving a speech about morality again!

The Doctor, Ace and Benny rush to the Church of the Vacuum, where they interfere with the psychic link controlling the station's trajectory. The fungus has doubts that the station is still on track, so they destroy it.

John: Thankfully the fungus doesn't keep it going on the off-chance!

Filip: The saboteur's name was Kale, so of course he's been turned into a smoothie.

Georgia: They do karaoke. And it's important. Then, Benny makes a final quip to Phaedrus and is dragged off stage by the Doctor's umbrella – perfect chapter ending.

The Doctor, Ace and Benny return to the dig site, where the Doctor explains the Time Lords' previous encounters with the fungus, known as the Hoothi. As the Hoothi take over her body, Roisa tries to shoot herself, but is stopped by Máire.

Filip: I'm forever surprised at how the Doctor keeps finding these ancient enemies of

the Time Lords, and at this rate I want to know what species *aren't* engaged in a cold war with Gallifrey somehow.

Georgia: That's a *terrifying* position to be in, knowing you'll be killed or possessed, not knowing when. Also: DODO MENTION!

Evan: I'm not sure why the Doctor is suddenly having Dodo flashbacks here, but I am here for it.

John: Always here for Dodo content! But enough, the Hoothi are absolutely repellent!

The dig breaks through into the observatory, and finds a telescope designed by the Heavenites to see through the Hoothi defences. Meanwhile, the Hoothi inside Roisa tries to shoot Jan in the woods, but she manages to jerk her arm away at the last moment.

Georgia: It turns out the Hoothi have effectively kidnapped Ace's dead friend. Cheery.

John: I like how much we get to see the Heavenite's ingenuity. They weren't just passive victims and did very brave things all that time ago.

Back at the camp, Jan takes the telescope and makes for the nearest shuttle in an attempt to stop the Hoothi. Ace and Máire pursue him, followed by the Doctor and Benny. Ace and Máire catch up with Jan and, with some other Travellers, they transmat to a spaceport and steal a ship.

Filip: Well done Jan, you've engineered yourself into a situation where you will die. Ace isn't allowed good things in these novels, is she?

John: Eek. That doesn't seem wise.

Georgia: That was just a really bleak chapter.

Aboard the ship, Máire holds an impromptu betrothal for Ace and Jan. They all get into escape pods as they prepare

to send the ship into the Hoothi sphere. Some of the Travellers have already been infected by the Hoothi and they try to stop the plan. Jan sends Ace's escape pod back towards Earth before she can be infected, but it's too late for him.

Filip: It's like *Among Us* but they're all impostors!

Evan: They're engaged to be married, and then suddenly disengaged from each other.

John: They're plunged into chaos and panic with no time for emotional speeches or farewells. Just death.

Georgia: I, for one, can't *believe* this romantic interest of the week didn't work out. Please tell me there isn't another one in the next book... That said, 'Ace Falling' is a really powerful short chapter on grief, despair and rebuilding.

The Doctor and Benny take the TARDIS to the Hoothi sphere. The Hoothi reveal the drink Roisa gave him earlier contained a fungal spore. The Doctor and Benny return to Heaven as Hoothi agents.

Filip: The inside of the sphere is kinda reminiscent of *Blindsight*. It feels to me like Cornell keeps approximating a variety of books and films long before they're released. It's like he had a time machine but couldn't bring a notebook with him.

Georgia: The bleakness continues. Particularly the Doctor infecting Benny, who believes he's made a choice to condemn her to death.

John: Benny has been given no reason to trust the Doctor at all! It's a wonder she hasn't attacked him yet.

The Doctor reveals he's faked Benny's infection, and drops her back on Heaven. Benny manages to get to Ace's escape capsule, where they find Christopher.

Evan: I don't know how the Doctor managed to fake the infection, so I'll just have to trust he did something very clever.

Filip: Christopher appears once again as Mr Deus Ex Machina himself, proclaiming to be one with Puterspace.

Georgia: There's certainly a lot of death in this, though it avoids being gory by turning everyone to fungus in almost comical explosions.

John: They certainly didn't skimp on the love or the war in *Love and War*.

As the dead rise across Heaven, Ace follows Phaedrux into Puterspace and attacks him. The Doctor follows the pair. Phaedrux puts them in contact with the Hoothi sphere, and the Doctor calls to Jan's mind in the collective Hoothi consciousness. Jan responds, and uses his pyrokinetic abilities to destroy the Hoothi sphere.



Filip: The Doctor is portrayed as the mas-terminid behind all this, but it seems like he avoided the main plot until it was time to burn his remaining bridges with Ace. Was he supposed to have been the protagonist?

John: The Doctor calls out to Jan using his secret name – the cruelty here being that he barely knew the man.

Georgia: Phaedrus using Ace's mother to get away is brilliant – and the “reunion” is really well-written. I'll be honest though, I'm a bit confused about what's going on.

Ace realises that the Doctor had been using Jan all along. Ace wanders aimlessly, before returning to the church and finding the last of the Hoothi. Ace appeals to Julian in its collective consciousness and the Hoothi tears itself apart.

John: Apparently Ace's horrors aren't over without one final chunk of trauma.

Georgia: Oh wow – that's the end of Ace's time in the TARDIS, I guess? Grim stuff.

Evan: All those Travellers we met right at the start of the book... they're all gone now.

Christopher dies for the final time in the Doctor's arms. The Time Lord runs after Ace, and they argue. Ace throws her trademark jacket to the ground, and leaves with Máire. Benny collects the garment, and, after some thought, decides to become the Doctor's new companion.

John: This is really awful – the Doctor has to use a nerve pinch-style technique to physically freeze Ace and force her to listen to him, when she'd probably rather beat him up. He promises not to play with Bernice's life if she travels with him – but that can't possibly be true, can it?

Evan: It's an incredibly acrimonious departure for Ace, which is unsurprising given what's just happened, and not something we've really seen before (or since) in the TV series.

Filip: I'm not surprised Ace wants to leave the Doctor. First, he kidnaps her at the end of *Nightshade* and now he's played a big part in her fiancé dying. I'm more surprised that Benny still wants to be a companion after all of this!

Georgia: I have no idea why Benny is making the choices she's making, but I look forward to seeing her in the next book!

What did our readers think of the book?

Filip: I liked that Ace was the more prominent character and there were some genuinely interesting ideas here. But I thought the book in general was inconsistent, the plot was contrived and there's a general air of Cornell just... trying too hard?

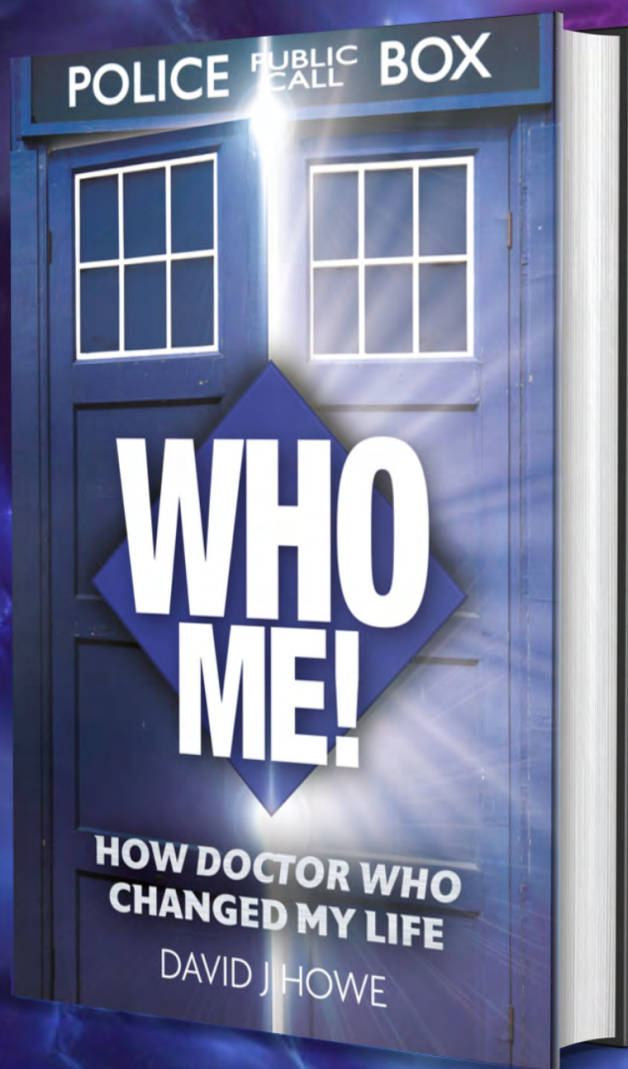
John: A really excellent book with not a single wasted element. Everything is important! Ace's relationship with Jan is believable, even if it is cut short by the Doctor becoming as monstrous as the Hoothi to ensure the fungus is defeated. After seeing the worst of the Doctor, Bernice still chooses to join him – I wonder how that'll go...

Georgia: With a brand new world and constantly shifting scenes, *Love and War* was often a more challenging read than *Nightshade* – and when it hits, it hits hard. After teasing two happy endings for Ace across two separate stories, her eventual departure is brutal. That said, I'm looking forward to finally getting to know Bernice Summerfield!

Evan: It's fitting that Ace's departure story feels this epic. She plays a prominent role in the story set across this rich, cosmic backdrop of the planet Heaven. There are big storylines, big set pieces and big fallout, which all coalesce by the climax. I just wish I was more sold on Ace's latest whirlwind romance and her decision to leave the Doctor when she's so far from home.

Next time... *Transit*

Journey Through the Whoniverse



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